

**Recasting Caste: Histories of Dalit Transnationalism and
the Internationalization of Caste Discrimination**

by

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Dedication

For my sister, Prapti Mehta

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Abstract

This dissertation analyzes one strand of post-independence anti-caste activism, that of transnational dalit activism. As an interdisciplinary work of anthropology and history, it draws from multi-site archival and ethnographic research. Each chapter focuses on a particular moment or aspect of transnational dalit activism and its translation of caste-based discrimination into an internationally recognized wrong. Through an exploration of the affective and political bonds activists have developed with communities outside of India, and the simultaneous use and critique of human rights in dalit activism, this dissertation demonstrates how the global field has become critical to the conceptualization and articulation of social justice. Engagements in the global field also set this activism apart from the dominant anti-caste movement of modern India – that of B.R. Ambedkar’s movement for dalit rights. Specifically, in terms of its political strategy, identity politics, and conceptualization of caste, transnational dalit activism departs from Ambedkar’s movement. First, in terms of political strategy, this activism uses human rights discourse to communicate the problems and aspirations of dalits. It seeks support from institutions beyond the nation-state, and it internationalizes caste-based discrimination, ostensibly to connect with social justice movements outside of India and to generate international pressure on the Indian state to act in the interests of dalits. Second, regarding identity politics, this activism emphasizes a *similarity* in political identity with other groups, which is in contrast to Ambedkar’s use of a minority identity politics that emphasized dalit *difference* to claim rights. Activists construct dalit identity through analogies with groups outside of India that are perceived as sharing comparable histories of oppression and structural positions in their home societies. Dalit identity is constructed through the citation of other groups and through the projection of membership in a virtual global community of comparably oppressed people. Third, activists have reinterpreted the very notion of “caste,” challenging most academic, popular, and state conceptualizations of the phenomenon. In transnational campaigns, “caste” is recast as a global phenomenon; it is not unique to Hinduism or India, but rather, is a generalizable category, a form of descent-based discrimination that is found across the world.

Introduction

On November 25, 1949, in a speech anticipating the enactment of the Indian Constitution, B.R. Ambedkar pointed to a disjunction between political status and social reality that he feared would mark life in post-independent India:

On 26th of January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we have equality and in social and economic life we have inequalities. In politics we will be recognizing the principles of one man one vote and one vote one value. In our social and economic life, we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man, one vote. How long shall we continue to live this life of contradiction?¹

“Political democracy,” he argued, could only thrive if joined with “social democracy.”

Over sixty years after the ratification of the Constitution, the “contradiction” Ambedkar foresaw continues to affect the lives of many of India’s dalits. Despite the prohibition of caste discrimination, the guarantees of civil rights, and positive obligations laid out for the state, dalits – the group perhaps most dramatically affected by the workings of caste – remain subject to systemic violence and discrimination. Government statistics show that dalits have the highest illiteracy rates and lowest life spans in India. They are among the poorest in the country, constituting over fifty percent of those living under the official poverty line, even though they are only seventeen percent of the country’s population. Human development indicators are worse for dalit women than the dalit community at large, and dalit women on average live a staggering fourteen years less than the general population. Activists interested in the annihilation of these disparities have had to

¹ B.R. Ambedkar, “Speech to Constituent Assembly Constituent Assembly of India Proceedings, Volume XI, available at <http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/debates/vol11p11.htm>.

contend with the contradiction Ambedkar foresaw, namely the persistence of caste inequality in a nation-state context where both formal equality and “compensatory” discrimination, such as a reservation of seats in higher education and government jobs for dalits, have been established with the explicit aim of advancing the status and well-being of dalits.²

This dissertation analyzes one strand of post-independence activism that targets the removal of caste inequality, that of transnational dalit activism. In contrast to Ambedkar – for whom engagements with a larger global field did not fundamentally inform his politics and whose thinking on problems of caste remained within the context of the nation – later dalit activists imagined solidarity and alliances with groups across the world.³ For these activists, the global field became critical to the conceptualization and articulation of their politics of social justice. While Jotirao Phule’s imagining of solidarity with groups oceans away in the mid-nineteenth century reveals a deeper history to anti-caste activists’ interest in models of social change from afar, transnational activism has its most significant impact on the dalit movement after Indian independence. Over the last six decades, dalit activists have built connections with groups across the world, including, for example, with the Roma in central Europe, the Burakumin in Japan, African Americans in the United States, and landless workers in Brazil. Groups such as the Dalit Panthers, the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights, the National Federation of Dalit Women, and Navsarjan Trust express a clear internationalist vision for the empowerment and liberation of all oppressed communities. These connections,

² Marc Galanter uses the term “compensatory discrimination” for state measures – such as reservations – for the advancement of the more vulnerable and weak sections of society. See Marc Galanter, *Competing Equalities: Law and the Backward Classes in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984).

³ Another strand of anti-caste activism – although outside the scope of this dissertation – transformed Ambedkar’s political strategies to build dalit-bhujan solidarity within the nation-state for electoral gains.

political visions, and solidarities are the focus of this dissertation; I draw out the transnational dimensions of this activism and illuminate the ways in which they reach beyond and transect the Indian state.

Activists' turn outward and abroad for solidarity and support seems linked to an increasing frustration with the "contradictions" Ambedkar foresaw between Indian political and social structure. After independence, the state in India was to be the engine of social change and progress. By the 1970s, a sense of the state's failure to live up to its own vision precipitated a move away from a solely statist approach to social change and a turn outward for models of protest and partners in the pursuit of social justice. The economic reforms of the early 1990s seemed to have created a further disillusionment with the state and its promise to act in the interests of social justice. At the same time, however, India, as it sought more power on an international stage, seemed more invested in its international reputation as a thriving democracy and economic power. Transnational activism and the use of human rights then had the potential of using a politics of shame to pressure the Indian state into acting in the interests of dalits.⁴

This dissertation explores two primary issues in transnational dalit activism: the affective and political bonds dalits have developed with other marginalized communities and social justice movements, and the simultaneous use and critique of human rights in dalit activism. Through this exploration, I reveal a set of parallel and intertwined processes – how local, caste-specific experiences are made to resonate globally and how the global discourse of human rights is reworked and rearticulated by dalit activists. I distinguish transnational dalit activism from other strands of post-independence anti-caste movements on the basis of three characteristics: this activism seeks support from groups

⁴ See Thomas Keenan, "Mobilizing Shame," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no 2/3 (2004) 435-49.

and institutions beyond the nation-state. It internationalizes the issue of caste-based discrimination ostensibly to both disrupt the isolation of dalits in India and to generate international pressure for the Indian state to act in the interest of dalits. Second, transnational dalit activism uses the language of human rights to articulate its protests and demands. It embraces a universalist discourse and analyzes the problems of caste discrimination and violence as global problems and as human rights violations. Lastly, this activism imagines and/or actualizes solidarity with other groups and social justice movements. This solidarity both aids in courting global support for dalits in India and shapes the representation of the anti-caste movement within India.⁵

I demonstrate that transnational dalit activism uses a political logic and form of argumentation that departs from Ambedkar's movement for dalit rights. Specifically, the internationalization of caste discrimination reworks previous conceptualizations of dalit identity and of caste. The dominant logic of Ambedkar's anti-caste movement was one grounded in a minority identity politics that emphasized dalit *difference* – a difference in *political* identity from the majority of Indians. Transnational dalit activism, in contrast, emphasizes a *similarity* in identity with other groups. These groups are deemed to be in comparable social positions to dalits in India, but critically, are outside of the Indian state. They are framed as having distinct histories of exploitation and marginalization, and yet dalit transnationalism sees parallels with the plight of these distant communities.

⁵ An example of another strain of thought against caste inequality is Mandalism. Mandalism remains a regional and/or national discourse that employs a "caste" perspective more than a "human rights perspective" to critique inequality and exploitation in India. A caste perspective analyzes the predicament of lower caste through reference to a Hindu social worldview; a human rights perspective, however, uses the concepts and vocabulary of internationally recognized human rights. Critically, Mandalism stays committed to statist action and the nation-state paradigm. See more on the distinctions between transnational dalit discourse and the discourse of Mandalism, see Shiv Viswanthan, "Durban and Dalit Discourse," in *Caste, Race, and Discrimination: Discourses in International Context*, ed. Sukhadeo Thorat and Umakant (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2004).

What dalits are felt to share is an analogically similar history of oppression and marginalized structural position in society, in other words, a shared difference. A positive political identity of “minority” may be maintained within the context of the nation-state, but this is supplemented in human rights campaigns with appeals based in membership in a virtual global community of comparably oppressed people. While still an identity politics, in lieu of an argument based on dalit difference, activists use analogies and comparisons with other groups outside India – suggesting that dalits are *just like* African Americans under Jim Crow, Black South Africans under Apartheid, or Jews under the Nazis. Many of the groups referred to in these analogies have had successful social justice movements that have captured world attention. These analogies and comparisons have been mobilized for many ends, assuming political and pedagogical significance; they announce to the world that dalits are just like these other groups who galvanized international movements, and they also project a future for a successful dalit movement in India. Transnational activism thus communicates dalit identity and human rights claims through the “citation” of these other communities; the analysis of the politics of these “citations” forms a central focus of this dissertation.⁶

Through the internationalization of dalit issues, activists have also reinterpreted the very notion of “caste” itself, a transformation that challenges most academic, popular, and official statist understandings of caste. In international and transnational campaigns of dalit activists, “caste” is recast as a global phenomenon; it is a form of social stratification and inherited inequality that is found in societies across the world, including, for example, Japan, Yemen, Nigeria, and Senegal. This conceptualization of

⁶ See Antoinette Burton, *Brown Over Black: Race and the Politics of Postcolonial Critique* (Gurgaon, Haryana: Three Essays Collective, 2012).

caste emphasizes *similarities* with other forms of inequality and discrimination, and it suggests a mode of comprehending caste in India that focuses on these similarities, rather than on the differences between the social forms in question. A conceptualization of caste marked by its difference, its specificity to India or Hinduism, would preclude its globalization; as long as caste is exceptional, it remains unique to India and cannot be considered a particular form of a more general phenomenon. In human rights activists' articulation of caste, caste was not unique to Hinduism or India; rather, "caste" was a heuristic category that enabled the understanding of a variety of local forms of inherited inequality.

Background: Terms and Categories

First coined by Jotirao Phule in the nineteenth century, the term 'dalit' has served as a central organizing identity for the anti-caste movements of post-independence India. The term comes from the Sanskrit root *dal*, meaning to break or crack and is often glossed in English as the oppressed, downtrodden, or crushed. Ambedkar first used the term in 1928 to describe one who had experienced degradation and deprivation, but 'dalit' did not gain popularity as an identity until the 1960s.⁷ During this period, the dynamic literary culture of Maharashtra gave 'dalit' the dominant meaning it has today: the designation of the groups officially identified by the Indian state as the "Scheduled Castes" and often glossed in English as "outcastes" or "untouchables," and an identity of one subjected to the most extreme forms of caste oppression who also contests the

⁷ Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 15.

justifications of that oppression.⁸ The significance of ‘dalit’ lies not only in its contestation of the other terms – most notably *harijan* – used for those from Schedule Caste communities, but also, as Anupama Rao writes, in its “politics of naming,” in how it generates “new relationships between words and bodies, between new ways of being and ways of seeing and speaking within the social field.”⁹ In her discussion of the term ‘dalit’ and the surrounding politics of naming, Rao argues that ‘dalit’ is both “analytic and prescriptive: *it defines the historical structures and practices of dispossession that experientially mark someone as Dalit and simultaneously identifies the Dalit as someone seeking to escape those same structures.*”¹⁰ A ‘dalit’ identity thus recalls a history of oppression and humiliation, while also asserting opposition to the social order responsible for producing that oppression. An identity with political content, ‘dalit’ signals membership in a collective movement against exclusion, exploitation, and degradation and announces an assertion of rights and a refusal to tolerate inequality. Following Rao, I also use the term ‘dalit’ even when it is anachronistic.

The term “caste” is believed to have derived from the Portuguese use of the word ‘*casta*,’ meaning pure or chaste, to describe Indian social organization. “Caste” is not a term found in any South Asian language, but is conventionally used to refer to two local concepts of social relations: *varna* and *jati*.¹¹ The *varna* system refers to the four-fold, occupation-based division of society laid out in Hindu texts written in the first few

⁸ Among the other terms used to identify this group are “Depressed Classes,” a category created by the colonial state; “*harijan*,” or “children/people of God” which was coined by Gandhi. Indigenous terms include *avarna*, meaning without *varna* or caste, and *panchama*, or fifth *varna*.

⁹ Rao, *Caste Question*, 16.

¹⁰ Rao, *Caste Question*, 16.

¹¹ Padmanabh Samarendra notes that “caste is a foreign word” and argues that the concept of caste “as conceived in contemporary academic writing or within the policies of the state” has “never characterised the Indian society.” See Padmanabh Samarendra, “Census in Colonial India and the Birth of Caste,” *Economic and Political Weekly* XLVI, no 33 (August 13, 2011): 51-58.

centuries of the Common Era, such as the *Dharmasatras*. In this model, society is divided into four *varnas* – the *Brahmin*, or priests and scholars; the *Kshytria*, or kings and soldiers; the *Vaishya*, or merchants; and the *Shudra*, or laborers – each with differential rights, privileges, and obligations. Dalits are not formally included in this scheme, but, as evidenced by designations such as *avarna* (without *varna*) or *panchama* (fifth *varna*), can be considered included within it through their very exclusion.¹² *Jati* refers to the endogamous groups most relevant for the everyday operations and manifestations of social life. There are thousands of *jatis* within India and hundreds of Scheduled Caste *jatis*. This dissertation does not take up issues of *varna* or *jati*, but rather focuses on “caste” – as a sociological, anthropological, and political category used to make sense of the social order in India – and “dalit” – as an epistemological position and category of being explicitly in opposition to inequality based on *varna*, *jati*, or caste. I focus on “caste” because that is the category activists use to translate the structures generating discrimination and violence towards dalits and on “dalit” because that is the organizing identity behind this movement for rights.

The subjects of my research are activists. By activists, I mean individuals, groups, or organizations who are engaged in the pursuit of social justice. This engagement seeks not just the amelioration of suffering within the confines of the status quo, but rather strives for structural change to produce radical shifts in the organization of power and resources in society. Throughout this dissertation I describe the work of these activists as “international” or “transnational” activism. “International” refers to

¹² B.R. Ambedkar argues that the reason why dalits are not included in this framework is because untouchability was established as a social institution at around 400 CE, after the creation of the *varna* system. See B.R. Ambedkar, *The Untouchables: Who Were They and How They Became Untouchables* (New Delhi: Amrit Book Co., 1948).

connections among nation-states or connections across borders that reference the nation-state system. I use “transnational” to refer to relationships among people and movements that traverse nation-state boundaries such that the latter become porous or even “borderless.” These relationships draw attention to alliances around identity or global issues and emphasize connections and cooperation among people. “Transnational” as a category of relations has drawn significant scholarly attention over the last couple of decades, and my own understanding of the term is derived from feminist studies. Feminist scholarship, such as the work of Chandra Talpande Mohanty, Inderpal Grewal, and Ella Shoat, uses ‘transnational’ to draw attention to processes of colonialism, imperialism, and global capitalism in structuring the forces that oppress men and women across the world.¹³ While focusing on the intersection and simultaneity of race, class, gender, nationality, ethnicity and sexuality in the lives of individuals, it also draws attention to the possibilities of organizing and protest across nation-state borders. My use of ‘transnational’ also borrows from historian Jean H. Quataert’s description of the term. In her analysis of human rights as a form of “globalization from below,” she argues that “transnational” is more than a “descriptive term.”¹⁴ “Transnational,” she maintains,

is a dynamic analytical tool that simultaneously keeps in focus local contexts and international settings. It is a perspective that moves seamlessly from local through national and regional to international arenas and back again, all the while addressing the transnational responses to local situations, on the one hand, and

¹³ See, for example, Chandra Talpande Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, eds. *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Ella Shoat, ed, *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999); and Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcón, and Minoo Moallem, eds. *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalism, Transnational Feminism and the State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

¹⁴ Jean H. Quataert, *Advocating Dignity: Human Rights Mobilizations in Global Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 7.

crediting the grassroots pressures on regional and international decision-making in matters of law and policy, on the other.¹⁵

I thus use “transnational” not only to describe one strand of anti-caste activism, but also to highlight a critical orientation: the activism that I analyze links the local with the global, drawing attention to processes of exclusion and marginalization and striving to connect people with different histories and in different spaces with the possibility of a shared politics. For this reason, I use the term “transnational” to refer to connections before India was a nation-state, albeit anachronistically.

B.R. Ambedkar

This dissertation begins and ends with a chapter on Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956). Indeed, an analysis of Ambedkar’s political work and philosophy seems an essential part of a study of dalit activism. Ambedkar not only dedicated his life to the empowerment of the dalits, but he also committed himself to the restructuring of Indian society; and for this, he used the experiences of the historically most dispossessed community in India to generate universalist values of equality, liberty, and fraternity. His life and legacy continue to exert enormous force, both symbolic and concrete, on anti-caste movements. In addition, the shift in argument and logic that occurs with transnational dalit activism can only be fully grasped by first recounting Ambedkar’s contributions to the movement to annihilate caste.

Ambedkar was born in 1891 into the dalit Mahar community and rose to become one of the most educated Indians of his time. After receiving a scholarship from the Gaekwar of Baroda, Ambedkar travelled to the United States in 1913 to study at

¹⁵ Quataert, *Advocating Dignity*, 7.

Columbia University. He studied anthropology and economics and ultimately earned a doctorate for his thesis *The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India*. In 1916, he began a doctoral thesis at the London School of Economics and also became a barrister after passing the bar exam at Gray's Inn. Ambedkar's education is often remembered as symbolic of his disruptions of the caste order: dalits had long suffered from the denial of education and under the ideal moral life of the *varna* system, the pursuit of knowledge would be limited to Brahmins.

Ambedkar began his career as spokesperson for dalits in arbitrations with the colonial government in 1919 when, having returned to India, he was consulted by the Southborough Committee about upcoming electoral reforms. Ambedkar spent much of the next four decades advocating for the rights of dalits. Among his most notable campaigns was his Mahad *satyagraha* in 1927 for dalit access to the Chavdar water tank and his movement for dalit rights to enter the Kalram Temple in 1930. To signal a dramatic defiance of the caste order, Ambedkar and his followers burned a copy of the *Manusmriti*, an ancient Hindu legal code, in the 1927 *satyagraha*. In the early 1930s, Ambedkar encountered one of the most significant political battles of his career in a dispute with M.K. Gandhi over separate electorates for the Depressed Classes. Ambedkar was forced to concede to Gandhi after he had initiated a "fast-unto-death" to protest separate electorates, but the event resulted in an enduring distrust of both Gandhi and the Congress Party.

With Indian independence, Ambedkar became Minister of Law and Chair of the Drafting Commission of the Constitution. For this reason, dalits today honor him with the appellation of India's modern Manu. In 1948, Nehru appointed Ambedkar to preside over

the drafting of a new Hindu Code, a process that had been initiated in 1941. When Ambedkar's version of the Code was rejected without protest from Nehru in September 1951, Ambedkar resigned from Nehru's cabinet. After announcing his rejection of Hinduism and plan to convert into another belief system in 1935, Ambedkar formally converted to Buddhism in a public ceremony on October 14, 1956, a date which was considered to be the anniversary of Mauryan Emperor Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism in 262 BCE. He died less than two months later in December 1956.

Methodology

As an interdisciplinary work of anthropology and history and of contemporary history, this dissertation draws from several fields of inquiry and also from several sources. Research for this project required multi-site archival and ethnographic research. After conducting research at the Maharashtra State Archives, the National Archives of India, the British Library's India Office Records, and the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW), and Navsarjan organizational archives, I have created a collection of sources in Hindi, Gujarati, and English that speak to the history of dalit transnationalism. There was not one primary or established archive from which I gathered material. Rather, I created an "archive" that spoke to the topic of this dissertation. I also studied national-level dalit organizations such as the NCDHR and the NFDW and conducted ethnographic research with Navsarjan Trust, a grassroots human rights organization in the state of Gujarat. I interviewed dalit activists in Ahmedabad, Bangalore, Mumbai, and New Delhi in Hindi, Gujarati, or English.

I use these interviews as “data” insofar as they communicate a representation of the activism in question. Sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology have cautioned against a methodological strategy of interpreting interviews as direct channels to the interviewee’s thoughts and behavior. Anthropologist Charles Briggs suggests that it is the “objectivist ideology that underlies interview techniques...that leads us to believe we are capturing features of our subjects’ behavior and belief.”¹⁶ Instead, he argues that interviews should be analyzed as “communicative events” in which both interviewer and interviewee are “co-participant[s] in the construction of a discourse.”¹⁷ Recalling Briggs’ caution about the nature of interviews, I read the interviews from my research as extensions of activist campaigning itself. The activists I met knew that I was a doctoral student from an American university researching dalit activism. My position as someone who would write about dalits to a foreign audience influenced almost all of my conversations with activists. My questions were quite frequently viewed as interview questions whose answers could and probably would be disseminated to foreign publics. Activists spoke to me about their campaigns, I believe, knowing that their representations would be circulated to a wider, even global audience. The intersubjective environment created by the interview was one in which I was likely viewed as someone who would increase the visibility of dalit issues and dalit activism. I analyze these interviews as I do the textual or visual representations of activist campaigns. I do not assume that activists’ responses to my questions are unmediated descriptions of their feelings, beliefs, or actions; rather, I try to contextualize their responses as part of a larger campaign for the visibility of dalit issues and try to analyze the logic of the visibility that activists seek.

¹⁶ Charles Briggs, *Learning How to Ask: A Sociolinguistic Appraisal of the Role of the Interview in Social Science Research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 124.

¹⁷ Briggs, *Learning How to Ask*, 25.

Dalits and the Nation in Dalit Studies

Eleanor Zelliot's and Gail Omvedt's pioneering studies of Ambedkar and his movement for dalit rights anticipated key themes in the emerging field of dalit studies. Zelliot and Omvedt focused on Ambedkar's rearticulation of the political and cultural identity of India's untouchables; both scholars argue that resignifying identity was a key means for the empowerment of dalits in the late colonial period.¹⁸ In the 1990s, a spate of writings on dalits and the dalit movement renewed interest in the history, perspectives, and social justice movements of dalits in India. Identity was again a central focus of this scholarship, but in distinction from Zelliot and Omvedt's work, this field of dalit studies emphasized dalit difference and the political significance of this assertion of difference. The establishment of autonomous dalit women's organizations seems to have influenced this direction in the scholarship. The emergence of organized dalit feminist activism initiated an interest in conceptualizing the kind of identity politics at work in the dalit movement and led to scholarly debates about the emancipatory potential of dalit feminists' assertion of their "difference."¹⁹ This notion of "difference," however, was primarily analyzed within the nation-state context; "dalit difference" offered a critique of leftist social justice movements, but the implications of "dalit difference" for transnational activism were not considered.

¹⁸ See, for example, Eleanor Mae Zelliot, *Dr. Ambedkar and the Mahar Movement* (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1969); Gail Omvedt, *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahmin Movement in Western India, 1863-1930* (Bombay: Scientific Socialist Education Trust, 1976). For a more detailed discussion of Zelliot and Omvedt's scholarship, see Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

¹⁹ See, for example, Gopal Guru, "Dalit Women Talk Differently," *Economic and Political Weekly* (October 14-21, 1995): 2548-2550; Sharmila Rege, "Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of 'Difference' and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position," *Economic and Political Weekly* 33, 44 (Oct. 31-Nov. 6, 1998): WS39-WS46; and Anupama Rao, ed., *Caste and Gender* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003). See Chapters 5 and 6 of this dissertation for a more detailed analysis of this literature.

Histories of dalit communities have similarly neglected the global context. Historical studies such as Vijay Prashad's and Ramnarayan S. Rawat have provided extremely important accounts of the role of colonial and national processes in reproducing 'untouchability,' specifically through assumptions about the association between caste and occupation.²⁰ These studies, however, remain histories of the nation as much as they are histories of dalit communities. In a similar vein, Dilip Menon provides a compelling argument of the analysis of caste and untouchability in studies of modern Indian history.²¹ Noting a pattern of lower caste assertion followed by communal violence, he contends that caste is central to understanding communalism in India, suggesting that "communalism in India may well be the return of the repressed histories of caste."²² In this reading, histories of caste become important for their contribution to studies of communalism and again, of the nation. In her ground-breaking study, Anupama Rao, however, excavates a history of "caste radicalism" that is essential to understanding political modernity in India and, more generally, to the history of democracy.²³ The significance of dalit history here resonates beyond the nation-state into a global context; Rao demonstrates how dalit struggles speak to the histories of ideas such as equality, rights and democracy. While I am indebted to the scholarship on dalits and the dalit movement, my approach to the study of dalit activism tries to avoid subsuming its narrative into the greater narrative of the nation. I try to remain attentive to activists' perceptions of their national and global contexts and to the implications of this

²⁰ See Vijay Prashad, *Untouchable Freedom: A Social History of a Dalit Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) and Ramnarayan S. Rawat, *Reconsidering Untouchability: Chamars and Dalit History in North India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).

²¹ See Dilip Menon, *The Blindness of Insight: Essays on Caste in Modern India* (Chennai: Navayana Publishing 2006).

²² Menon, *The Blindness of Insight*, 24.

²³ See Rao, *The Caste Question*.

activism in a global context. In this way, I hope this dissertation can also illuminate possibilities for internationalizing South Asian history and for mapping the history of the region through transnational connections.

Chapter Overview

Each chapter of my dissertation focuses on a particular moment or aspect of dalit activism and its translation of caste-based discrimination into an internationally recognized wrong. Chapter 1, “Ambedkar’s Buddhism: A Theology for Modernity,” provides a historical and intellectual context for post-independence dalit movements. I begin with an exposition of Ambedkar’s thought and work because (1) he offers a political foundation for dalit assertions of rights within the Indian state and (2) he remains a key symbol for transnational dalit activism, despite its departure from his political philosophy. Ambedkar is not only paid deference in transnational anti-caste activism, but he appears as an authorizing figure, the figure in whose name activism is pursued. In this chapter, after detailing Ambedkar’s commitment to legislative and constitutional measures for the eradication of caste inequality, I analyze his reformulation of Buddhism. I argue that Ambedkar’s turn to Buddhism precipitates a shift away from minority politics as the means of dalit empowerment. Through his revision of Buddhism, Ambedkar offered a new historical awareness and ethical paradigm for the liberation of dalits and the entire Indian nation. Conversion to Buddhism was to inculcate a new cultural identity and ethics to supplement the laws and policies of the new Indian state. Ambedkar, however, continued to imagine the liberation of dalits within the nation-state framework. He deemed Buddhism an ‘indigenous’ universalism and in this way, the new

identity and ethics he imparted to dalits was fundamentally “Indian,” and dalit issues remained framed within a specific history of oppression. While Ambedkar did engage in an international field, the international context did not substantially affect his prescriptions for dalits or the Indian nation. Subsequent chapters of this dissertation explore how engagement with a global context changed the argument for dalit rights.

Chapter 2, “National Minority, Global Majority: Episodes in Dalit Transnationalism,” narrates the trend towards transnationalism and the turn away from activism limited to the national context. It recounts five episodes of transnational dalit activism, beginning with Ambedkar’s correspondence with W.E.B. DuBois. This correspondence was as an early effort, but one that ultimately did not come to fruition, to internationalize dalit issues. The four subsequent episodes analyze the activism of the Dalit Panthers, diasporic dalit groups, international human rights organizations and networks, and Navsarjan Trust. I describe my approach to this history as episodic because it recounts discrete histories, rather than linearly tracing a historical development, and discerns recurrences and congruities over different historical moments; the narrative that emerges from these different pieces then aids an understanding of dalit activism. The three primary developments that recur in these different moments of transnational activism are (1) a claim of similarity in social position and in politics with another community; (2) the expansion of “dalit” as an identity not limited to those subjected to caste oppression; and (3) a rearticulation of caste as a global phenomena, as a form of inherited inequality not unique to India, but rather that occurs in societies across the world. Chapter 3, “Generalizing Caste: Histories of Caste as Inherited Inequality” picks up on the latter theme and provides a deeper history to the conceptualization of caste in

transnational activism. Starting with a speech by radical Republican senator Charles Sumner in 1869, I trace a history of the term “caste” in which it referred to a system of social stratification and inherited inequality. In this history, “caste” was not geographically restricted to the Indian subcontinent nor was its development solely linked to the effects of Hinduism in Indian society. While India may have provided the best or original example of caste and its processes, “caste” in this history is defined in terms of relational criteria and social features that were not limited to a geographic place. This notion diverges from official, scholarly, and even Ambedkar’s conceptualizations of caste, but as this chapter demonstrates, this notion also enables the internationalization of dalit grievances and transnational activism.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 analyze three examples of this internationalization through a discussion of national-level dalit organizations and their transnational activism. Chapter 4, “The NCDHR’s *Black Paper*: Countering State Neglect with Dalit Human Rights,” discusses the formation of the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights and its inaugural human rights campaign in 1998. I argue that NCDHR’s appeal to human rights expresses both frustration with the Indian state for its failure to fulfill the promises of the Constitution and concern that the economic reforms of the early 1990s were further eroding the state’s responsibility to act in the interest of social justice. The NCDHR also challenges some of the premises of human rights, putting forth a conceptualization of universal rights that critiques the scope of acceptable liberty in liberal theory; challenges the state-centered approach implicit in both the theory and practice of human rights; highlights the need for positive obligations from the state; and underscores the violence of neglect. This chapter then illustrates the contradictions of dalit human rights activism

as it reaches beyond the state to enact changes within the state. First, the NCDHR, representing a marginalized community in a postcolonial country, conceives of liberal human rights as part of a complex of ideas that have enabled global inequality. Ironically, the NCDHR's reconstitution of human rights revises the international discourse so that it more closely resembles Ambedkar's political philosophy. Second, while the NCDHR's revision of human rights maps onto Ambedkar's liberation theory, its conceptualization of dalit identity and caste critically departs from Ambedkar's.

Chapter 5, "Dalit Activism at WCAR, 2001," analyzes the mobilization of the NCDHR's concept of identity and caste in its campaign at the United Nations World Conference Against Racism held in Durban, South Africa in 2001. Activists argued that caste-discrimination constituted a form of inherited inequality, specifically a form of discrimination based on descent; this then rendered caste discrimination analogous to discrimination based on race. I analyze the debate that ensued among scholars, activists, and politicians over the NCDHR's conceptualization of caste and draw attention to the Indian state's efforts to block all discussion of caste at WCAR. This chapter then highlights a tension in transnational activism: while the NCDHR seeks an international system of human rights that embodies the understanding of rights found in the Constitution of India, it is the Indian state that puts up the most resistance to the internationalization of caste discrimination.

Chapter 6, "NFDW and Transnational Dalit Feminist Activism," disaggregates dalit activism and highlights the tensions that erupt around a failure to address all forms of inequality within the movement. This chapter offers the perspective of dalit feminists, a group that have felt marginalized within both anti-caste and women's movements. It

focuses on the National Federation of Dalit Women and traces key moments in the development of its international advocacy. I analyze the how dalit feminists contend with their marginalization within both anti-caste and women's movements and argue that transnational alliances and solidarity with other communities of marginalized women – from an allegiance of camaraderie with Angela Davis to an alliance against sexual exploitation between former *devadasis* and former comfort women – have enabled dalit feminists to transcend the ideological contradictions of these social movements. My understanding of the alliances around sexual exploitation draws from Margaret Keck's and Kathryn Sikkink's analysis of transnational advocacy networks. Keck and Sikkink define these networks as “those actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse and dense exchange of information and services.”²⁴ I use their model of advocacy networks to analyze how dalit feminists translate the caste-based practice of the dedication of dalit girls into the devadasi system and how they build “a common discourse” about human rights violations against women.

Chapter 7, “Ambedkar on the Women's Question,” returns to Ambedkar's political philosophy, but offers a critical reading of his views on and prescriptions for dalit women. I expose the gender biases in Ambedkar's thought and highlight the strategic use of patriarchal codes of respectability in his movement for dalit rights and empowerment. Ambedkar's views on women and gender, I argue, compromise his universalism, and this legacy of sexism has produced a tension in post-independence anti-caste movements that has yet to be resolved. By calling attention to Ambedkar's sexism, this chapter suggests that an exclusionary impulse existed in the foundation of

²⁴ Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 89.

modern anti-caste movements, and that the legacy of this can be discerned in contemporary dalit activism, especially around issues related to gender.

By bookending this dissertation with discussions of Ambedkar, I hope to impart the relevance of his legacy for contemporary activists and highlight the contradictions and tensions that emerge from the idealization of Ambedkar. Chapter 1 demonstrates that Ambedkar's movement for dalit rights was premised on a particular notion of identity, one built around dalit *difference* in *political* identity. Chapter 7 highlights how Ambedkar also insisted on an identity for dalits that conformed to the predominant notions of respectability at the time; those outside the norms for respectability were excluded from Ambedkar's movement. As Chapters 2-6 demonstrate, transnational dalit activism departs from both of these aspects of Ambedkar's identity politics. Transnational dalit activism stresses *similarity* in political interest and identity with groups outside of India – groups that are deemed to be in comparable structural positions to dalits. It also empties dalit identity of its national specificity and constructs this identity through a projection of dalits' membership in a virtual global community of struggling peoples. Despite this departure from the logic of Ambedkar's movement, Ambedkar remains the key emblem of transnational dalit activism. In another irony, activists completely discount the exclusionary impulses present in Ambedkar's liberation philosophy, even as these ideological tensions continue to strain the universalist ideology of contemporary anti-caste activism. By anchoring my analysis of transnational dalit activism in discussions of Ambedkar, each chapter adds to the unpacking and elucidation of the contradictions that emerge in this activism with regards to Ambedkar's legacy.

Chapter 1 Ambedkar's Buddhism: A Theology for Modernity

In a speech broadcasted on All-India Radio in 1954, B.R. Ambedkar declared that his social ideology was neither inspired by a European intellectual tradition nor did it have a secular logic. Rather, he claimed that it had an indigenous origin and was fundamentally based in religion:

my Social Philosophy may be said to be enshrined in three words: Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. Let no one, however, say that I have borrowed my philosophy from the French Revolution. I have not. My philosophy has roots in religion and not political science. I have derived them from the teachings of my Master, the Buddha.²⁵

While Buddhist philosophy has been cited as an Indian intellectual tradition comparable to views emerging from the European Enlightenment – as a body of thought that is equivalent in content but genealogically distinct from Enlightenment philosophy – in the passage above, Ambedkar is not arguing for a *similarity* between Enlightenment and Buddhist philosophies.²⁶ Rather, he seems to juxtapose them to highlight their *difference*. Ambedkar uses one of the key slogans of the French Revolution and the national motto of France – “Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity” – only to claim that for

²⁵ B.R. Ambedkar, “My Philosophy of Life,” in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Volume 17, Part 3* (Mumbai: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Material Publication Committee, Higher Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 2003), 503.

²⁶ For example, Amartya Sen in *The Idea of Justice* makes a case for multiple universalisms by arguing that the Buddha's thinking is “closely aligned” with “many of the critical writings of the leading authors of the Enlightenment.” He writes that “similar – or closely linked – ideas of justice, fairness, responsibility, duty, goodness and rightness have been pursued in many different parts of the world” and that “similar intellectual engagements have taken place in different parts of the globe in distinct stages of history.” Sen also views Akbar's statecraft as very similar to contemporary political theories on secularism. While he suggests that the philosophies of the Buddha and Akbar can be seen as examples of historically distinct yet conceptually equivalent universalisms, he does not go beyond a mere reference to them. He thus does not answer his call for the recognition of multiple universalisms in this text. See Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2009), xvi, xv, 37-39.

him, those values are not derived from European political theory but rather from the religious teachings of the Buddha. His usage of a phrase so closely associated with the triumphs of the Enlightenment, its political revolutions and doctrines of humanism and rights, indicates a complicated engagement with European discourses of liberation.

From the 1920s onwards, Ambedkar pursued the liberation of dalits through an ingenious use of “political science” – the logics and frameworks of liberalism, constitutionalism, and democracy. He argued that dalits constituted a distinct and separate community within India and used the political logic of difference to protect against dalit exclusion. As Anupama Rao has demonstrated, Ambedkar relied on the liberal category of “minority” to argue for the promotion of dalit interest. In Rao’s words, this strategy was “characterized by the exacerbation of difference in order to obviate it.”²⁷ As a “minority,” dalits appeared as a community in sharp distinction and irreconcilably separate from caste Hindus. A ‘minority identity,’ a category itself derived from European “political science,” was a central part of Ambedkar’s struggle for a political resolution to the inequality, exclusion, and disenfranchisement of dalits within Hindu society and under the colonial institutional and electoral system.²⁸

In the statement quoted above, however, Ambedkar announced a departure from European “political science” and placed the liberatory promise of the creed “Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity” within the realm of religion rather than political theory. While Ambedkar never abandoned political channels to dalit empowerment, his conversion to Buddhism marked a change in the form of community he imagined for the liberation of

²⁷ Anupama Rao, *Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (Berkeley: University of California press, 2009), 25.

²⁸ This was done in a context where in which colonial governmentality was, as Anupama Rao shows, “organized around the political theology of the franchise and procedures of representation.” See Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question*, 20.

dalits in India. In this chapter, I argue that after Indian independence and his adoption of Buddhism, Ambedkar rejected the logic of minority politics and approached the pursuit of dalit liberation through the formation of a new community. Dalit empowerment and national fraternity, as I will show, was then pursued not through the assertion of difference and a minority identity, but rather through the creation of a new moral community – that of Buddhism – for all of India. This form of community was cultural by design and was part and parcel of a new historical awareness that Ambedkar projected for dalits and the new nation. In this chapter, I first discuss Ambedkar’s use of “minority identity” as a political category that amplified difference in identity in order to counter historical and manifest inequality. I then turn to his critiques of liberal political theories, his interpretation of Indian history, and his conversion to Buddhism to demonstrate his departure from minority identity politics.

Ambedkar Studies

Over the last two decades, Ambedkar's life and work has been the source of renewed interest among scholars of South Asia. While Eleanor Zelliott and Gail Omvedt began publishing on Ambedkar in the 1970s, his contributions as a nationalist leader, social reformer, and theorist of caste remained somewhat neglected in the historical and anthropological scholarship on India. In their pioneering studies of Ambedkar and his anti-caste movement, Zelliott and Omvedt focus on his effort to reconstitute dalit identity and his commitment to the political and democratic process.²⁹ Both scholars underscore

²⁹ See, Eleanor Mae Zelliott, *Dr. Ambedkar and the Mahar Movement*. PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1969; Eleanor Zelliott, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*. (Manohar: New Delhi, 1992). Gail Omvedt, *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: the non-Brahmin Movement in Western India, 1863-1930* (Bombay: Scientific Socialist Education Trust, 1976); Gail

the primacy of the social and religious in Ambedkar's struggle against caste. They emphasize Ambedkar's focus on the "superstructure" in bringing about social change by analyzing the reconceptualization of lower caste identity in Ambedkar's movement for dalit liberation.³⁰

Ambedkar's political leadership has been the focus of several recent biographical and historical studies. Valerian Rodrigues emphasizes the uniqueness of Ambedkar's insistence that the movement for dalit rights be led by dalits.³¹ Ambedkar distrusted the reformist designs of Congress leaders, and insisted upon dalit agency in the destruction of caste and the reorganization of Indian society. Rodrigues also notes that Ambedkar repeatedly strove to join dalits in coalitions with other oppressed groups. His attempts at mobilizing mass followings through his political parties – the Independent Labour Party, 1936 and the Republican Party, 1956 – have been analyzed as part of his effort to join dalits, peasants, and non-Brahmins in a political movement. Christophe Jaffrelot notes that a consistent tension between forging an identity of difference for dalits and joining dalits with other oppressed groups can be found throughout Ambedkar's political activities. Jaffrelot interprets the formation of the Scheduled Caste Federation just six years after the Independent Labour Party as a result of Ambedkar's fear of "diluting the identity of his movement" and indicative of the "a key dilemma of his approach: must Untouchables conceive of themselves as an entirely separate group?"³² While Jaffrelot analyzes Ambedkar's conversion and reworking of Buddhism

Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*. (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1994).

³⁰ See Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, 229.

³¹ See Valerian Rodrigues, "Introduction," in *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar* ed. Valerian Rodrigues (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002).

³² Christophe Jaffrelot, *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analysing and Fighting Caste* (London: Hurst & Company, 2005), 74.

as a “strategy of emancipation,” he neglects to see it as providing resolution to this “key dilemma,” to the tensions in a strategy based on dalit difference, an interpretation that I will offer later in this chapter.

Literary theorist Gauri Viswanathan’s reads Ambedkar’s conversion as inherently political, as both a critique and a strategic maneuver with demographic significance. She discusses Ambedkar’s dissatisfaction with the modern secular state as an antidote to caste oppression and reads his conversion to Buddhism as effectively revealing “the wide gap between the secular commitment to the removal of civil disabilities and the secular state’s persistent functioning within a majoritarian ethic.”³³ Viswanathan provides a compelling analysis of Ambedkar’s Buddhism as a “form of political and cultural criticism” and “dissent against the identities constructed by the state.”³⁴ While she accurately points out Ambedkar’s frustration with the state’s functioning with a “majoritarian ethic,” her reading of conversion as a denouncement of secularism as a “universalist world view stalling the processes of enfranchisement” does not resonate with my reading of Ambedkar’s thought. Throughout his activist career, Ambedkar stayed committed to the democratic process and to secularism as a governmental ideology. Conversion, it seems, was meant to supplement the governmental laws and institutions of independent India to facilitate the establishment of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

Anupama Rao argues that Ambedkar’s conversion exemplifies the importance of both the political and religious arenas as sites of liberation. Conversion also put forth a distinct identity for dalits that unambiguously cast off the denigration of dalits as “degraded Hindus.” Another contribution of Rao’s monograph on anti-caste radicalism is

³³ Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 214.

³⁴ Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*, 213.

her discussions of Ambedkar's innovations in transforming the liberal category of equality as caste equality. In this way, she reveals Ambedkar's work as pivotal to the history Indian democracy and political modernity more generally.

While Rao analyzes Ambedkar's creative translations and innovations of liberal political theory, historian Ananya Vajpeyi explores Ambedkar's nationalist politics in terms of his reconceptualization of *duhkha*, a concept she categorizes as part of an "Indic tradition."³⁵ *Duhkha* is conventionally translated as sorrow or suffering and within Buddhist and Hindu practice, this suffering is commonly interpreted as individual suffering brought on by the work of karma. Vajpeyi suggests that in his exposition of Buddhism, Ambedkar redefines *duhkha* as social suffering arising from caste and deems it collective suffering. In my reading, Ambedkar does not limit *duhkha* to the work of caste; rather, he espouses a more generalizable understanding in which *duhkha* is the product of various forms of man-made inequality and exploitation. Vajpeyi does, however, accurately note that Ambedkar presents a reading of Buddhism that focuses on the social aspects of its doctrines rather than the transcendental and metaphysical. While many scholars have related this to Ambedkar's particular emancipatory project for dalits, Vajpeyi sees this as evidence of his being "estranged" from Indic traditions.³⁶ She claims that Ambedkar's interpretation "renders Buddhism unrecognizable as itself" and indicates

³⁵ See Ananya Vajpeyi, *Righteous Republic: The Political Foundations of Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012). In her review of *Righteous Republic*, Karuna Mantena points out that Vajpeyi's concept of "Indic traditions" is not clear. At moments, Vajpeyi assumes an "internal coherence" to these traditions, but this coherence is itself result of 18th and 19th century colonial and nationalist knowledge production. At other moments, this tradition is conceptualized as a product of the nationalist imagination or as a heuristic device for Vajpeyi's argument. See Karuna Mantena, "The Ideas of Indians: What did Ashoka, Shah Jahan and the Buddha mean to Modern India's Founding Fathers?" *The Caravan* (March 2013), 79.

³⁶ Vajpeyi, 239. Scholars who relate Ambedkar's reworking of Buddhism to his social and political project for dalit emancipation include Eleanor Zelliot, Gail Omvedt, Christopher S. Queen, Gauri Viswanathan, Christophe Jaffrelot, and Anupama Rao.

Ambedkar's "distance from a certain civilizational orientation."³⁷ The "civilizational" traditions Vajpeyi refers to are based on Sanskritic texts and Brahmanical Hinduism. By suggesting that Ambedkar – the only dalit out of the five thinkers she analyzes - is alienated from Indic traditions, Vajpeyi reinforces an upper-caste and elitist bias and invalidates Ambedkar's (and other lower caste) critiques of these traditions as oppressive ideologies.³⁸

While recent scholarship has elucidated Ambedkar's social philosophy, political strategies, and contributions to political theory and social justice, Vajpeyi's recent work shows the persistence of the marginalization and, at times, denigration of Ambedkar and his liberation movement by certain schools of South Asian history.³⁹ Ambedkar has long been accused of disloyalty to the nation, an accusation that is often wielded at contemporary dalit activists as well. While Vajpeyi identifies Ambedkar as a nationalist leader, her interpretation of his revision of Buddhism suggests an alienation from the cultural fabric of the nation and ends up excluding him from the pantheon of foundational, nationalist leaders. Ambedkar thus appears as an outsider, estranged from the values and traditions that constitute Indic civilization. The works of Zelliott, Omvedt, Rodrigues, Jaffrelot, Viswanathan, Rao, and others, however, have excavated Ambedkar's contributions and have analyzed the significance of these for both India and political modernity in general. They have drawn attention to the oft neglected visions of

³⁷ Vajpeyi, 211, 229.

³⁸ Vajpeyi also presents an untenable evaluation of Ambedkar's views on identity and politics. She suggests that Ambedkar saw modern religious and caste identities as political identities and cites his support for Pakistan as an example of this. Ambedkar, however, supported the demand for Pakistan because he witnessed and experienced the effects of Hindu majoritarianism in restricting "corporate sentiment" to Muslims and treating minorities as "second-class citizens." See B.R. Ambedkar, *Pakistan or the Partition of India*, in *B.R. Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 8* ed. Vasant Moon (Bombay: Department of Education, Government of Maharashtra, 1990), 19.

³⁹ This denigration is also found in popular histories. See, for example, Arun Shourie, *Worshipping False Gods: Ambedkar and the Facts Which Have Been Erased* (New Delhi: ASA Publications, 1997).

social justice and the Indian nation that Ambedkar strived to actualize and have helped stimulate a renewed scholarly interest in his work and philosophy.

In this chapter, I approach Ambedkar's social and political philosophy with an eye towards contemporary dalit activism. In particular, I hope my exposition will offer a historical and intellectual context for modern dalit movements, and will also detail the political insights inherited by dalit activists after Ambedkar. I analyze Ambedkar's rearticulation and resignification of Indic tradition and focus on the forms of community Ambedkar imagined for the liberation of dalits and the entire nation after Indian independence.

Jotirao Phule and E.V. Ramaswamy, a Predecessor and Contemporary

When Ambedkar began advocating for the rights of dalits in 1919, he joined an anti-caste movement that had for decades appealed to the colonial government on behalf of the oppressed castes.⁴⁰ Within Ambedkar's Mahar community in western India, activists such as Gopal Baba Valankar (?-1900) and Shivram Janba Kamble (1875-1942) grounded their arguments for greater opportunities within the colonial structure in historical claims of pre-Aryan, indigenous, or Kshatriya lineage.⁴¹ For both of these activists as well as for Ambedkar, the leadership and intellectual project of Jotirao Govindrao Phule (1827-1890) was seminal in the development of their activism. Phule, born into a shudra community, placed the historical reconstruction of lower-caste identity

⁴⁰ Ambedkar represented the interests of the Depressed Classes before the Southborough Committee as it prepared for electoral reforms with the Government of India Act, 1919 (the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms).

⁴¹ See Eleanor Zelliot, "Religion and Legitimation in the Mahar Movement," in Bardwell Smith, ed., *Religion and the Legitimation of Power in South Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 1978); Rao, *The Caste Question*, 39-80.

at the center of his activist project and thus also aspired for the reconfiguration of community identity as a means of social change. Phule put forth a speculative history in which Brahmins were foreign conquerors who subdued the indigenous population through “that weird system of mythology, the ordination of caste and the code of cruel and inhuman laws.”⁴² This indigenous population was deemed the ancestors of Shudra and Dalit communities. Phule maintained the identification of Brahmins with Aryans found in Orientalist historiography, but resignified the elements of the Orientalist construction of Indian history. Aryan Brahmins appeared as brute and uncivilized people in Phule’s history and the indigenous people as prosperous and advanced. He thus inverted the dominant theory of the Aryan conquest and put forth a history in which the dominant tropes were of struggle, violence, and clashes of power. His narrative of the conquest of the indigenous people included ten phases, which he claimed were mythologized as the ten incarnations of Vishnu. In this way, Phule redefined Hindu mythology and read it as a chronicle of the Aryan/Brahmin assault on India. In her study of Phule, Rosalind O’Hanlon writes that for non-Brahmins, “the discovery of his real identity, and of the hidden history of his ancestors” from Phule’s history “was intended to bring about an upheaval in emotions as well as in his reasoned understanding of his social environment.”⁴³ Phule’s intellectual and activist project called for the unity of shudras and dalits to dismantle Brahmanical power and the caste system. He espoused a universal theism that proclaimed equality among all castes and between both sexes.

Ambedkar professed inspiration from Phule and although his histories rejected the claim

⁴² Jotirao Phule, *Slavery (in this Civilised British Government Under the Cloak of Brahmanism) in Collected Works of Mahatma Jotirao Phule, Vol. 1*, translated by P.G. Patil (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1991), xxi.

⁴³ Rosalind O’Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 142.

of pre-Aryan and Kshatriya status, he too employed the tropes of struggle and conflict in his reconstruction of the Indian past and developed a new religion to reorient the identities of the lower castes.

In addition to the activism in western India, anti-caste movements were also gaining momentum in South India during the colonial period. The most notable of these was the Self-Respect Movement, led by Ambedkar's contemporary, E.V. Ramaswamy or Periyar (1879-1973), and like the non-Brahman movement in Maharashtra, it stressed a non-Aryan and indigenous origin of the lower castes.⁴⁴ Periyar's work combined socialism, distrust of Congress, Tamil nationalism, and opposition to caste. Periyar had joined the Indian National Congress in 1919, but left in 1925, frustrated and disappointed by Congress' recalcitrance on issues of social reform. In 1926, he founded the Self-Respect League, which espoused opposition to the caste order and skepticism of all religions, in particular, the power of Brahmin priesthood. It also extolled rationalism and made women's equality and rights a centerpiece of his movement. Periyar travelled to Malaysia, several countries in Europe, and the Soviet Union between 1929 and 1932; and the latter left a significant impact on his economic thinking. In 1944, he reorganized the Justice Party, renaming it Dravida Kazhagam, with the explicit goal of Dravidian self-determination. In her assessment of the Periyar, Gail Omvedt argues that although Periyar tirelessly struggled for the abolition of untouchability and the caste order, the Self-Respect and Dravidian Movement failed to attract a mass dalit following.⁴⁵ Internal

⁴⁴ For a history and analysis of Iyothee Thass (1845-1914), a dalit activist and thinker from the Parayar community in Tamil Nadu, and his critique of caste and turn to Buddhism, see Gajendran Ayyathurai's doctoral dissertation, *Foundations of Anti-Caste Consciousness: Pundit Iyothee Thass, Tamil Buddhism, and the Marginalized of South India*, PhD diss., Columbia University, 2011.

⁴⁵ See Gail Omvedt, *Dalit Visions: The Anti-Caste Movement and the Construction of an Indian Identity* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1995). Omvedt points out that the most popular dalit leader in Tamil Nadu was M.C. Rajah, a member of the Hindu Mahasabha. Omvedt, *Dalit Visions*, 61.

fractures limited the movement's appeal. As Omvedt writes, "The South thus witnessed a powerful non-brahman movement and a strong opposition to 'Hinduism' but more than any other region was plagued by splits between Communists and Dravidians, and dalit and non-Brahmans."⁴⁶

While Phule and Periyar remain key figures in the history of anti-caste movements and continue to inspire contemporary activism, Ambedkar emerges as the first dalit leader to have appeal across India. An "all-India" leader, Ambedkar is still upheld as a model and guide for dalit liberation. His political thought and lived struggles have influenced the trajectory of modern anti-caste movements and he remains a powerful symbol for dalit activism. The compilation of the writings and speeches published by the Government of Maharashtra has also disseminated his work to a wide public, furthering the circulation of his political thought among activists all over India. As defender and advocate of dalits, communities found in villages, towns, and cities across India, Ambedkar is also one of the few nationalist leaders who has, as Ramchandra Guha writes, "truly pan-Indian appeal."⁴⁷ His status as both a nationalist and anti-caste leader thus contributes to his continued importance to activists today.

Dalit Difference as Political Strategy for the Annihilation of Caste

Ambedkar's pursuit of a political solution to the problem of caste inequality came to the fore in the 1930s. Throughout the 1920s, Ambedkar had campaigned for dalit rights to access water reserves and temples. He argued that these practices constituted civic

⁴⁶ Omvedt, *Dalit Visions*, 61.

⁴⁷ Ramchandra Guha, *An Anthropologist Among the Marxists and Other Essays* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001) 97.

rights and used legal arguments that stressed the “public” nature of these facilities.⁴⁸ In 1924, he established the Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha (Society for the Wellbeing of the Excluded) with its motto of “Educate, Agitate, Organize.” The organization was key to Ambedkar’s movement for the empowerment of dalits. In 1926, Ambedkar was nominated to the Legislative Council for the Bombay Presidency, adding to his political authority to represent dalits.

In the 1930s, the assertion of dalit difference – of a radical difference in political identity from caste Hindus – became Ambedkar’s predominant strategy for dalit empowerment. This strategy framed dalits as a minority community and as Anupama Rao writes, cast them as “subjects of suffering defined by permanent antagonism to the caste Hindu order.”⁴⁹ This strategy rendered dalits a community politically equivalent to Muslims and consequently, deserving of comparable electoral protections. At the Second Roundtable Conference, in which both M.K. Gandhi and Ambedkar sat on the Minorities Committee, Ambedkar advocated for the institution of separate electorates for the Depressed Classes. In August 1932, the colonial government responded with the Communal Award, which gave the Depressed Classes the right to separate electorates. Gandhi protested that separate electorates would destroy Hindu unity and announced a “fast-unto-death” if the measure was not repealed.⁵⁰ Ambedkar, forced to yield under threat of Gandhi’s death, conceded to the Poona Pact, a diluted version of the reform

⁴⁸ See Rao, *The Caste Question*, 82.

⁴⁹ Rao, 23.

⁵⁰ Christophe Jaffrelot reports that in a conversation with Sardar Patel about the Communal Award, Gandhi suggested that “caste Hindus had to be defended against the British-sponsored solidarity between Muslims and Dalits.” See Jaffrelot, *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability*, 65.

offered by the Communal Award. Instead of instituting separate electorates, the Poona Pact promised reserved seats in the general electorate.⁵¹

Three years after the Poona Pact, in a move that declared his rejection of Hinduism and troubled Congress and Hindu Mahasabha leadership, Ambedkar announced his plan to convert to another religion. Over the next two decades, Ambedkar consulted with leaders of various religions, including Islam, Sikhism, and Christianity, before converting to Buddhism in 1956. In 1936, Ambedkar established his first political party, Independent Labour Party. He formed the Scheduled Caste Federation in 1942 and his third political party, the Republican Party, shortly before his death in 1956. While these political parties were not very successful electorally, they do indicate Ambedkar's continued pursuit of the political empowerment of dalits and of political resolutions to the problems of caste inequality even after the disappointment of the Poona Pact.

As evidenced by the argument for separate electorates, minority identity for the dalits of India was thus central to Ambedkar's strategy for the political resolution to caste inequality. In their introduction to a volume focused on the reassessment of identity politics, Linda Martin Alcoff and Satya P. Mohanty argue that the term "minority" – in addition to referencing numerical weakness – "signifies a struggle, a position that is under contestation...that does not enjoy equality of status, of power, or of respect" and indicates "the nonhegemonic, the nondominant, the position that has to be explained

⁵¹ Under a system of separate electorates, Depressed Class candidates would be elected by the Depressed Classes; they thus would have representatives that have been selected by them. Under a system of reserved seats, Depressed Class candidates would be elected by the general electorate. This ran the risk of the candidates – although nominally being of the Depressed Classes – not acting in the interest of the larger dalit community. A system of reserved seats thus did not guarantee proper representation of the constituency. In short, whereas separate electorates increased the probability of representatives serving as "proxies" for the community, a system of reserved seats runs the risk of representatives being mere "portraits" of their constituency. For a discussion of representation as proxy and portrait, see Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

rather than assumed.”⁵² “Minority” thus indicates not only a quantitative difference, but as Anupama Rao notes, a qualitative difference from the majority. Accordingly, B.R. Ambedkar’s assertion of a minority identity for dalits served as a political strategy to shore up dalit electoral power, indexed structural relations between Hindus and dalits, and promoted a notion of community based on difference from caste Hindu society.

Colonial assessments of Indian society had rendered religious identity equivalent to political identity and religious community equivalent to political interest. Muslims in India thus constituted the main minority community in India. By espousing minority status for dalits, Ambedkar broke their association with the Hindu community and rendered them structurally equivalent to Muslims. Most prominently evoked at the Second Roundtable Conference, minority status was used to argue for separate electorates – which Muslims had been granted in 1909 – so that dalits could gain power and emerge as a distinct political entity. Ambedkar claimed that the history of suffering inflicted by the caste Hindu order provided the basis of dalits’ minority status. Rather than “degraded Hindus,” dalits were, as Rao demonstrates, “defined by social marginality, civic exclusion, and material deprivation.”⁵³ Ambedkar stressed “the primacy of the political to oppose preexisting organic definitions of community” and argued that dalits shared a “political interest.”

The Political as Insufficient for the Annihilation of Caste

⁵² See Linda Martin Alcoff and Satya P. Mohanty, “Reconsidering Identity Politics: An Introduction,” in *Identity Politics Reconsidered* eds. Linda Alcoff, Michael Hames-Garcia, Satya P. Mohanty, Paula M.L. Moya (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 8.

⁵³ Rao, *The Caste Question*, 133.

Although Ambedkar utilized the logic and categories of liberal political theory, he also remained critical of it. Politics, it seems, provided a path to dalit empowerment, but Ambedkar seemed to doubt its efficacy in restructuring society. In the speech referenced in the beginning of this chapter, Ambedkar contended that law could not generate liberty and equality nor could it provide a guarantee against their violations.⁵⁴ He explained that law could be broken or circumvented, but that fraternity – which law alone cannot generate – was the “only real safeguard against the denial of liberty or equality.” Throughout his career as a spokesperson for dalits and as a nationalist leader, Ambedkar’s overriding critique of Hindu society was that it was unable to produce fraternity, and consequently, equality and liberty. Caste divisions, he maintained, precluded community and as long as Hindu society observed caste, dalits would not be able to enjoy a life of dignity, a life that could only be fully experienced through bonds of fraternity. For Ambedkar, “fraternity” – which was “another name for religion” – was not guaranteed by political community; rather, it could only be the product of cultural or religious community.⁵⁵ Unlike Buddhist philosophy, he suggested, European Enlightenment political theory did not foster communal solidarity.

Even before turning to Buddhism, however, Ambedkar was critical of the categories and understandings of liberty and equality in classical political theory. In *States and Minorities: What are their rights and how to secure them in the Constitution of Free India*, Ambedkar challenged the “scope and function” of traditional constitutional

⁵⁴ Ambedkar, “My Philosophy of Life,” 503. In both the French and American model of rights, law has a central place in securing individual rights. Under the French model, the way to secure rights is to have everyone subject themselves to the law. Rights then emerge from the law and the legitimacy of the government is based on upholding individual rights. Under the American system, individual rights precede the government and these rights also represent the limits to governmental power.

⁵⁵ Ambedkar, “My Philosophy of Life,” 503.

law.⁵⁶ The text was published in 1947 after the All-India Scheduled Caste Federation had asked Ambedkar to provide an account of how the Scheduled Caste communities would be protected in the future constitution of an independent India. Ambedkar suggested a constitution for the “United States of India,” and in his notes, he conceded that “Students of Constitutional law will at once raise a protest” that his “proposal goes beyond the scope of the usual Fundamental Rights.”⁵⁷ He maintained, however, that the state needed governmental mechanisms for the protection and advancement of vulnerable groups, even if these mechanisms deviated from classical European liberal constitutionalism. If “democracy is to live up to its principle of one man, one value,” India needed to learn from the European example, where liberal constitutionalism had yielded gross economic inequalities.⁵⁸ Ambedkar cautioned that formal political equality and universal enfranchisement were not capable of catalyzing the social and economic changes necessary to make manifest the “one man, one value” ideal of democracy. For Ambedkar, the problem of caste – a problem with roots in religion – was the main obstacle to democracy in India. True democracy, he said in a speech in 1956, required bonds of “sympathy” and “social endosmosis,” and this could not be generated by political institutions and formal equality alone.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ B.R. Ambedkar, *States and Minorities: What are their rights and how to secure them in the Constitution of Free India* (Hyderabad: Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Society, 1970).

⁵⁷ Ambedkar, *States and Minorities*, 34.

⁵⁸ Ambedkar claims that the Scheduled Castes are “more than a minority” because “social, economic and educational condition is so much worse than that of the citizens.” He argues that they subsequently are owed all the protections of minority groups as well as additional “special safeguards against the tyranny and discrimination of the majority.” See B.R. Ambedkar, *States and Minorities*, V.

⁵⁹ B.R. Ambedkar, “Prospect of Democracy in India,” in *Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17. Part 3*, (Mumbai: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Material Publication Committee, Government of Maharashtra, 2003), 520, 521.

Ambedkar's political reasoning thus indicates his critique of the liberal foundations of European political theory as not sufficiently emancipatory.⁶⁰ Furthermore, post-independence politics – especially around the Hindu Code Bill – showed Ambedkar how the modern democratic, secular state could operate in collusion with a discriminatory, religious ideology. Conversion to Buddhism was meant as an antidote to the state's and society's casteist, Hindu orientation by supplementing the rights and freedoms afforded by the political system with new ethics. For dalits, conversion offered a cultural alternative to caste and political identities. It was conceived as part of a complex of ideas and practices which would remake caste identities, alter understandings of the past, and inspire new projections of the future.

A New Past for a Future Without Caste

While many of Ambedkar's earlier anthropological writings on caste suggested a narrative of Indian history, it was not until the 1940s and 1950s that he fully engaged in history writing. These histories – *The Untouchables: Who Where They and Why They Became Untouchables*, *Who are the Shudras?: How They became the Fourth Varna in Indo-Aryan Society*, and *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India* – narrate stories of conflict and struggle. Buddhism emerges in Ambedkar's histories as one of the most significant ideological movements that shaped Indian civilization and the religion

⁶⁰ Amartya Sen's analysis of the inadequacy of "transcendental institutionalism" as an approach to social justice parallels Ambedkar's dissatisfaction with the institutions and ideology of liberal democracy. "Transcendental institutionalism," the approach taken by key thinkers like Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, focuses on discerning the criteria constitutive of justice and then creating institutions that serve these criteria. This approach aims at "getting the institutions right," but does not take into consideration "the actual societies that would ultimately emerge." Instead of focusing on the "removal of manifest injustice" in society, a transcendental approach focuses on abstract principles and creating institutions to serve these. Ambedkar's Buddhism targeted the "removal of manifest injustice" – that which political institutions alone could not do. See Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 5-18.

practiced by most Indians during India's "Golden Age."⁶¹ Allegiance to Buddhist beliefs was also implicated in the establishment of untouchability. In *The Untouchables*, published in 1948, Ambedkar dispelled dominant theories of the genesis of untouchability – including religious myth, colonial race theory, and occupational theories of caste – and put forth an alternative history of the origin of the practice. This history, I argue, was part of Ambedkar's search for an alternative to a political identity based on difference and offered a template for reconceptualizing dalit and Indian identity.

Ambedkar's genealogy of untouchability begins with an anthropological assessment of the needs of "Primitive Society" as it transitions from a nomadic mode of living to a settled one reliant on agriculture. Ambedkar speculates that in "primitive" times, tribes were in constant warfare. A defeated tribe which lost many of its members resulted in a "floating population of Broken tribesmen roaming in all directions."⁶² These Broken Men were vulnerable to attack and in need of shelter and protection. Tribes that had settled faced another problem: these groups needed watchmen to protect them from raiding, nomadic tribes. Ambedkar contends that in the negotiations between settled communities and the Broken Men, Broken Men were offered shelter outside of the demarcated area of the settled community in exchange for their protection of the community. Ambedkar cites examples of Broken Men communities in Ireland and Wales to demonstrate that this type of spatial organization of communities was "a universal phenomenon."⁶³ While other societies eventually incorporated the Broken Men into their communities this did not happen in India because, as Ambedkar contends, "the notion of

⁶¹ In Orientalist and nationalist interpretations of India's past, the 'golden age' was the ancient, Vedic age.

⁶² Ambedkar, *The Untouchables*, 37.

⁶³ Ambedkar, *The Untouchables*, 48.

Untouchability supervened” and eventually, the Broken Men of India became Untouchables.

As Broken Men, the people living outside of the village were neither denied interaction with the other villagers nor were they despised or seen as defiling. The animosity towards Broken Men developed during Brahmanism’s rise to power after the fall of Buddhism. Ambedkar explains that while most people during this era had been Buddhist, many returned to Brahmanism when it came into power. The Broken Men “did not care to return to Brahmanism,” and were thus objects of contempt. Ambedkar adds that in the Brahmanic revolution against the Buddhist kings, the cow was strategically deified and beef-eating was transformed from “a purely secular affair” to “a matter of religion.” The defiant maintenance of Buddhist beliefs and the continuation of beef-eating made the Broken Men guilty of “sacrilege” and created untouchability, which along with the system of caste was then institutionalized by *Smriti* literature. Using Hindu texts and writings from Chinese travelers, Ambedkar dates the origin of untouchability – which was “born out of the struggle for supremacy between Buddhism and Brahmanism” – to the 4th century AD.

If, as Ambedkar writes, untouchability is an “outgrowth of social psychology,” its solution would have to include a change in perceptions and consciousness.⁶⁴ Ambedkar’s history of untouchability enables this change by producing a new awareness of the past. Genealogical accounts, such as that offered in *The Untouchables*, highlight historical contingency and expose the potential of variation in what had previously been considered historically constant. These kinds of accounts, as philosopher Bernard Williams argues, have a “disobliging or disrespectful tone,” posing a subversive threat to the notion of the

⁶⁴ Ambedkar, *The Untouchables*, 183.

present as naturalized by more than historical chance.⁶⁵ Ambedkar's genealogy exposes how untouchability, the authority of Brahmins, and deification of the cow were products of specific political events.

In Ambedkar's historical narrative, Buddhism emerged in ancient India as a critique of Brahmanism and the form of social structure it had established. He argues in *Revolution and Counter Revolution in Ancient India* that Aryan/Hindu culture was in a state of decay when the Buddha preached his gospel. "The Aryan community of this time," he writes, "was steeped in the worst kind of debauchery: social, religious, and spiritual" and cites "gambling," "drinking," and "sexual immorality" – activities all deemed unrespectable in late colonial/early independent India – as endemic to Aryan culture.⁶⁶ Ambedkar portrays society under Brahmanism as deteriorating, with many suffering from the exploitation and inequality legitimized by Brahmanic values.

Buddhism challenged the very foundation of Brahmanic thought and as Ambedkar writes, opposed the "inequality, authority and division of society that Brahmanism had introduced in India."⁶⁷ It precipitated a revolution in both political authority and social ideology and salvaged Indian civilization from decadence and immorality. As Ambedkar writes, Buddhism "attempted to found a society on the basis of reason and morality and was a major revolution, both social and ideological against the degeneration of Aryan society." The spread of Buddhism across India and the subsequent royal patronage of the religion generated a period of civilizational glory,

⁶⁵ See Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

⁶⁶ B.R. Ambedkar, "Revolution and Counter Revolution in Ancient India," in *B.R. Ambedkar, Writings and Speeches, Vol. 3* (Bombay: Department of Education, Government of Maharashtra, 1979).

⁶⁷ B.R. Ambedkar, "Buddha Paved Way for Democracy and Socialistic Pattern of Society," in *Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17. Part 3* (Mumbai: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Material Publication Committee, Government of Maharashtra, 2003), 406.

where equality, community, liberty, and rationality were guiding values. In this historical narrative, the murder of the last Maurya Emperor Brihadratha Maurya by his Brahmin Commander-in-Chief Pushya Mitra, however, reversed Buddhist reforms and allowed for the return of Brahmanic dominance.

With this history, Ambedkar not only broke the identification of India the Hindu conceptualization implicit in dominant Indian nationalism, but he also uncovered a history in which the pinnacles of civilization occurred under Buddhism. In this way, he posited an alternative ‘golden age’ for the nation from that of the dominant nationalist imaginary. Ambedkar showed that hierarchy and inequality were not indigenous to India, but were politically expedient values and enforced as the organizing principles of the social structure in the Counter-Revolution. Ambedkar’s narrative thus discredits Hinduism – which had become the cultural content of the dominant anticolonial and nationalist projects – both historically and morally as a foundation for the identity of Indians. As literary theorist Gauri Viswanathan demonstrates, “Ambedkar struggled to release Unity from the stranglehold of Hinduism and relocate national identity.”⁶⁸ He found the cultural content of this identity in Buddhism and its history of radical reform, equality, liberty, and fraternity in India. Ambedkar argued that the Buddhist Revolution was “as significant as the French Revolution.”⁶⁹ At another point, six years before this speech, Ambedkar stated that the revolution instigated by the Buddha’s doctrine of equality was actually much more significant than the French Revolution: “India has been a land of revolution in comparison to which the French Revolution would only be a

⁶⁸ Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*, 239.

⁶⁹ B.R. Ambedkar, “Buddha Paved Way for Democracy and Socialistic Pattern of Society,” 407.

‘Bagatella’ and nothing more.”⁷⁰ With this account, he offered Indians a model of revolution, radical change, and emancipatory knowledge that not only developed in India, but that he deemed to be a more efficacious path to emancipation and social justice than that offered by Enlightenment notions political modernity. The “Buddha,” Ambedkar argues, “was the first person to preach the message of liberty, equality, fraternity in the history of the world.”⁷¹ In Ambedkar’s historical narrative, India, under Buddhism, emerges as a birthplace of humanistic universalism and also, human rights.

The pedagogical aspects of Ambedkar’s histories – the aspects of instructional value to dalit communities – emerge through his use of counterfactual and modal claims. Counterfactual claims convey the opposite of a historical statement and modal claims impart a sense of historical possibility. James Bulhof contends that counterfactual and modal claims are utilized in historical narratives to isolate causes and highlight the significance of events.⁷² These types of claims seem essential to genealogical accounts because they illustrate the contingency of events and implicitly state how outcomes could have been different. As Bulhof writes, “behind every assertion of causes...is the suggestion that something else could have been done, that it was in fact possible for the situation to have been different; then we see what that possibility implies.”⁷³ Counterfactual and modal claims join two events together in a sequence and enable the representation of a cause. They may be explicitly stated or simply implied and are utilized to illustrate possibility. These claims can convey a history alternative to that

⁷⁰ See B.R. Ambedkar, “Indian Struggle is nothing but Struggle between Buddhism and Brahmanism” in *Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17. Part 3* (Mumbai: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Material Publication Committee, Government of Maharashtra, 2003), 335

⁷¹ B.R. Ambedkar, “Indian Struggle is nothing but Struggle between Buddhism and Brahmanism,” 336.

⁷² See James Bulhof, “What If? Modality and History,” in *History and Theory* 38 (1999): 145-168.

⁷³ James Bulhof, “What If? Modality and History,” 151.

conventionally narrated. This fictional history, the unwritten history of events that *could have* occurred or *would have* occurred if certain key factors had turned out differently, contributes to the meanings derived from the written narrative

Ambedkar's historical reconstruction of ancient India is replete with both explicit and implicit counterfactual and modal claims. These claims impart a story of what could have occurred for the groups that became the untouchables if certain key events had turned out differently. These claims also project ideas of what should occur in the present. In Ambedkar's delineation of the significance of the murder of Brihadratha Maurya by Pushyamitra is the implicit counterfactual claim that if the murder had not occurred, the Brahmin revolution against the Buddhist kings would not have succeeded. Despite the impossibility of testing the veracity of the claim, it does convey the sense that if Brihadratha Maurya had survived, Buddhist kings would have continued to rule. The social reforms enacted by the Buddha would be have been maintained, and the Brahmins would have been unable to legally institutionalize caste. This alternative history produces an imagining of what could have been if the Brahmin revolution had not succeeded: an India without caste and untouchability. This then is also the aspiration for the future that Ambedkar strives to inculcate in dalits as well as the Indian nation.

A Buddhist Modernity

With these histories of ancient India, conversion to Buddhism becomes an action based on the modal historical claim that the ancestors of today's dalits – in fact most Indians – were formerly Buddhist. Conversion is thus rendered a “return” to the religion of India's golden age and a reclamation of an ancestral religion. The Buddhism that was

envisioned for this return was one which reversed key tenets so that it embodied Ambedkar's project of social justice. As M.S. Gore writes, "What emerged was a version of the Buddha's teachings which was consistent with a modern liberal philosophy, met criteria for a religion with a social mission and answered the needs of India's depressed millions."⁷⁴

Ambedkar expounded on his interpretation of Buddhism in *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, a text posthumously published in 1957. In this text, Ambedkar revised conventional interpretations of Buddhism and elaborated a humanistic universalism within the category of religion. One of Ambedkar's key interventions in Buddhist philosophy was his rejection of the "Four Noble Truths" and the doctrine of karma. Ambedkar contended that these tenets were Brahmanic perversions intended to dilute the Buddha's emancipatory message. He termed the "Four Noble Truths" the "Four Aryan Truths," and argued that a worldview that sees sorrow in everything and does not conceptualize liberation from this sorrow "den[ies] hope to man."⁷⁵ He claimed that this worldview, in addition to conventional interpretations of karma and rebirth, conspired to block human agency to better one's situation and ameliorate suffering. While a Brahmanic social structure was premised on the individual's resignation to their station in life and the suffering it may bring, the Buddha, Ambedkar wrote, was "interested in knowing how to do away with suffering."⁷⁶ In this rendering of Buddhist philosophy, the

⁷⁴ M.S. Gore, *The Social Context of Ideology: Ambedkar's Social and Political Thought* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1993), 258. Gore also writes about the difference in Nehru and Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism in Indian history. For Nehru, the overall trope is one of cultural unity through the ages and the story of Buddhism is one of spread and absorption. For Ambedkar, the dominant trope in conceptualizing Indian history is that of conflict and struggle. The fall of Buddhism is precipitated by a violence and ancient Indian history is marked by dramatic discontinuities.

⁷⁵ B.R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and his Dhamma* in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 11*, (Mumbai: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1992), Introduction.

⁷⁶ Ambedkar, *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, 75.

sources of suffering are not the actions committed during a former birth, but rather, worldly inequality.⁷⁷ He maintained that, “Man’s misery is the result of man’s inequity to man”; “Only righteousness,” he added, “can remove this inequity and the resultant misery.”⁷⁸

Ambedkar interpreted Buddhism as having replaced the figure of God with “Morality.”⁷⁹ The aim of religion was to impart this morality to society and to illuminate the nature of right relations between individuals. The humanistic universalism Ambedkar prescribed for the “moral community” of independent India was found in his reworking of the Buddha’s *dhamma*, his teachings on righteousness.⁸⁰ This universalism is alternative to that offered by Enlightenment notions of political modernity and countered majoritarian notions of the nation-state. The central concepts of this alternative are *prajna* (understanding) and *karuna* (love). Ambedkar wrote that moral action shouldn’t be directed towards appeasing a god and thus did not require “prayers, pilgrimages, rituals, ceremonies, or sacrifices.”⁸¹ In addition, the impetus to moral action was not to be found in the laws of a God nor was it rooted in a “natural law,” the rules of nature. Rather, as Ambedkar conceived it, morality was pursued out of earthy expediency. He wrote that “it is for his own good that man has to love man” and righteousness “arises” from this, “the

⁷⁷ Ambedkar comments that although “men are born unequal,” the Buddha did not believe that the “rule of life” should be the “rule of inequality.” Society should embrace a principle of equality. Not only does a principle of equality assist the “best” to survive, even if they are not the “fittest,” but more importantly, it makes Buddhism a “religion which promotes the happiness of others simultaneously with the happiness of oneself and tolerates no oppression.” This, according to Ambedkar, constitutes a much “better” religion than one that “recommends actions that bring happiness to oneself by causing sorrow to others, or happiness to others by causing sorrow to oneself or sorrow to both oneself and others.” See Ambedkar, *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, 308-309.

⁷⁸ Ambedkar, *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, 284.

⁷⁹ He writes that “in the religion of the Buddha, Morality has been given the place of God.” See Ambedkar, *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, 244.

⁸⁰ Gauri Viswanathan writes that Ambedkar’s main motivation for conversion was the “construction of a moral community” not just for dalits but for the whole nation. See Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*, 239.

⁸¹ Ambedkar, *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, 323

direct necessity for man to love man.”⁸² In fact, many of the traditional attributes of religion, such as belief in God, the soul, or the efficacy of sacrifice, were not part of the criteria of morality. *The Buddha and his Dhamma* repudiated belief in the supernatural, belief based on speculation, and belief in the infallibility of sacred text. Unlike the prescriptions of Brahmanism, Ambedkar’s Buddhism opened learning to both sexes and all strata of society and mandated that a *Bhikku*, or mendicant/monk would be “made,” not born.⁸³ Critically, Ambedkar emphasized that the Buddha offered principles not rules for action; a principle, he explained, offered the framework for reasoning within a particular context, but demands understanding and “leave[s] you freedom to act.”⁸⁴ Ambedkar’s elucidation of the Buddha’s *dhamma* then illuminated his own utopian vision: a disenchanted world where merit was earned and was open to all, reason triumphed, and only reason led to true understanding and right action.

Although the model of right action and belief that Ambedkar put forth intersects with many aspects of modernity, it also challenged a key liberal right in Enlightenment notions of political modernity, namely the right to accrue private property.⁸⁵ Ambedkar stated that Buddhism begins its exposition on human relations with the social fact of exploitation. He translated *dukkha*, a central concept in Buddhist philosophy often

⁸² Ambedkar, *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, 323.

⁸³ See Ambedkar, *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, 287. Ambedkar writes that “A Brahmin is born. A Bhikku is made.” See Ambedkar, *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, 432.

⁸⁴ Ambedkar, *The Buddha and his Dhamma*

⁸⁵ Outside of renouncing of superstition and the supernatural for the rule of reason, Ambedkar also claims that the Buddha’s understanding of matter – the constant “grouping and dissolution and regrouping” of elements of the universe – is in line with modern physics. Rebirth occurs not through the transmigration of the soul, as the Vedas speculate, but rather the recombination of elements of one being with other beings. See Ambedkar, *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, 597, 330.

glossed as suffering, as poverty.⁸⁶ Ambedkar writes of poverty as that which “gives rise to sorrow” and hunger as the “worst of diseases.”⁸⁷ In his reformulation of Buddhism, limitations on private property do not follow from an ascetic ideal, but rather are mandated to curb exploitation:

The Blessed Lord did not elevate poverty by calling it a blessed state of life...Nor did he tell the poor that they may remain content for they will inherit the earth...On the contrary, he said riches were welcome. What he insisted upon is the acquisition of riches must be subject to Vinaya.⁸⁸

Vinaya are the principles that govern the Buddhist community. Ambedkar emphasized that the acquisition of wealth would have to be in accordance with the ethics of Buddhism, ethics which centered on love and understanding and which were occluded by greed and selfishness. He maintained that men and women should not be alienated from their labor and wealth should be acquired through a direct connection to one’s labor: “legitimately” and “justly” acquired wealth was “earned by great industry, amassed by strength of arm and gained my sweat (of the brow).”⁸⁹

Ambedkar recognized “the close affinity” between “the doctrine of the Buddha and the doctrine preached by Karl Marx.”⁹⁰ For him, however, the ethics of love and understanding, constituted a fundamental difference between the two. He claimed that communism was “based on force.” Buddhism, in contrast, achieved its goals through “persuasion, by moral teaching, by love”; Ambedkar insisted that “the Buddha would not

⁸⁶ See Ambedkar, “Buddha or Karl Marx,” in *Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17. Part 3* (Mumbai: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Material Publication Committee, Government of Maharashtra, 2003), 552.

⁸⁷ Ambedkar, *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, 368.

⁸⁸ Ambedkar, *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, 459. The prohibition on private property is an ideal that must be followed by the monastic community, the *Sangha*. The *Sangha* represents the ideal human community. The prohibition on private property is not binding on the laity, who may own property as long as it is acquired in accordance with principles of Buddhism.

⁸⁹ Ambedkar, *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, 460.

⁹⁰ Ambedkar, “Buddha or Karl Marx,” 554.

allow violence and the Communists do.”⁹¹ In his view, the world could only be transformed through a change in people’s perspective and ideology. For this reason, he recommended that the exploited and poor “not be allured by Communist successes,” and stated that he was “quite confident that if we all become one tenth as enlightened as the Buddha was, we can bring about the same result [as the Communists] by methods of love, of justice, and good will.”⁹² Ambedkar’s reformulation of Buddhism was thus intended not just for dalits or the Indian nation, but all of the world. The internationalism of Ambedkar’s Buddhism is evident in the universality of its ethics. Moreover, in a speech on BBC in 1956, Ambedkar added that it was Buddhism’s focus on worldly ethics as opposed to the transcendental or metaphysical that made it an ideology for social change and a blueprint for a global revolution: “Once it is realized that Buddhism is a social gospel, the revival of it would be an everlasting event for the world will realize why Buddhism makes such a great appeal to everyone.”⁹³

The humanistic universalism that Ambedkar proposed could not have been strictly materialist or secular; by necessity, this universalism had to be in the form of religion. Ambedkar maintained that human beings needed more than the satisfaction of their materials needs; they needed hope and the human mind needed to be “cultured.”⁹⁴ In his view, only religion provided this. Religion proliferated social values and made ethical principles universal and was therefore “absolutely essential for the development of

⁹¹ Ambedkar, “Buddha or Karl Marx,” 554.

⁹² Ambedkar, “Dr. Ambedkar on the Occasion of the Conversion,” in *Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17. Part 3*, (Mumbai: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Material Publication Committee, Government of Maharashtra, 2003), 558.

⁹³ B.R. Ambedkar, “Why I Like Buddhism,” in *Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17. Part 3*, (Mumbai: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Material Publication Committee, Government of Maharashtra, 2003), 516.

⁹⁴ Ambedkar, “Dr. Ambedkar on the Occasion of the Conversion,” 537, 541.

mankind.”⁹⁵ Furthermore, Ambedkar had long called attention to the futility of political rights in a social context that denied them; for him, rights could only become meaningful if they emerged from the desires of society. Ambedkar’s Buddhism provided a template for social relations and offered a basis for the broad, horizontal community necessary for his ideal of democracy. Gauri Viswanathan astutely points out that Ambedkar envisioned the incorporation of the “ethics of Buddhism...[into] the democratic principles of the modern state”; the net effect of this integration would be the rearticulation of rights “not in terms of political franchise alone but primarily moral claims.”⁹⁶ Ambedkar claimed that social relations required a moral guide and could not be changed by politics or economics alone. He provided this guide in the religion he devised from the teachings of the Buddha.

Religious studies scholar Christopher S. Queen suggests that Ambedkar’s advocacy for dalits and reworking of Buddhism can be productively compared with the use of liberation theory in the Civil Rights movement in the U.S. and in social movements throughout the Americas.⁹⁷ Indeed Ambedkar does seem to resuscitate Buddhism to provide a “liberation theology” for dalits, if not all Indians. His understanding of Buddhism contains a template for social relations that counter the harms of both traditional society and political modernity. His excavation of Buddhism also

⁹⁵ Ambedkar, “Dr. Ambedkar on the Occasion of the Conversion,” 537.

⁹⁶ Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*, 239, 238.

⁹⁷ Queen suggests that this comparison could be fruitful for understanding religious modernism and the connections between religious and social values and practice. See Christopher S. Queen, “Dr. Ambedkar and the Hermeneutics of Buddhist Liberation,” in *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* eds. Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 45-71.

offers an alternative genealogy of humanism and of rights to equality, liberty, and fraternity that future generations of dalits can claim as their own. This alternative was made available for dalit contestations with the Indian state and dominant castes and became an element in the historical and political imagination of dalit activists and intellectuals today. In this chapter I have shown how Ambedkar himself departed from the political logic of identity difference and embraced a cultural identity that could be shared by all Indians. Here, a nascent internationalism can also be discerned. Ultimately, Ambedkar's thinking on dalit issues remained within the nation-state framework, but he did lay the foundation for transnational activism, as the next chapter will demonstrate.

Chapter 2 National Minority, Global Majority: Episodes in Dalit Transnationalism

“We must understand that the caste nature of the term dalit is breaking down.” – Dalit Panther Manifesto, 1973

In an essay titled “The Problem of Isolation,” B.R. Ambedkar lamented the absence of allies for the dalit movement.⁹⁸ He argued that the structure of Hindu society precluded allies and made those with similar interests oppose cooperation with dalits. Even labor movements and communist parties, he argued, had not generated the solidarity needed for the dalit movement to succeed. “This want of solidarity,” he reasoned, was because of the system of “graded inequality,” a system in which “the Brahmin is above everybody, the Shudra is below the Brahmin and above the Untouchable.” Ambedkar argued that this system guaranteed the political isolation of dalits in India and the perpetuation of caste inequality. “If the Hindu social order was based on inequality,” he wrote, “it would have been over-thrown long ago. But it is based on graded inequality so the Shudra while he is anxious to pull down the Brahmin, he is not prepared to see the Untouchable raised to his level.”⁹⁹ Ambedkar decried the result of this structure: “there is nobody to join the Untouchables in his struggle. He is completely isolated. Not only is he isolated, he is opposed by the very classes who ought

⁹⁸ B.R. Ambedkar, *Untouchables or the Children of India's Ghetto*, in *B.R. Ambedkar, Writings and Speeches, Vol. 5*, ed. Vasant Moon (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1989). This is was an unpublished manuscript found after Ambedkar's death and probably written in the mid-1950s

⁹⁹ B.R. Ambedkar, “The Problem of Isolation,” 116.

to be his natural allies. This isolation is one more obstacle in the removal of untouchability.”¹⁰⁰

The solidarity Ambedkar found lacking was political solidarity. This kind of solidarity countered isolation, especially isolation *in struggle*. It was not rooted in identity and while it anticipated similar interest, it also could not be reduced to a partnership based on expedience. Regardless of the veracity of Ambedkar’s claim that political solidarity could not be found for dalits in India, generations of dalit activists have created linkages to groups outside of India, in an effort to counter the isolation of dalits in India. They have developed and imagined a political solidarity that discerned a similarity in struggle with disparate groups. In this chapter, I historicize and analyze five episodes of this kind of transnational solidarity. I argue that a transnational approach to building allies and countering isolation has also corresponded with a shift away from the identity-based minority politics that characterized the movement for dalit rights since the late colonial period.

The structure of this chapter largely replicates the account of the internationalization of caste discrimination offered by several of the activists I interviewed in my research. As activists spoke of their human rights work, they also offered a history of twentieth-century transnational activism. This history begins with an exchange between B.R. Ambedkar and W.E.B. Dubois, then moves to the activism of the Dalit Panthers, before arriving at the activism of the dalit diaspora and that of human rights activists in India. The narrative I present in this chapter is based on research conducted after taking cues from this account. As an anthropological and historical method, an episodic approach both attends to activists’ own understandings of the context

¹⁰⁰ B.R. Ambedkar, “The Problem of Isolation,” 116.

of their work while also excavating an overlooked historical narrative. This approach does not linearly trace continuities, but rather discerns certain congruities in different historical moments that together shed new light on contemporary activism. The histories I present track three primary congruities over five different episodes: First, a discernment of similarity in structural position or similarity in struggle conditions the projection of transnational political solidarity. Second, this projection has on occasion rearticulated ‘dalit’ as an identity not specific to those subjected to caste oppression. Lastly, as dalit activists’ attempt to counter their isolation in India, they also reframe caste as a global phenomenon and caste discrimination as a global problem.

Episode 1: Ambedkar and Dubois

When I asked about the beginnings of transnational dalit activism during my research, several activists referenced B.R. Ambedkar’s correspondence with W.E.B. Dubois. They said that Ambedkar had written Dubois about the possibility of submitting a petition to the United Nations on caste discrimination and the plight of dalits in India. Despite having done extensive secondary reading on Ambedkar and having conducted archival research of Ambedkar’s private papers, I had not been aware of the exchange between Ambedkar and Dubois until these interviews. To my knowledge, this correspondence has not yet been published in the volumes of Ambedkar’s writings and speeches issued by the Government of Maharashtra or in Ambedkar’s other published works, despite its apparent significance to many dalit activists.¹⁰¹ Upon returning to the

¹⁰¹ I have since found references to this correspondence in two articles and one book: S.D. Kapoor, “B.R. Ambedkar, W.E.B. Dubois and the Process of Liberation,” *Economic and Political Weekly* (Dec. 27, 2003): 5344-5349; Daniel Immerwahr, “Caste or Colony: Indianizing Race in the United States” *Modern*

U.S., I was able to track down this correspondence, not in any of the available collections of Ambedkar's writings, but rather, in *The Papers of W.E.B. Dubois*, a compilation of eighty-nine reels of Dubois' correspondence.¹⁰²

The correspondence activists spoke of was initiated by Ambedkar in July 1946. Ambedkar began his letter to Dubois by noting Dubois' esteemed standing among all who are "working in the cause of securing liberty to the oppressed people." He stated that he had been "a student of the Negro problem" and had followed Dubois' writings. He then claimed an analogy between the situation of dalits in India and African Americans in the U.S. "There is so much similarity between the position of the Untouchables in India and of the position of the Negroes in America," Ambedkar suggested, "that the study of the latter is not only natural but necessary." Ambedkar wrote that he was "very much interested to read that the Negroes of America have filed a petition to the U.N.O.," and requested copies of the statement, disclosing that the "Untouchables of India are also thinking of following suit." In his response to Ambedkar, dated July 31, 1946, Du Bois included the statement submitted by the National Negro Congress and reported that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was considering submitting a "more comprehensive statement," which he would send once it was completed. Dubois acknowledged that he was familiar with Ambedkar and his work and also indicated solidarity with his cause: "I...of course have every sympathy with the

Intellectual History 4, no. 2 (2007): 275-301; and Kamala Visweswaran, *Uncommon Cultures: Racism and the Rearticulation of Cultural Difference* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

¹⁰² W. E. B Du Bois. *The Papers of W. E. B. Du Bois: (1877-1963)* (Sanford, North Carolina: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1980, 1981).

Untouchables of India,” he wrote, adding that he would be “glad to be of any service...if possible in the future.”¹⁰³

The petition referred to in the letters – “A Petition to the United Nations on Behalf of 13 Million Oppressed Negro Citizens of the United States of America” – was drafted in Detroit, Michigan at the Tenth Anniversary Convention of the National Negro Congress and was presented to United Nations officials on June 3, 1946.¹⁰⁴ The statement emphasized the repeated attempts that had been made to move the United States’ government for redress and noted that such efforts would continue since “the main responsibility lies with the rulers of America.” It explained that the failure of these efforts compelled Africans Americans in the U.S. to

call upon the United Nations, as we have every legal and moral right to do, to mobilize the influence of all organized mankind toward fulfillment, here in the United States, of the stated purpose of the United Nations to *promote and encourage ‘respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion.’*

The petition included a statement of “facts,” which detailed the violence, poverty, disenfranchisement, and “inequality of opportunity” experienced by African Americans and also reprinted letters written to Trygve Lie, then Secretary General of the United Nations, and Harry S. Truman, then President of the United States.

¹⁰³ In a letter Dubois wrote the next day to Walter White, civil rights activist and NAACP leader, he encouraged the NAACP to submit a petition to the United Nations in September, citing Ambedkar’s letter and the possibility of the dalit’s appeal to the U.N. as giving such a petition greater urgency. He noted the possibility of “the Indians of South Africa, the Jews of Palestine, the Indonesians” as well as the “Untouchables” submitting petitions and argued that this underscored “the necessity” of a petition by the NAACP on the situation of African Americans. See W.E.B. Du Bois, “Correspondence with Walter White: Petition to U.N. on American Negroes, August 1, 1946,” in *The Correspondence of W.E.B. Dubois, Volume III Selections, 1944-1963*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 163.

¹⁰⁴ National Negro Congress, US, *A Petition to the United States on Behalf of 13 million Oppressed Negro Citizens of the United States of America* (New York: National Negro Congress, 1946).

The activists I spoke with had only read or heard references to the exchange between Ambedkar and Dubois.¹⁰⁵ While I am not sure if other contemporary activists had read the exchange at the time when I was conducting my research, Ambedkar's letter does intimate two political logics that characterize the transnational anti-caste activism that emerged thirty years later: the internationalism and human rights activism of the 1970s onwards find parallels in Ambedkar's plan to appeal to the United Nations and in his identification of a similarity in predicament with African Americans. Although Ambedkar did not submit a petition about the situation of dalits to the United Nations, the letter clearly shows his interest in putting the issue before an international governing entity. Literary scholar and political commentator S.D. Kapoor suggests that Ambedkar "probably had no time to pursue the matter" since the British government announced the imminence of their departure just a few months after writing to Dubois.¹⁰⁶ More importantly, with India still a British colony, Ambedkar could not have filed the kind of petition that the National Negro Congress had. A petition on behalf of India's dalits claiming "second-class citizenship" – as the National Negro Congress had claimed – could not have carried much force at a time when all Indians were subjects of the British crown and not extended full "democratic rights and liberty."¹⁰⁷ In addition, the imminent independence of India held possibilities for political restructuring and with this, social transformations. Ambedkar's interest in taking the issue of caste discrimination to an international governing entity at this point, however, is significant, especially since he did not submit such a petition even after the failure of his draft of the Hindu Code Bill.

¹⁰⁵ One dalit activist noted that reference to the correspondence and Ambedkar's plan to petition the U.N. can be found in Marathi newspaper article from 1946. I have since provided a copy of the exchange to him.

¹⁰⁶ S.D. Kapoor, "B.R. Ambedkar, W.E.B. Du Bois and the Process of Liberation," 5345.

¹⁰⁷ "A Petition to the United States on Behalf of 13 million Oppressed Negro Citizens of the United States of America"

Rather than pursue redress through the United Nations, Ambedkar spent his last years developing Buddhism as an alternative to both liberal democratic and Hindu ethics.

Ambedkar's letter to Dubois also seems significant for its indication of a likeness between dalits and African Americans and for the nature of this likeness. At a time when the dominant political logic behind the dalit movement was based on social differentiation, Ambedkar recognized a similarity condition between two groups with distinct histories in vastly different places. The likeness that Ambedkar refers to is one of "position," not of identity or history. This "position" was the product of being "oppressed" and desiring liberation from that oppression. Based on Ambedkar's other writings, I suggest that Ambedkar could discern this similarity because he did not accept the prevailing discourse of race and because he perceived a similar social and political predicament confronting both dalits and African Americans.

In an essay on Ambedkar's experience in the United States, Eleanor Zelliot writes that "a direct comparison between the Negroes of America and the untouchables of India does not appear in Ambedkar writings" and reasons that "this is natural, since Ambedkar denied that there was a racial basis for untouchability."¹⁰⁸ Indeed, Ambedkar vehemently argued against a biological or racial basis to caste distinctions in India and maintained that Indians could not be meaningfully divided on the basis of race. As Zelliot astutely points out, this was "in contrast to the leaders of almost all other Untouchable movements," who stressed that dalits were of a different racial stock from other Indians.¹⁰⁹ Zelliot adds that Ambedkar's "observation of obvious racial differences

¹⁰⁸ Eleanor Zelliot, "The American Experience of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar," in *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1992), 81-82.

¹⁰⁹ As discussed in Chapter 1, leaders such as Phule and Periyar, claimed a different racial or ethnic origin for lower caste groups.

between Negro and white Americans, and the segregation based on race in America” may have deepened his opposition to using the language of race to argue for dalit rights.

In my reading, however, Ambedkar seemed suspect of the very discourse of race and the use of it to describe the divisions in both India and the U.S. For example, in *Annihilation of Caste*, written in 1936, Ambedkar points out that “Now ethnologists are of the opinion that men of pure race exist nowhere and that there has been a mixture of all races in all parts of the world... To hold distinctions of Castes or really distinctions of race and to treat different Castes as though there were so many different races is a gross perversion of facts.”¹¹⁰ Ambedkar stressed the singularity of the human species and deemed the science of race questionable at best, rejecting it as an explanatory category for social divisions. The similarity between dalits and African Americans that Ambedkar refers to in his letter thus emerges from a repudiation of the discourse of race, of a biological basis for social divisions, and from the discernment of a similarity in oppression and the goals of social justice. It is a similarity in “position” and politics, not in a racial or any other essentialized notion of identity.

In an essay titled “Parallel Cases,” Ambedkar argued that several other populations had suffered the same ‘position’ that had trapped dalits in India. “Social inequality is not confined to Hindus only,” he wrote, “It prevailed in other countries also and was responsible for dividing society into higher and lower, free and unfree, respectable and despised.”¹¹¹ The examples he provided were not of potential political

¹¹⁰ B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste, With Mahatma Gandhi’s Criticism and Reply to It*, (Nagpur: Samata Prakashan, 2004) (reprinted from third edition, 1944).

¹¹¹ B.R. Ambedkar, *Untouchables or the Children of India’s Ghetto*, “Parallel Cases,” in *B.R. Ambedkar, Writings and Speeches, Vol. 5*, ed. Vasant Moon (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1989). This is was an unpublished manuscript found after Ambedkar’s death and probably written in the mid-1950s.

allies of dalits, since the forms of inequality he described had been reformed or had disappeared. His discussion of slavery, however, lends itself to an interpretation that substantiates his claim that African Americans and dalits shared comparable ‘positions.’ Writing about slavery in the Americas, Ambedkar argued that while “neither slavery nor untouchability is a free social order,” untouchability posed a greater harm to society and the individual. The system of slavery, he reasoned, allowed for the possibility of emancipation and thus, also presented an “open and direct” form of enslavement. Untouchability, however, was deemed an “indirect form of slavery” and one that offered no escape; “if a man is deprived of his liberty indirectly,” Ambedkar wrote, “he has no consciousness of his enslavement.” Indirect enslavement amounted to, as he wrote, “tell[ing] an Untouchable ‘you are free, you are a citizen, you have the rights of a citizen,’ and to tighten the rope in such a way as to leave him no opportunity to realize the ideal.”¹¹² As a self-professed “student of the Negro problem” who had read Du Bois’ writings, Ambedkar must surely have been aware of the segregation, discrimination, and violence in post-Emancipation United States. The “position” shared by dalits and African Americans thus emerges as a particular form of oppression, that of “indirect enslavement.”

In Ambedkar’s correspondence with DuBois, there is indication of a discernment of a politics based not on an essentialized identity, but on “position.” Ambedkar found a potential ally in Du Bois because despite the difference in historical and social contexts, dalits and African Americans were imagined as confronting similar struggles. The similarity in struggle promised an alliance that carried the potential of countering the

¹¹² B.R. Ambedkar, *Untouchables or the Children of India’s Ghetto*, “Slaves and Untouchables,” in *B.R. Ambedkar, Writings and Speeches, Vol. 5*, ed. Vasant Moon (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1989), 15.

“isolation” of dalits in India. Decades later dalit activists would espouse a non-elite South-Southism based on such ‘positions’ and would cite the Ambedkar-Dubois exchange as a key moment in this history. It wasn’t until the Dalit Panthers’ *Manifesto* of 1973 that the inchoate South-Southism suggested by the Ambedkar-Dubois exchange is more fully worked out and made a central part of an anti-caste movement.

Episode 2: Dalit Panthers

Inspired by the Black Panthers in the United States and by the resistance and liberation movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Dalit Panthers were founded in Bombay in 1972. A radical anti-caste and anti-capitalism organization, the Dalit Panthers espoused an internationalism that connected the plight of dalits to marginalized populations across the world and expressed this internationalism through their rearticulation of the term ‘dalit.’ The Panthers recognized a shared struggle with groups suffering from capitalist exploitation and made the political unity of all oppressed people – both within India and across the world – a foundational principle of its platform. The category of ‘dalit’ joined these groups in a liberation struggle that also targeted the annihilation of caste.

The Panthers resignified ‘dalit’ in their *Manifesto*, written one year after the group’s founding in 1973.¹¹³ Largely drafted by Namdeo Dhasal, founder of the Dalit Panthers, and Sunil Dighe, a former radical Naxalite, the *Manifesto* announced their revolutionary aspirations and laid out the Panthers’ critique of both the Indian state and

¹¹³ In her study of the organizational structure and strategies of the Dalit Panthers, states that the *Manifesto* represented one of the only concrete statements of the organization’s ideology. See Lata Murugkar, *Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra: A Sociological Appraisal* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1991).

foreign imperialism.¹¹⁴ The authors stated that the document was written to address “misconceptions about the objectives of the ‘Panthers’” and to clarify their “commitment to total democratic and revolutionary struggles.” In my discussion of the Dalit Panthers, I read their *Manifesto* as an episode of transnational activism. The document emerges as an attempt to counter the isolation of dalits in India and connect with other groups. I focus on the representation of ‘dalit’ in the *Manifesto* and analyze this as the identity mobilized by the Panthers for their revolutionary goals. From a minority identity produced through the caste system, ‘dalit’ appears in the *Manifesto* as an identity and experience shared by groups across the world.¹¹⁵

My analysis of the Dalit Panthers’ evocation of other groups in political struggle is informed by Antoinette Burton’s notion of the “politics of citation” – the ways in which the citation of other groups aids the representation of a particular brand of postcolonial identity. In *Brown Over Black*, Burton analyzes the citation of Africans and Africa in four literary works authored by people of South Asian descent and argues that the “citationary dynamic” in these works “tends to racialize as it relegates, locating people of African descent both below Indians in civilizational terms and behind them in temporal terms.”¹¹⁶ *Brown Over Black* is part of a burgeoning field of scholarship on

¹¹⁴ Naxalite refers to a radical and militant Communist group or a member of such a group.

¹¹⁵ In an article remarking on the state of dalit studies, social commentator Savyasaachi discusses a conference paper by Raj Kumar which argues that ‘dalit’ is made up of two root words – ‘dal’ and ‘anti’ – which come to the Sanskrit from Hebrew. Savyasaachi synopsis claims that ‘dal’ in Hebrew “refers either to physical weakness or to a lowly, insignificant position in society” and that when paired with “another Hebrew root word ‘anti’ it describes an economic relationship.” This etymology provides for a broader definition of dalit, one which “recognizes that poverty is a process of being emptied, becoming unequal, being impoverished, dried up, made thin.” With this understanding of the term, “a prostitute,” Savyasaachi adds, “is as much a dalit as is the spouse of an upper caste patriarch who is ill-treated, as are the victims of ethnocide and communalism, irrespective of whether they are Hindus, Christians, Muslims or Sikhs.” See Savyasaachi, “Dalit Studies: Exploring Criteria for a New Discipline,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 39, no. 17 (Apr. 24-30, 2004): 1658-1660, 1658-1659.

¹¹⁶ Antoinette Burton, *Brown Over Black: Race and the Politics of Postcolonial Citation* (Gurgaon, Haryana: Three Essays Collective, 2012), 4.

South-South or Afro-Asian solidarity.¹¹⁷ Burton, however, cautions against the assumption of “solidarity” and challenges a historiographical trend towards romanticizing Afro-Asian postcolonial linkages. Rather than the horizontal affiliations implicit in the notion of “Afro-Asian Solidarity,” Burton discerns the citation of Africans and Africa to “shore up and consolidate an Indian self dependent on a set of racial/izing hierarchies” and demonstrates how postcolonial linkages were often complicated by colonial racial economies.

Burton’s contribution is an important one, but like most other works on this topic, *Brown Over Black* focuses on linkages created by postcolonial elites. My research, however, analyzes the citationary politics of linkages created by dalits, a doubly (or triply) marginalized group in a globally marginalized space. My reading of the Dalit Panther’s citation of other struggling communities does not suggest the replication of racial hierarchies, but here too, the politics of citation does help fashion a particular postcolonial identity for dalits. It projects a cosmopolitanism constituted by knowledge of modernity’s underbelly and imparts an identity for dalits that unites them with struggling groups across the world. For the Panthers, recognizing struggling African Americans, Africans, and Southeast Asians as fellow ‘dalits’ builds from a political logic of analogy that challenges the exceptionalism of caste and renders dalits part of a global ‘minority.’

¹¹⁷ The notion of Afro-Asian Solidarity comes from the Bandung Conference, 1955 and later by the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement. The Bandung Conference was followed by the Afro-Asian Solidarity Conference in Cairo, 1957 and the Belgrade Conference, which resulted in the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement. See Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People’s History of the Third World* (New York: The New Press, 2007).

The Dalit Panthers' *Manifesto* defines 'dalits' as "all those who are exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion."¹¹⁸ 'Dalit' refers to a non-essentialized and relational social category; the experience of exploitation generates a dalit identity.¹¹⁹ The concept of subalternity as theorized by Fernando Coronil proves useful in illustrating the dynamism of this concept of dalit identity. Coronil revises the notion of subalternity implicit in the scholarship of the Subaltern Studies Collective and writes that subalternity may be better conceived as a

relational and relative concept that refers to heterogeneous social actors that share a common condition of subordination...there are times and places where subjects appear on history's stage as subaltern actors, just as there are times or places in which they play dominant roles. Moreover, at any given time or place, an actor may be subaltern in relation to another, yet dominant in relation to a third...Subalternity defines not the being of a subject but a subjected state of being.¹²⁰

"Dalit" in the Dalit Panther's *Manifesto* similarly refers to a "subjected state of being" rather than an essentialized identity. It is an identity that refers to a position and the condition of being dominated; in this sense, it simultaneously calls attention to relations of domination and subordination.

Sociologist Lata Murugkar explains that the Panthers emerged following a lull in social reform activities after independence, at a time when faith in the effectiveness of democracy, the Constitution, and leftist parties to deliver solutions to the problems of the oppressed had eroded. Although, as Murugkar writes, "laws did open up possibilities for advancement and change to the lower castes...they did not provide any leverage to

¹¹⁸ Dalit Panthers, "Dalit Panther Manifesto," in *Untouchable: Voices of the Dalit Liberation Movement* ed. Barbara R. Joshi (London: Zed Books, 1986), 145.

¹¹⁹ In this way, the Panthers' notion of 'dalit' echoes Ambedkar's sense of the term. Ambedkar first used the term 'dalit' in 1928 and used it to refer to one who had experienced degradation and deprivation.

¹²⁰ Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 16.

them.”¹²¹ Expectations of change were met with continued inequality and increased violence and both the Schedule Caste and progressive Hindu leadership seemed ineffective and apathetic. The Dalit Panthers arose from the resulting frustration, discontent, and vacuum in leadership.¹²² They eschewed institutional forms of protest and put forward a trenchant critique of the state which highlighted its complicity in continued violence and inequality.¹²³ Murugkar argues that the Panthers’ “non-institutional way of struggle” represented a significant shift from previous anti-caste movements.¹²⁴ While appeals to the state – first the colonial state then the independent Indian state – and party politics had been the predominant modes of advocacy for dalits, the Dalit Panthers employed more militant methods.¹²⁵ Critically, unlike previous anti-caste movements, the Panthers did not see the state as an ally or as a viable agent of progressive social change. They remained critical of political institutions of the modern Indian state as they turned abroad for community in their struggle.

By naming their organization after the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, the Dalit Panthers claimed an affiliation with the U.S.-based group’s politics as well as identification with the position of African Americans in the U.S. A contemporary commentator pointed out that not only was there a history of anti-caste leaders’ drawing parallels between the sufferings and struggles of African Americans and that of the lower

¹²¹ Lata Murugkar, *Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra*, 5.

¹²² S.D. reported that “the politically conscious young men among the scheduled castes were stunned by apathy of the so-called ‘progressive’ Hindu opinion” to the rising violence against dalits and that Namdev Dhasal had described the Panthers as the “movement of the ‘dalits’ who had been abandoned by the RPI and its leaders.” See S.D., “Children of God Become Panthers,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 8, no. 31/33 (Aug. 1973):1395-1398, 1397, 1398.

¹²³ For example, the Panther’s first demonstration on August 15, 1972 protested the failure of twenty-five years of independence to improve the lives of poor. Murugkar reports that the Panthers held a mock assembly at this protest and “Dhasal declare that if the Legislative Council and Parliament would not solve the problem of the common man, the Panthers would burn them down.” Murugkar, 121.

¹²⁴ Murugkar, 214.

¹²⁵ See S.D., “Children of God Become Panthers,” 1398.

castes in India, but the political context facing both groups bore many similarities.¹²⁶ Like leaders of the Black Panthers in the United States, the Dalit Panthers had recognized that formal legal equality did not guarantee improved life conditions.¹²⁷ They had been exposed to discrimination that had no basis in the law, but was just as efficacious in maintaining gross social and economic inequality as that buttressed by the legal system.¹²⁸ The politics of the Dalit Panthers, however, should not be seen as derivative of that of the Black Panthers. Rather, their politics were rooted in a claim of similarity in condition, struggle, and goals between dalits and African Americans.

The liberation movements taking place in Africa and Southeast Asia had an equally significant impact on the founding members of the Dalit Panthers. As politically-conscious observers of the situation both within India and across the world, the Dalit Panthers viewed the problems facing dalits in an international context and identified common causes of suffering for subordinated groups across the world. In a section of the *Manifesto* titled “The Dalits of the World and Panthers,” the Panthers discussed the similarity in condition and solidarity among dalits in India, the Black Panthers, and other struggling groups:

Due to the hideous plot of American imperialism, the Third Dalit World, that is oppressed nations, and the dalit people are suffering. Even in America, a handful of reactionary whites are exploiting blacks. To meet the force of reaction and

¹²⁶ S.D., “Children of God Become Panthers,” For example, Jotirao Phule develops an analogy between slavery in the U.S. and the conditions confronting the lower castes in India.

¹²⁷ The situation described here seems comparable to what Patricia Hill Collins terms “the new racism.” “New racism” refers to the replication of racial inequality in a context where formal, legal inequality has been abolished. This kind of racism “incorporates elements of past racial formations,” but is accompanied with the concentration of capital and power in corporations, which has also reduced the leverage of local and national governments. See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

¹²⁸ In her article on the Australian Black Panther Party, Kathy Lothian makes a similar point about the influence of the Black Panthers on Aboriginal activists. See Kathy Lothian, “Seizing the Time: Australian Aborigines and the Influence of the Black Panther Party, 1969-1972.” *Journal of Black Studies* 35, no. 4 (Mar., 2005): 179-200.

remove this exploitation, the Black Panther movement grew. From the Black Panthers, Black Power emerged. The fire of struggles has thrown out sparks into the country. We claim a close relationship with this struggle. We have before our eyes the examples of Vietnam, Cambodia, Africa and the like.¹²⁹

The Dalit Panther's internationalism emerged from their recognition that capitalism and imperialism had produced a grossly imbalanced world, a world split into the dominant nations and the Third-world/ Dalit nations. The Dalit Panthers' Manifesto placed "American imperialism" in the same category as "Hindu feudalism"; both forces created relations of domination that produced the dalit subject.

The "citationary dynamics" of the Panthers' transnational references challenge the uniqueness of caste-oppression and reveal it as a form of subjugation analogous to racism and colonialism; this then renders the dalits of India as sharing an identity – an identity based on analogous structural position – with the groups cited. The term 'dalit' then becomes a channel for the Panthers' internationalism for it unites disparate groups in its liberatory project. For the Panthers, 'dalit' is not an essentialized identity or another term for the ex-untouchables of India, but rather a variable category that calls attention to relations of domination and exploitation.

As a relational category, 'dalit' characterized groups at various scales. According to this logic, the Indian state – a state which the Dalit Panthers saw as beholden to upper caste Hindu interests – would also be part of the community of the "Third Dalit World." Like Coronil's concept of subalternity, 'dalit' is a relational category, and so, India becomes a 'dalit nation' in an international context. The Panthers argued that within India, modernity – its economic, political, and legal forces – had transformed the category of 'dalit' to encompass many more groups than just those at the bottom of the

¹²⁹ *Dalit Panther Manifesto*, 145.

caste hierarchy. The Panthers' *Manifesto* claimed that while "Hindu feudalism" may have spawned caste inequality, the extension of "Hindu feudalism" by the modern Indian state had created oppression "a hundred times more ruthless."¹³⁰ This was because, as the Panthers explain, "Hindu feudal rule has in its hands all the arteries of production, bureaucracy, army and police forces, in the shape of feudal landlords, capitalists who stand behind and enable these instruments to thrive." The Panthers insinuated that while Phule and Ambedkar could deem untouchability a psychological pathology that would no longer be sufficient, for "the problem of untouchability...is no more one of mental slavery."¹³¹ Ideology or religion alone, they argued, would not solve the problems of dalits, for the apparatus of the modern state – "the army, the prisons, the legal system and the bureaucracy" – had expanded the "framework of untouchability."¹³² As the reach of caste oppression had expanded, groups who shared a political interest with India's ex-untouchables also increased. The unity of these groups was indispensable to the Panthers' revolutionary project. "The dalit," they wrote, "is no longer merely an untouchable outside the village walls and the scriptures. He is an untouchable, and he is a dalit, but he is also a worker, a landless labourer, a proletarian."¹³³ These groups were subjugated by the forces of global capitalism with effects similar to the subjugation of untouchables by scripture and religion. The net result, the Dalit Panthers claimed, was that "the caste nature of the term dalit is breaking down."¹³⁴

¹³⁰ *Dalit Panthers Manifesto*, 141.

¹³¹ *Dalit Panther Manifesto*, 142. The term 'mental slavery' seems to be a reference to Phule's denouncement of the caste system. Ambedkar had also contended that "Untouchability is an aspect of social psychology. It is a sort of social nausea of one group against another group." See B.R. Ambedkar, *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables* (New Delhi: Amrit Book Co, 1948), 143.

¹³² *Dalit Panther Manifesto*, 144.

¹³³ *Dalit Panther Manifesto*, 142.

¹³⁴ *Dalit Panther Manifesto*, 233.

For the Dalit Panthers, “dalit” identity was thus not singularly related to caste oppression or a history of caste oppression; it became an identity that indexed particular kinds of relationships in modernity, namely relationships spawned by capitalist exploitation and the reinforcement of traditional oppression by the modern state. As the *Manifesto* stated, dalits are “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.” While still referring to a collective identity, ‘dalit’ was neither naturalized nor essentialized in this conceptualization; rather it became an identity that emerged when subjected to dominance and exploitation. “Friends” of the Dalit Panthers did not have to be subject to this, but had to share the “revolutionary” goal of eradicating suffering based on class and caste. Consequently, the “enemies” of the Panthers, as stated in the *Manifesto*, the agents – the forces, individuals, and institutions – responsible for generating and maintaining oppressive relationships included “power, wealth, and price...landlords, capitalists, money-lenders and their lackeys...parties who indulge in religious or castist politics and the government which depends on them.”¹³⁵

Despite their aspirations for a transnational unity of the oppressed, the Dalit Panthers had difficulty maintaining unity among their leaders. The group split into two factions, each of which split into more factions and in 1977, Raja Dhale announced the dissolution of the group. Meanwhile, across oceans, dalit immigrants to Europe and North America had begun to organize and advocate for dalits in India. Their actions laid the foundations for an anti-caste movement that would ultimately span the globe as a human rights movement.

¹³⁵ Dalit Panther *Manifesto*, 237.

Episode 3: Activism by the Dalit Diaspora

Ambedkar once remarked that time abroad had enabled him to experience amnesia of caste identity. “My five years of stay in Europe and America,” he wrote, “had completely wiped out of my mind any consciousness that I was an untouchable and that an untouchable whenever he went in India was a problem to himself and others.”¹³⁶ For later generations of overseas dalits, however, this was not always the case. The Indian diaspora in the U.S., U.K., and Canada was fractured by caste identities and practices, which at times reproduced the exclusion and discrimination experienced in India. For many dalits, caste inequality and marginalization continued to be experienced abroad.¹³⁷ Memories of India, experiences in the diaspora, and a commitment to improving the status of dalits in the subcontinent compelled these immigrants to establish dalit associations and advocate locally and globally against caste discrimination. This activism was initiated by members of, in dalit studies scholar Vivek Kumar’s terms, the “new” dalit diaspora.¹³⁸ Kumar divides the dalit diaspora into two categories: the “old,” which comprised of indentured laborers to Fiji, Trinidad, and Malaysia, and the “new,” the

¹³⁶ Quoted in Nanak Chand Rath, *Reminiscences and Remembrances of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar* (New Delhi: Falcon Books, 1995)12.

¹³⁷ See for example, Vivek Kumar, “Understanding Dalit Diaspora,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 39, no. 1 (Jan. 3-9, 2004):114-116; and Rachel Fell McDermott, “From Hinduism to Christianity, from India to New York: Bondage and Exodus Experiences in the Lives of Indian Dalit Christians in Diaspora,” in *South Asian Christian Diaspora: Invisible Diaspora in Europe and North America*, eds. Knut A. Jacobsen and Selva J. Raj (Surrey England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008). McDermott conducted interviews with dalit Christians in the New York metropolitan area and concluded that they continued to face caste-based discrimination. She writes that “caste is a diaspora problem now, and will only become more so in the coming years” (246). See also Annapurna Waughray, “Caste Discrimination: A Twenty-first Century Challenge for UK Discrimination Law,” *The Modern Law Review* 72, no. 2 (2009): 182-219. Waughray discusses the UK government’s decision in 2008 not to legally protect against caste discrimination despite the fact that “caste exerts a divisive force” in the lives of many groups and individuals in the United Kingdom. Lastly, Castewatch UK, a watchdog organization targeting caste discrimination in the United Kingdom was founded in 2003.

¹³⁸ Vivek Kumar, “Understanding Dalit Diaspora,” 114.

skilled and professional immigrants who migrated to the U.K., U.S., and Canada after independence. The latter, who resided in the most powerful countries in the world, were able to take advantage of innovations in communication and the expansion of NGOs at local, national, and international levels.¹³⁹ Through their activities, as Gail Omvedt writes, “gradually, a worldwide Dalit movement began to take shape.”¹⁴⁰ This activism was crucial for increasing the global visibility of caste discrimination and for courting the attention of international human rights organizations.

The first of these diasporic associations was established by dalit immigrants to the United Kingdom. Punjabi immigrants to Wolverton in the English Midlands founded the Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Committee of Great Britain in 1969.¹⁴¹ Three years later in 1972, dalit immigrants established the Bheem Association – later renamed the Dr. Ambedkar Mission Society – in Bedford, England. The 1970s saw the launching of several Ambedkarite associations, including ones in Birmingham, Southall, and East London.¹⁴² In 1985, the Federation of Ambedkarite and Buddhist Organizations, U.K. (FABO UK) was founded to coordinate the activities of the associations within the U.K. and to advocate for dalits in India. The FABO UK began raising awareness of the conditions facing dalits in India at both the national and international levels, most notably during a series of events from 1989 to 1993 celebrating the birth centenary of Ambedkar. These organizations developed around the figure of Ambedkar, but while memorializing

¹³⁹ Vivek Kumar, “Dalit Movement and Dalit International Conferences,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 38, no. 27 (July 5-11, 2003): 2799.

¹⁴⁰ Gail Omvedt, “The U.N., Racism and Caste,” in *Caste, Race and Discrimination: Discourses in International Context*, eds. Sukhdeo Thorat and Umakant (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2004) 188.

¹⁴¹ In 2003, the Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Committee opened a museum in honor of B.R. Ambedkar. Personal items such as Ambedkar’s eye glasses and pen were devoted to the museum by his personal secretary.

¹⁴² Among the organizations established were, for example, the Ambedkar Buddhist Organisation, Ambedkar Memorial Trust, and Ambedkar and International Mission.

Ambedkar remained a focus of diasporic organizations, as FABO shows, these groups also began to advocate against caste discrimination in India and abroad.

Groups in North America were established with the explicit aim of protesting and advocating for dalits in India, and here too, Ambedkar remained a key symbol for community development. The first association in the United States, Volunteers in the Service of India's Oppressed and Neglected (VISION), was founded in the early 1970s in New York City by Dr. Shobha Singh. Singh was an immigrant from New Delhi who had graduated from Johns Hopkins University in 1957 with a Ph.D. in Physics and went on to build an illustrious career at AT&T Bell Laboratories. VISION organized its first demonstration with dalits from across the U.S. and Canada in June, 1978. The demonstration was outside of the United Nations and was planned to coincide with Prime Minister Morarji Desai's address to the General Assembly for the Special Session on Disarmament. The organization was protesting the Indian government's handling of upper caste violence against Jatvas, a dalit community in Agra, Uttar Pradesh. As part of their celebration of Ambedkar's birthday, Jatvas in Agra held a parade in which an elephant – an animal associated with the high caste and kings – carried a portrait of Ambedkar. As the parade marched through high caste neighborhoods on April 14, 1978, its participants were hit with stones and bricks. Jatvas retaliated, causing damage to a few small shops. Following the initial clash, leaders of the Jatvas scheduled a silent and peaceful march to protest the insult that had been done to Ambedkar. Another violent clash with members of the police and upper caste ensued and over the course of the next

few days, 303 Jatvas protesters were incarcerated.¹⁴³ After a two-week conflagration, the Indian army had to be called in to restore calm. VISION mobilized dalits from across the U.S. and Canada to protest the Indian state's management of the ordeal.

In Canada, the Ambedkar Memorial Mission was founded in Vancouver in 1978, but moved to Toronto the next year and was renamed the Ambedkar Mission. VISION and the Ambedkar Mission, together with the assistance of Chennai-based Dalit Liberation Education Trust, successfully persuaded the London-based human rights organization Minority Rights Group to create a working group on untouchability.¹⁴⁴ The organization assisted in a conference in 1983 titled "Minority Strategies: Comparative Perspectives on Racism and Untouchability" which was hosted by the City University of New York and Columbia University's Southern Asian Institute. Papers from the conference were later published as a book, *Untouchable! Voices from the Dalit Liberation Movement*.¹⁴⁵ A follow-up conference in India was planned, but blocked by the Indian state, which refused to grant visas to the American organizers of the conference.¹⁴⁶ In the years that followed, diasporic groups expanded their outreach and helped lay the foundation for a transnational advocacy movement for dalit rights.

Diasporic groups also began to use the language of human rights to communicate the problems of dalits and in this way, began to frame caste inequality as a human rights violation. VISION and the Ambedkar Mission represented dalit issues at the Osaka International Conference Against Discrimination in 1982 and the Nairobi World

¹⁴³ For an account and analysis of this event, see Owen Lynch, "Rioting as Rational Action: An Interpretation of the April 1978 Riots in Agra," *Economic and Political Weekly* 16, no. 48 (Nov. 28, 1981): 1951-1956.

¹⁴⁴ Clifford Bob, "'Dalit Rights are Human Rights': Caste Discrimination, International Activism and the Construction of a New Human Rights Issue" *Human Rights Quarterly* 29 (2007): 167-193, 176.

¹⁴⁵ See Barbara R. Joshi, *Untouchable! Voices of the Dalit Liberation Movement*, London: Zed Books, 1986.

¹⁴⁶ See Gail Omvedt, "The UN, Racism, and Caste," *The Hindu*, April 10, 2001.

Conference on Religion and Peace in 1984. Dr. Laxmi Berwa, an oncologist based in the Washington D.C. area who took over the leadership of VISION after Singh, became the first person to testify on the plight of dalits before the U.N. Commission on Human Rights in 1982. Dr. Berwa's work illustrates two of the most important trends in the development of an international anti-caste movement: the shift from an identity-based politics to one that courted non-dalit groups and the increased use of the language of human rights to communicate the problems of dalits and arguments based on comparison and analogy.

Dr. Laxmi Berwa, a practicing Buddhist and student of Ambedkar's social and political philosophy, arrived in the United States in 1971 after receiving an MBBS from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in New Delhi. He completed his internship and residency in Brooklyn, N.Y. and a fellowship in Buffalo, N.Y. in 1977. From 1977 to 1980, he served as a commissioned officer in the U.S. Air Force and then began practicing internal medicine and oncology in the Washington D.C. area. In addition to providing testimony at the U.N. Commission on Human Rights in both 1982 and 1995, Berwa testified before Capitol Hill for the Congressional Human Rights Caucus in 1993 and spoke on the situation of dalits in India at a diverse range of venues, including, for example, the Medicine Department of Cook County Hospital, Howard University, George Mason University, a conference of the International Studies Association, a meeting of the American Federation of Muslims, and a meeting of Communities United to Fight Under-Development in Trinidad. He publicized his attempts to hold meeting with Indian dignitaries such as Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi when they visited the United States and organized demonstrations around these visits to draw attention to the

situation of dalits in India, specifically, the impunity with which violence and discrimination was enacted against them.

To communicate the severity of conditions and suffering experienced by dalits to audiences unfamiliar with caste discrimination, Berwa relied on analogies between dalits and other groups. In his testimony at the Human Rights Commission in 1982, Berwa claimed that the state of dalits in India – which he described as a “constant state of terror and humiliation” – was akin to “the condition of Jewish people in Hitler’s time.”¹⁴⁷ At this and other forums, Berwa supplemented this analogy with two other ones: that of slavery and of the situation of African Americans under Jim Crow laws.¹⁴⁸ On several occasions, he used the term “crime against humanity” to describe untouchability. The term ‘crime against humanity’ translated untouchability as an affront to human dignity on par with the Holocaust and Apartheid. Berwa thus utilized a form of argumentation based on analogy as well as a vocabulary that rendered untouchability and caste discrimination gross violations of human rights.

Berwa found common cause with other minorities, both Indian and non-Indian, and rallied for their alliances in the face of majoritarian repression. He reached out to Indian Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians in the United States and argued for their solidarity with struggles faced by their counterparts in India. The problems facing minorities in India, he argued, were analogous: all minorities, he claimed, faced accusations of not belonging, of being “outsiders” to the nation. Not only do minorities experience similar

¹⁴⁷ “Testimony by Dr. Laxmi Berwa to the UN Sub-Commission on Human Rights,” Geneva, Switzerland, August 31, 1982 in *Untouchable: Voices of the Dalit Liberation Movement* ed. Barbara R. Joshi (London: Zed Books, 1986).

¹⁴⁸ For example, Berwa uses these analogies at a speech to the Medicine Department of Cook County Hospital in Chicago, April 27, 1983. See Laxmi Berwa, “Speech to the Medicine Department of Cook County Hospital” in *Asian Dalit Solidarity* ed. Laxmi Berwa (Delhi: Dalit Liberation Education Trust, 2000).

problems, Berwa maintained, they also faced a “common aggressor,” namely Hindu extremists.¹⁴⁹ Berwa pointed out that minorities lacked the resources and capital available to the Hindu right and implored all Indian minorities to “stick together, help each other and work with the other secular minded Hindus to fight the communalists.”¹⁵⁰ In another presentation, Berwa called attention to status of Indians in the U.S. as minorities and compared the relative tolerance and peace they enjoyed to the repression and violence experienced by minorities in India. He argued that Hindu aggression towards minorities in India would be analogous to “Christian-right hoodlum groups like K.K.K. and skin heads acted destroying Hindu temples and raping Hindu Women” in the U.S. “Let us not forget,” Berwa announced to a Seventh-day Adventist church in Maryland, “that Hindus outside of India are a minority and they are subject to the same reprisals as the minorities in India.”¹⁵¹

During a lecture celebrating Ambedkar’s one hundred and sixth birth anniversary at Howard University in 1998, Berwa argued for the relevance of Ambedkar’s thought to minority issues in the U.S., in particular that of African American struggles for equality.¹⁵² The trustee elect of the Graduate Student Council, Randy Short, had invited Berwa to speak about Ambedkar to an audience that included students, professors, the

¹⁴⁹ Berwa, “Address to Members of the American Federation of Muslims, October 21, 1994,” in *Asian Dalit Solidarity* ed. Laxmi Berwa (Delhi: Dalit Liberation Education Trust, 2000), 59.

¹⁵⁰ Berwa, “Speech Delivered at Protest held at the Indian Embassy, May 6, 1987,” in *Asian Dalit Solidarity* ed. Laxmi Berwa (Delhi: Dalit Liberation Education Trust, 2000) 22.

¹⁵¹ Berwa, “Speech at Sligo Church, Maryland, January 17, 1999” in *Asian Dalit Solidarity* ed. Laxmi Berwa (Delhi: Dalit Liberation Education Trust, 2000).

¹⁵² Gail Omvedt notes that Laxmi Berwa’s “organizing... illustrated one of the first examples of unity between dalits and Black Americans (African Americans).” She adds that Berwa discuss the situation of dalits in India and recounted stories of caste atrocities on African American radio stations in the Washington D.C. area. See Gail Omvedt, “The U.N., Racism and Caste,” in *Caste, Race and Discrimination: Discourses in International Context*, eds. Sukhadeo Thorat and Umakant, Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2004, 188.

ambassador to India, and a member of the executive board of the NAACP.¹⁵³ It was the first time an African American institution had commemorated Dr. Ambedkar's birthday, and Berwa saw the event as "a new beginning in the human rights movement between Dalits and Afro-Americans."¹⁵⁴ He spoke of the universality of Ambedkar's theories of liberation and argued for their relevance to all minority issues "whether about Dalits in India, the Indian in U.K., Canada, or America for that matter, whether it was an issue of Afro-Americans in America or any persecuted minority." He also noted that there were ideological similarities between the leaders of the civil rights and dalit rights movements.

Both Ambedkar and Martin Luther King, Jr., he argued, knew that "no one was going to give them their rights."¹⁵⁵ They understood that securing rights would require struggle and that oppressed groups "must fight for their rights from their oppressors"¹⁵⁶ Berwa concluded his speech by "urg[ing] the Afro-Americans in this country whether academicians, civil rights or political leaders...[to] join hands with the Dalits in India with the same message which our two leaders gave and that one message was equality."

Berwa represented himself as a spokesperson for "the millions of speechless untouchables" and strove to, as he said, bring the plight of dalits "to the attention of the whole civilized world."¹⁵⁷ This required not only strategic analogies and broader networks of affiliation, but also the deployment of the logic and vocabulary of human

¹⁵³ A portrait of Ambedkar was raised at both the Howard University School of Law and the Indian Embassy as part of this event. Berwa had noticed that a portrait of Ambedkar was missing from among the portraits of the "founding fathers" of the nation and felt that this event "would be a great opportunity for the Indian government to pay homage to Dr. Ambedkar in America." See Berwa, "Speech at Howard University for 106th Birth Anniversary of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, April 16, 1998" in *Asian Dalit Solidarity* ed. Laxmi Berwa (Delhi: Dalit Liberation Education Trust, 2000).

¹⁵⁴ Berwa, "Speech at Howard University for 106th Birth Anniversary of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar."

¹⁵⁵ Berwa, "Speech at Howard University for 106th Birth Anniversary of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar."

¹⁵⁶ Berwa, "Speech at Howard University for 106th Birth Anniversary of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar."

¹⁵⁷ Laxmi Berwa, "Speech at Consulate of India in NYC, May 1, 1983" in *Asian Dalit Solidarity* ed. Laxmi Berwa (Delhi: Dalit Liberation Education Trust, 2000).

rights. The language of human rights allowed Berwa to counter the Indian state's adamant refusal to view caste as an issue appropriate for foreign or international forums. Globalizing dalit issues meant countering the view of caste as a problem "internal" – both in terms of occurrence and jurisdiction – to India. During Rajiv Gandhi's visit to the United States in 1987, Berwa protested violence against minorities in India and declared that even though the government of India had blocked the discussion of caste at the United Nations, the movement "must press on and meet the U.N. Secretary General to have a personal hearing and submit a memorandum on Human Rights Violation in India."¹⁵⁸ In his presentation to the United Nations Human Rights Commission, Berwa cited "police inaction," "police terrorizing," and state neglect of dalits in India and requested international surveillance and pressure for "corrective action."¹⁵⁹

Berwa's advocacy shows a keen awareness of the politics of human rights. For example, in 1982 Berwa appealed to the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Jeane Kirkpatrick, for assistance, during what has been described as a period of "acrimonious" relations between the U.S. and India.¹⁶⁰ Kirkpatrick, who has been remembered as "a beacon of neoconservative thought," had spoken of the denial of rights to untouchables at the United Nations in December 1982.¹⁶¹ Eighteen months earlier, during Kirkpatrick's visit to India, she and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had publicly clashed over economic

¹⁵⁸ Laxmi Berwa, "Speech in front of the White House, protesting Rajiv Gandhi's visit, October 20, 1987" in *Asian Dalit Solidarity* ed. Laxmi Berwa (Delhi: Dalit Liberation Education Trust, 2000). In this speech, Berwa also stated that if international advocacy did not bring about the necessary changes, dalits should turn to more militant action: "if we don't get justice from anywhere then we have the right to seek justice with own hand. If that means we have to raise arms against the injustice, we must do it. If it means a blood bath to save the honour of our women, we must do it. After all, what good is life which is without dignity, pride, and honor? What good is peace in the graveyard?"

¹⁵⁹ Laxmi Berwa, "Presentation at U.N. Commission on Human Rights, August 31, 1995" in *Asian Dalit Solidarity* ed. Laxmi Berwa (Delhi: Dalit Liberation Education Trust, 2000).

¹⁶⁰ George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation* (Berkeley: University of California, 1999), 233.

¹⁶¹ Tim Weiner, "Jeane Kirkpatrick, Reagan's Forceful Ally, Dies," *New York Times*, December 9, 2006.

and arms aid to Pakistan. Tensions increased a few months later when the U.S. objected to India's application for an IMF loan.¹⁶² In addition to her mention of untouchables in 1982, Kirkpatrick had also referred to India's untouchables three years earlier in 1979. In an essay that extolled the benefits of some autocratic governments for U.S. foreign policy interests, Kirkpatrick wrote that those living under autocratic governments grow accustomed to their society as "children born to untouchables in India acquire the skills and attitudes necessary for survival in the miserable roles they are destined to fill."¹⁶³ Representing untouchables as inured to the "miseries of traditional life," Kirkpatrick's statement implied that they were passive and content, lacking the desire let alone the will to change their circumstances. Therefore, when T.C.A. Rangachari, India's representative at the U.N., denounced Kirkpatrick's 1982 use of the "cause of human rights" as strategic, he seemed somewhat justified. His retort that the Indian Constitution abolished untouchability and provided for the protection and uplift of the Scheduled Castes, however, remained an insufficient response on the issue of dalit rights.

Although Kirkpatrick's politics and depiction of dalits would seem counter to the emancipatory project of dalit rights – and Ambedkar's in particular – Berwa nonetheless appealed to her to help advance the dalit cause. In his letter to Kirkpatrick, Berwa described a situation of rising caste atrocities and government inaction in India and recounted his own experiences being silenced by the Indian government. He wrote that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had refused to meet with VISION during her visit to the

¹⁶² See George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb*, 233.

¹⁶³ See Jeane Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorships and Double Standards," *Commentary* (November 1979). This was one of Kirkpatrick's most influential essays. She distinguished between right-wing pro-American dictatorships and left-wing anti-American governments and argued that the U.S. should support the former.

United States and had sent him a statement criticizing his activist work in the U.S.¹⁶⁴ He added that Dr. Gopal Singh, chairman of the Indian National Commission for Minorities had asked for a meeting with him after his testimony at the U.N. Human Rights Commission. Berwa recounted that at this meeting, Singh pleaded with him to abandon his international advocacy work, saying, as reported in the letter, “I beg of you that whenever you write to us or write to the Prime Minister you should wait for the decision to be taken in the country before you bring them to the world forum.”¹⁶⁵ Given that the Government of India had consistently obstructed any communication on the issue of dalit rights, as Berwa explained in his letter, he was left to seek the assistance of international human rights organizations. Berwa also pointed out to Kirkpatrick that his request at Geneva for the appointment of a U.N. special commissioner to investigate human rights violations in India was supported by an American expert but blocked by the Indian government. Also, in an apparent attempt to utilize Cold War’s political logic to his advantage, he shrewdly added that the Indian position was backed by the delegate from the USSR. He concluded his letter with an ideological dictum: “All Governments who are concerned about Human Rights should pressurize the Indian Government to improve the situation.”¹⁶⁶

In 1999, after over two decades of advocacy for dalits from abroad, Laxmi Berwa was invited to speak at the Centre for Alternative Dalit Media in New Delhi. In this lecture, Berwa recounted the successes of dalit activism in increasing the global visibility

¹⁶⁴ See Laxmi Berwa, “Letter to Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, December 29, 1982,” in *Asian Dalit Solidarity* ed. Laxmi Berwa (Delhi: Dalit Liberation Education Trust, 2000) 87. Berwa writes that after refusing to meet with VISION, Indira Gandhi had sent him a “terse reply, ‘It does not help for those who live in affluence abroad to comment on the situations of which they have little knowledge.’”

¹⁶⁵ See Laxmi Berwa, “Letter to Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, December 29, 1982,” 87.

¹⁶⁶ See Laxmi Berwa, “Letter to Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, December 29, 1982.”

of dalit issues. He cited an episode of the news program *60 Minutes* on untouchability in India as well as other stories in the U.S. media.¹⁶⁷ Dalits who had left India, he explained, had not forgotten about the situation of their counterparts in India. These privileged few had used their positions abroad to mobilize a broader base of support and would continue to “expose the high caste hypocrisy and the Indian government’s negligence and indifference” if the Indian state failed to support an environment where dalits could “live as equals with dignity and pride.” Berwa pointed out that dalits abroad had helped direct the attention of the U.S. academy towards the situation of dalits and had forged both academic and activist partnerships between African Americans and dalits. “Thus,” he concluded, “it is a warning to dalit oppressors that Indian Dalits are no longer alone in their struggle for equality but overseas Dalits and the rest of the civilized world is expressing their solidarity in no uncertain terms.”¹⁶⁸ Berwa – like Ambedkar – thus perceived the problem of dalits in India as one of isolation. He characterized his work abroad – the courting of allies and the publicizing of dalits’ predicaments in internationally recognizable terms – as a way to dismantle this isolation so that dalits were “no longer alone in their struggle.” Through the work of Berwa and other activists both within India and the diaspora, transnational alliances became a significant avenue of dalit activism.

Episode 4: Caste Becomes a Global Problem

Diasporic dalit activism was instrumental in framing caste discrimination as a human rights violation and to directing the attention of international human rights

¹⁶⁷ The 60 minutes episode aired on March 21, 1999.

¹⁶⁸ Laxmi Berwa, “Lecture of Centre for Alternative Dalit Media, April 11, 1999,” in *Asian Dalit Solidarity* ed. Laxmi Berwa (Delhi: Dalit Liberation Education Trust, 2000)196.

organizations to dalit issues. Over two decades of activism came to fruition with two major successes in the mid-1990s: recognition from the U.N. Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) and subsequently, a publication on caste discrimination and untouchability by Human Rights Watch (HRW). The Government of India had signed on to the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 1968, but had consistently maintained that the Convention - which “condemns” “any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on...descent” – did not apply to caste.¹⁶⁹ In 1996, the CERD Committee’s response to the Indian state’s report stated that the “system of castes” was “among the factors which impede the full implementation of the Convention [in India]” and affirmed that the “situation of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes falls within the scope of the Convention.”¹⁷⁰ This statement was the closest a U.N. body had come to officially recognizing caste discrimination as a human rights violation. It facilitated subsequent pronouncements against caste discrimination by U.N. treaty bodies and also gave activism at the international level new viability.

The CERD statement was a milestone for dalit activism; it also helped persuade HRW in 1997 to commit to a project on untouchability and caste discrimination in India. HRW received a grant from the Ford Foundation, and led by Smita Narula, a recent law school graduate, the organization began research on caste based discrimination and violence in January 1998. HRW interviewed over three hundred dalit men and women and over a hundred others, including activists, social workers, and government officials for the report. The project also supported the founding of a national dalit human rights

¹⁶⁹ See Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, available at <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CERD.aspx>.

¹⁷⁰ CERD, “Consideration of Reports Submitted by States Parties Under Article 9 of the Convention,” CERD/C/304/Add.13, 17 September 1996, para 4, 14.

organization. HRW facilitated a series of meetings that brought together dalit activists from across India to identify the issues that would be featured in the report. The National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) - which later proved critical for forging links with international groups and for increasing global visibility of caste based discrimination and violence – was formed from this initiative in December 1998.

Political scientist Clifford Bob points out that organizations such as HRW and Amnesty International have “credibility and access to the media and governmental institutions,” and their support for an issue can have a “tremendous impact on its international recognition.”¹⁷¹ The HRW report, *Broken People: Caste Violence Against India's 'Untouchables,'* was published in 1999 and as many activists told me in conversation, the report exposed the plight of millions of dalits to the global public and galvanized international support for recognizing caste discrimination as a human rights violation. The report focused on the impunity with which violence and discrimination was carried out against dalits and argued that for this population, “caste is determinative for the attainment of social, political, civil, and economic rights.”¹⁷² It called attention to the continuation of untouchability in practices such as debt bondage, the devadasi system, and manual scavenging and provided detailed analysis of incidences of violence against dalits, including a massacre in Bihar, police open-firing on dalit protesters in Mumbai, and retaliatory violence against political and economic assertion in Tamil Nadu.

Violence against dalit women, who were characterized as bearing the “triple burden of caste, class, and gender,” was given attention in a separate chapter which interpreted the epidemic of rape against dalit women as serving as a “caste custom,”

¹⁷¹ Clifford Bob, “Dalit Rights are Human Rights,” 176.

¹⁷² Human Rights Watch, *Broken People: Caste Violence Against India's 'Untouchables'* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999), 9.

“village tradition,” or “retaliation” for the assertion of rights. The report concluded that dalits “remain at risk of systemic human rights violations on the basis of the caste into which they are born” and that the Indian state was guilty of a “failure to ensure equal protection under the law” and of a “pattern of complicity and collusion on behalf of police and local officials.”¹⁷³

The HRW report acknowledged the “difficulty of slotting caste-based abuses into the standard categories of human rights violations.” Although HRW did not explicitly link this difficulty to the implication of caste in Hinduism, the presumed specificity of caste and untouchability to India and Hinduism may have accounted for the prior neglect of caste-based human rights violations by the international human rights community. Starting in the late 1990s, dalit conferences and global outreach increasingly framed caste as a global problem not specific to India. This framing redefined caste as a universal wrong rather than a particular of Indian culture and facilitated links between dalits and marginalized groups across the world.

In 1998, the first World Dalit Convention took place from October 10-11, 1998 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The conference was sponsored by the Indian Progressive Front, a Malaysian political party, and brought together dalit activists from across the world, Indian politicians, and activists of the Buruku community in Japan. Despite the differences among the participants – including differences in nationality, region, language, rank, religion, and gender – the statement adopted at the Conference declared that participants had “dedicate[d]” themselves “for the blessed unity of Dalit community throughout the world and would solidly stand united to struggle relentlessly for better and

¹⁷³ HRW, *Broken People*, 205.

brighter future, dignity and respect of Dalits and other downtrodden communities.”¹⁷⁴

The Conference in Kuala Lumpur called for the creation of a U.N. Special Rapporteur to investigate caste-based human rights violations in India and other countries and supported this demand rhetorically by arguing that dalits face “a fate far worse than South African or American Apartheid.”¹⁷⁵ This document thus communicated the plight of dalits not through analogy, but through comparison: dalits faced a predicament *worse than* the other internationally recognized systems of oppression.

The second international dalit conference took place from May 16-18, 2003 in Vancouver, Canada. Largely funded and organized by the Shri Ravidass Sabhas of Vancouver and other Canadian cities, the 2003 Conference brought into relief the significance both of diasporic activism and religious institutions to providing community support for this activism. Guru Ravidass was a radical anticaste 15th century *sant*. Omvedt writes that unlike other radicals of the period who were “absorbed in the general cooptation of ‘bhakti,’ ... the Ravidass movement has developed a strong sense of anti-Hindu identity.”¹⁷⁶ She adds that in the diaspora, “freed from the economic and political hegemony of the upper castes, institutions like the Guru Ravidass Sabha have flourished.” Unlike the Kuala Lumpur statement, the Vancouver statement did not “declare” the unity of dalits, but rather, “call[ed] upon the Dalits of the world to unite in their activism in the true spirit of interfaith dialogue and multiculturalism, and resolve to

¹⁷⁴ “1st World Dalit Convention Declaration,” Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, October 10 and 11, 1998. Available at ambedkar.org

¹⁷⁵ “1st World Dalit Convention Declaration,” Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, October 10 and 11, 1998. Available at ambedkar.org

¹⁷⁶ See Gail Omvedt, “Dalits Mobilising,” *The Hindu*, May 27, 2003. For more on the ideology and social vision of Guru Ravidass, see Gail Omvedt, *Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anticaste Intellectuals* (New Delhi: Navayana Publishers, 2008).

work tirelessly for the upliftment of the community.”¹⁷⁷ It called for the establishment of “a formal institutional structure for better networking among the Resident and Non-Resident Indian Dalit community” and for more forceful outreach to the international community, including political and economic institutions such as the United Nations, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and educational and research institutions in North America and Europe. The Vancouver Conference declaration expressed its internationalist vision not only by pledging to “propagate knowledge of Babasaheb as a philosopher of emancipation to all the oppressed anywhere in the world,” but also by “affirm[ing] that every human being has the inherent right to life and dignity and that Black is Beautiful and Dalit is Dignified.”

The phrase “Black is Beautiful” references the cultural message and movement of the African American civil rights movement. This citation along with the other citations of international struggles by dalit activists has pedagogical value. For dalits, at the conference and in India, and for the global public, these citations provide a model of mass social movements. They develop analogies that instruct its audiences to understand dalits in a particular way; they suggest that dalits suffer *just as* black people living under apartheid in South Africa or Jim Crow in the American South did. Both were the target of mass social movements; the former also mobilizing a global movement. Comparing the situation of dalits to apartheid then instructs the global human rights community of the situation in India and the need for global assistance in protest.

The work of the activists in the diaspora together with the advocacy of dalit leaders in India led to formal establishment of the International Dalit Solidarity Network

¹⁷⁷ “Vancouver Declaration: International Dalit Conference,” Adopted Unanimously by the International Dalit Conference, Vancouver, BC Canada, May 16-18, 2003.

(IDSN) in March 2000. Based in Copenhagen, Denmark, the IDSN – together with national-level organizations in India and eight state-level networks in Europe – was critical to the creation of a “vibrant and increasingly dense transnational advocacy network.”¹⁷⁸ The network helped increase the visibility of dalit issues through targeted media activism and lobbied states and international institutions. As Clifford Bob notes, the IDSN also represented a shift in how the problems facing dalits were framed internationally: whereas religious and development organizations had focused on the various problems that India’s poor faced such as illiteracy and forced labor, the IDSN argued “an approach that frames the Dalits’ many problems in comprehensive terms – as outgrowths of caste-based discrimination endemic to Indian society.”¹⁷⁹

The IDSN also sponsored knowledge production on caste as a global problem, a problem found across the world and one that deserved the attention of the international human rights community. The network identified caste-like phenomena and caste-affected populations in South Asia, East Asia, the Middle East, West Africa, East Africa, and areas with immigrant communities from these areas. The IDSN defined caste systems as the division of people into groups fixed at birth in which the “the assignment of basic rights among various castes is unequal and hierarchal” and maintained through the threat of a “system of social and economic penalties.”¹⁸⁰ The IDSN defined untouchability as the classification of a group of people as “impure” and polluting” and assigning these

¹⁷⁸ Clifford Bob, “Dalit Rights are Human Rights,” 189. The South Asian affiliates of IDSN are the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights, India; Dalit NGO Federation, Nepal; Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement; Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network; and Human Development Organization, Sri Lanka. Among the organizations IDSN is associated with are Human Rights Watch, Minority Group International, Anti-Slavery International, Lutheran World Federation, and Asian Human Rights Commission. The U.K., Germany, Finland, Netherlands, Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Belgium have national-level dalit solidarity networks. See idsn.org.

¹⁷⁹ Clifford Bob, “Dalit Rights are Human Rights,” 188-189.

¹⁸⁰ See idsn.org

groups the most “menial” and “hazardous” jobs in a society. “The division of a society into castes,” the IDSN claimed, “is a *global phenomenon* not exclusively practised within any particular religion or belief system.” In addition to the countries of South Asia – Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka – the IDSN stated that caste discrimination occurs in Japan, Yemen, Senegal, Nigeria, Mauritania, Niger, Kenya, and diaspora communities in other countries. It noted that while caste in South Asia is justified by Hindu ideology, in Japan it is associated with “Shinto beliefs” and in Africa, it is based on “myths.”¹⁸¹

Clifford Bob argues that this articulation of caste was intended “to underline the problem’s scope and attract broader support from international actors, some of whom might otherwise be reluctant to offend the Indian government.”¹⁸² While this may be the case, in my reading, the severing of the caste system from its conventional associations – namely, India and Hinduism – enabled its recognition as a universal wrong. This articulation of caste helped activists translate caste as fundamentally antithetical to the ideals of liberal thought. The IDSN categorized caste systems as “a form of social and economic governance” which holds “the doctrine of inequality” at its “core.” It thus negated an understanding of caste as a ‘cultural’ practice open to relativistic tolerance, and placed it in the realm of the political. By politicizing and globalizing caste, the IDSN was able to reframe its imposition on individuals and communities as a human rights violation. The IDSN thus argued for a concept of caste that incorporated similarities with

¹⁸¹ This conceptualization was echoed in interviews with dalit activists. As one activist explained to me, in India, “caste’s origin lies in the Hindu religion,” but it may be rooted in a different ideological complex in other areas. This activist hypothesized that caste, as a global phenomenon, may have its origins in “traditional societies.” “Africa, Latin America, areas still embedded in tradition,” he said, “still have social systems based on descent...related to exclusion and discrimination based on descent.” In his and other activists’ articulation of caste, neither Hinduism nor India define caste; rather, caste becomes a sociological concept that can be employed to understand a variety of local forms of inherited inequality.

¹⁸² Clifford Bob, “Dalit Rights are Human Rights,” 191-192.

other forms of inequality and discrimination that exist around the world. The network promoted using these similarities, rather than a notion of caste's radical difference from social forms in other areas, as a mode of comprehending caste in India. This approach then also shows how transnational activism required a political logic that highlighted similarities between dalits' experiences and the experiences of other communities.

Episode 5: The Dalit Majority

This final episode in the history of dalit transnational activism was not one referred to in the accounts given to me by activists. Rather, it is based on dalit activist Martin Macwan's hope for the future of anti-caste activism. Macwan founded Navsarjan Trust, co-founded the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights, received the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award, and was instrumental in mobilizing the dalit rights contingent at the World Conference Against Racism, 2001. At the time of my interview with him in 2009, he had retired from leadership roles in dalit organizations and spent much of his time writing educational materials for children. During our conversation, he advocated reconceptualizing the meaning of 'dalit' and put forth a vision of the future of dalit activism in India and abroad based on this resignification.

In "Navsarjan on the Unbeaten Track," a booklet that both documents the history of Navsarjan Trust and lays out the organization's ideological positions, Martin Macwan recounts the development of his views on identity and community. In 1976, as a student at St. Xavier's College in Ahmedabad, Macwan worked closely with two professors and a Spanish priest on a development program for Gujarat's farmers. During this project, as the booklet states, Macwan was surprised to learn that even though the professors and

priest he worked with were not from Schedule Caste communities, they nonetheless “took their meals with them, mingled with them and maintained [an] equal relationship with them.”¹⁸³ According to the text, this experience alerted Macwan to the possible expansiveness of social affiliations. An adolescent at the time, Macwan recalled learning that bonds of associations were “often...forged not on the basis of sharing a particular caste, but by sharing the experience of injustice.”¹⁸⁴

Macwan’s conception of the boundaries of social affiliations underwent another transformation sixteen years later in 1992 during his first trip to the United States. “Navsarjan on the Unbeaten Track” details Macwan’s participation in a two-month training program in advocacy. During this program, Macwan worked at the National Council of La Raza, the largest Latino civil rights and advocacy organization in the U.S. and wrote a final paper titled “Comparison Between Dalits and Latinos.” Macwan recalled that he remained focused on the issues affecting dalits in Gujarat and that his experience working on social and political advocacy in the U.S. deepened his understanding of the situation in India. Macwan noted that after studying how “in other countries collective groups like Dalits progressed by getting organized,” his understanding of the problems facing dalits “acquired a global solution.”¹⁸⁵ He recognized that communities like the dalits existed across the world; “their problems,” he realized, “should become our problem.” Macwan also discovered the possibilities of transnational exchanges of knowledge in both inspiring and revising local models for social change. “If Martin Luther King can learn something from Gandhiji,” he noted,

¹⁸³Navsarjan “Navsarjan on the Unbeaten Track,” (Ahmedabad, India) 3.

¹⁸⁴“Navsarjan on the Unbeaten Track,” 3.

¹⁸⁵ Navsarjan on the Unbeaten Track, 13.

“then why should we find it difficult to accept something not just from Gandhiji but also Martin Luther King.”

Macwan remained attuned to the opportunities created through affiliations across caste, region, and nation in his career as an activist. A transnational vision of community can be discerned behind much of his advocacy work, whether international or local in scope. This vision was not only of ideological significance, but also of pragmatic expedience. As Macwan explained to me, “I have learned from my experience, personal and professional experience, that ultimately it [achieving social change] is a question of identity.” “You cannot win any war,” he continued, “if you don’t have a majority.”¹⁸⁶ In his quest to find an identity that could, as he said, “break the barrier of caste,” Macwan reinterpreted the meaning of ‘dalit.’ Whereas ‘dalit’ is conventionally associated with a caste identity, Macwan insisted that the term should refer to people who share a moral position, namely an unwavering belief in equality: “dalits are those who believe in equality; dalits are those who practice equality; dalits are those who protest for equality.”¹⁸⁷ With this logic, a non-dalit is then someone who “cooperates with inequality.” “That hits people,” said Macwan. With this definition of dalit, asking if one identifies as a dalit is akin to asking, in Macwan’s words, “are you a progressive person or are you a backward person.”¹⁸⁸ The majority of Indians, Macwan speculated, would want to be identified as progressive, would want to embody ‘modern’ values, and would thus have to identify as dalit. By resignifying ‘dalit’ in this way, Macwan hopes to transform both the political logic behind the movement for dalit rights and the social

¹⁸⁶ Martin Macwan, interview by author, August 2009, Village Nani Devti, Gujarat, India. Macwan qualified this statement by adding that the majority’s support is essential in absence of superior technology or resources.

¹⁸⁷ Macwan Interview.

¹⁸⁸ Macwan Interview.

determinants of individual and collective identity. Macwan shared an example to illustrate the problems he sees with current identification practices:

I have friends who are married for 30 years and they still introduce themselves ‘I am dalit. My wife is not.’ So, I say, let’s take this – this woman has given you children. The woman cooks for you. For thirty years, [she does] the most anyone can do [for you], but still you say she’s a nondalit. So, what we are saying to the world is that the caste system will remain, and we will make sure it remains, we want it to remain...I believe that it has to go; it can go. So, I’m looking for ways to break it.

Macwan reasons that if an identity cannot be shared by two people in an intimate bond such as marriage and parenthood, the prospects for building solidarity through some form of identification for the nation – or a collective of nations – are dismal. His redefinition of ‘dalit’ contains the possibility of dissolving caste distinctions and building solidarity through both empathy and shared ideology. While Macwan acknowledged that his thinking on this matter has been branded “idealistic” and “utopian” by other activists, he insists that his resignification of ‘dalit’ is having tangible affects. No longer officially working for either the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights or Navsarjan Trust, Macwan has dedicated himself to the education of dalit children in rural Gujarat. He has shared his definition of ‘dalit’ with them and proudly avers that “one hundred percent” of the children he works with define ‘dalit’ as those whose “believe in equality.” “This new perspective is a lasting thing,” he argued, “we’re changing the whole course of the dalit movement. Imagine if we had those children in the thousands. It would be a different world.”¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁹ Macwan Interview.

For Macwan, the redefinition of ‘dalit’ has revised advocacy outlooks by translating a minority politics into claims made from membership and participation in a global struggle. Redefining ‘dalit’ has helped him – as it did the Dalit Panthers – counter the political isolation of dalits in India and build solidarity with groups outside of India. Throughout this chapter, I have tried to analyze the shifting contours of the collectives with whom dalit activists have partnered themselves. I have employed an episodic approach to this history both to intimate the narrative of the internationalization of dalit issues offered by activists and also to draw attention to the political logics that recur – without causal connection – in different historical moments. In addition to the rearticulation of “dalit,” the imagining of similarity in structural position with groups outside of India and the reconceptualization of caste as a global problem have also recurred in the five episodes recounted in this chapter. The next chapter will provide a deeper history to this last contention – that caste is not specific to India – by analyzing the precursors to this line of reasoning in the social sciences.

Chapter 3 Generalizing Caste: Histories of Caste as Inherited Inequality

“...in dealing with caste, as with schizophrenia, we can never be sure where the fantasies of the analyst end and the plight of the subject begins.” – Amitav Ghosh, “The Slave of MS.H. 6”¹⁹⁰

In his seminal essay “Theory in Anthropology: Center and Periphery,” Arjun Appadurai discusses the close association between places and analytic concepts in anthropology since World War II.¹⁹¹ He argues that this association has confined the study of certain non-Western areas to a limited set of topics. In the case of India, “caste” and “hierarchy” have served as “gatekeeping concepts,” concepts which function to “limit anthropological theorizing about the place in question, and that define the quintessential and dominant questions of interest in the region.”¹⁹² Appadurai also points out that the inverse – the constraints “place” puts on the theorizing of a concept – poses difficulties for cross-cultural or regional comparison.

In this chapter, I illustrate the consequences of this inverse for the *concept of caste and the place of India*. The English term ‘caste’ usually refers to two local concepts of social relations: *varna* and *jati*. The *varna* system corresponds to the four-fold social order laid out in Hindu religious texts. Dalits are not formally a part of this system, but are included within it through their very exclusion. Unlike *varna*, *jati* refers to the endogamous communities most relevant for the everyday operations of social life.

¹⁹⁰ Amitav Ghosh, “The Slave of MS.H.6” in *Subaltern Studies VII: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, eds. Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 185.

¹⁹¹ Arjun Appadurai, “Theory in Anthropology: Center and Periphery,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 28 (Apr., 1986): 356-361.

¹⁹² Appadurai, “Theory in Anthropology,” 357.

There are thousands of *jatis* in India, and the identities and arrangement of these communities vary from area to area. This chapter does not take up the concepts of *varna* or *jati*, but rather, focuses on “caste.” “Caste” is not only a translation and abstraction, but is also an analytic category in anthropology and sociology with two-fold political significance: it denotes a system of social stratification and inequality, and also has been used ideologically to represent a stagnant Indian society, its underdevelopment and degeneracy.

Today, dalit activists argue that caste is not particular to India and that ‘caste-affected’ societies exist across the world. This view of caste as a global phenomenon challenges a longstanding assumption that caste is unique to India and is uniquely Indian. Although scholarship over the last few decades has effectively critiqued the view of caste as a rigid and unchanging institution that stands in as a metonym for Indian civilization, caste still emerges in most anthropological and historical studies as a phenomenon that is found only in India.

This chapter delineates the political and theoretical implications of circumscribing the *concept of caste* to the *place of India*. I trace a history of ‘caste’ as a generalizable category not specific to the study of India. I discuss examples from the nineteenth and twentieth century of the use of the term to identify systems of inherited inequality, mostly in the United States. In these examples, India provides an instance of caste, but the phenomenon itself is not geographically restricted to the Indian subcontinent nor is it exclusively associated with Hinduism. The use of caste to describe social systems outside of India, however, was not without controversy and in this section, I also draw out the key themes in debates that ensued over the use of caste to describe race relations in the

Jim Crow South. Through this exposition, I argue that if “caste” is deemed unique to India, then it appears as an exceptional, cultural practice; in this case, caste inequality cannot be categorized as a form of discrimination, but rather, is given legitimacy under the rubric of culture. Alternatively, if “caste” is a generalizable category, then it appears as a form of a social structure based on inequality, the effects of which violate liberal humanist conceptions of rights. The significance of this argument will be more fully illustrated in the following chapters. Chapter 5, in particular, analyzes dalit activism at the 2001 World Conference Against Racism and the attempt to have caste discrimination recognized as a universal human rights violation. While the debates discussed in this chapter and in Chapter 5 are separated by over a half century, they pivot on one central question: whether caste is specific to India or a generalizable category that can be applied to structures of inequality in other societies.

Caste in the History and Anthropology of India

Caste has been a central component in narratives of the Indian past and its society. An account of caste often encodes an evaluation of the dynamism or lack thereof of Indian political and philosophical traditions. The view of caste as the social expression of a religiously inspired principle of hierarchy, a view most notably advanced by French anthropologist Louis Dumont, renders the caste system a harmonious yet rigid system that stands in as a metonym for a historically stable and unchanging Indian civilization.¹⁹³ Here the caste system, with its built-in mechanisms of reproduction that preclude resistance or conflict, is also causally implicated in the lack of Indian history and politics.

¹⁹³ See Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

In this reading, the caste system is a hierarchal order which structures social life and critically, establishes a social order which subordinates political and economic activity to the religious; a principle of hierarchy, motivated by an opposition between purity and pollution, becomes the essence of India and constitutes its fundamental difference from an individualistic and egalitarian West.

While Dumont is often cited as having put forth this view, his critics, such as McKim Marriott and Arjun Appadurai, have pointed that his description of caste does not significantly deviate from colonial understandings of caste.¹⁹⁴ Colonial authorities had already rendered caste a fundamentally religious system that structured social life in India. Orientalist scholars derived this understanding of caste from their readings of ancient Hindu texts, which were aided by their Brahmin pundit interlocutors. Later colonial enumerative and ethnological projects, as Bernard Cohen and Nicholas Dirks have shown, reproduced this view and strategically simplified very complex social phenomena into a religious and hierarchal notion of caste.¹⁹⁵ Dirks implicates colonial policies in making caste the primary referent for Indian social relations. He argues that caste in India is neither the totalizing constant in Indian history nor the source and manifestation of the value of hierarchy that determines Indian civilization and its difference from the west. Rather, He contends that caste, as it is known today, is a product of colonial practices and constructions.

¹⁹⁴ See McKim Marriott, "Review of *Homo Hierarchicus: Essai sur le systeme des castes*," *American Anthropologist* 71, no. 6 (1969): 1166-1175; Arjun Appadurai, "Is *Homo Hierarchicus*," *American Ethnologist* 13, no. 4 (Nov. 1986): 745-761.

¹⁹⁵ See Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). See also See, for example, Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Readings of religious texts had undergird colonial ethnological and enumerative projects and generated the categories and rankings used to make sense of Indian social groups. With the rise of anthropology as a discipline in the twentieth century, scholarship undertaken after independence increasingly relied on ethnographic field work rather than textual studies to understand caste in India. Many of these accounts focused on a village community, which anthropologist Gerald D. Berreman suggested “was found by many anthropologists to be the most manageable unit for ethnological research.”¹⁹⁶ Although the villages were “manageable units,” anthropologists challenged the notion of the village as an isolated, self-contained unit.¹⁹⁷ In studies of caste, local phenomena were then connected to more generalized, pan-Indian categories and abstracted in order to produce theories of caste. Although a rich and varied field of scholarship, in my review of this field, I will focus on only three aspects of the conceptualization of caste most relevant for the intellectual history that follows in this chapter: definitions of caste; the notion of consensus in the caste system; and the issue of unity in categories across India.

The caste system is generally defined in association with the rankings of traditional occupations, rules of endogamy and commensality, and notions of purity and pollution. G.S. Ghurye, writing in 1932, describes castes the most generalizable unit of social organization and offers a definition that incorporates both the interdependence of different castes and their separation.¹⁹⁸ Castes were separated by rules related to marriage, occupation, feeding and social intercourse, resulting in the limitation of “community feeling” to within a caste, but were nonetheless “welded together and

¹⁹⁶ Gerald D. Berreman, *Hindus of the Himalayas: Ethnography and Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 1.

¹⁹⁷ See, for example, McKim Marriott, “Little Communities in an Indigenous Civilization,” in *Village India*, ed. McKim Marriott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955).

¹⁹⁸ See G.S. Ghurye, *Caste and Race in India* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1969).

interdependent for the purposes of civic life.”¹⁹⁹ Adrian Mayer, like Ghurye, argued that the study of caste was central to understanding social life; almost all social, political, and economic actions could be attributed to workings of caste.²⁰⁰ In a similar vein, M.N. Srinivas viewed castes as fundamentally religious groups, which created Indian social structure through bonds of both “horizontal solidarity” – caste bonds that span across villages – and “vertical solidarity” – bonds created through the division of labor and allegiance to a village.²⁰¹ Srinivas also pointed that that *varna* was not the “real unit of the caste system,” but rather *jati* – “a very small endogamous group practicing a traditional occupation and enjoying a certain amount of cultural, ritual, and juridical autonomy” – was.²⁰²

The notions of purity and pollution, central to Dumont’s view of caste, figure differently in these theories of caste. For example, Stephen Tyler, following Dumont, suggested that the “underlying ideology of purity/pollution” was central to the organization and ranking of castes.²⁰³ McKim Marriott, however, challenged this notion and argued that purity and pollution were not inherent qualities, but rather, were produced through transactional processes, such as the transfer of services and food.²⁰⁴ Caste rankings, he suggested, were the result of a transactional system: upper castes receive more services and lower castes provided more services; whereas lower castes receive more food and upper castes provide more food. For Marriott, caste ranking in

¹⁹⁹ Ghurye, *Caste and Race*, 26.

²⁰⁰ See Adrian C Mayer, *Caste and Kinship in Central India: A Village and Its Region* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960).

²⁰¹ See M.N. Srinivas, *Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).

²⁰² Srinivas, *Religion and Society*, 24. *Jati* appears as “subcaste” in Ghurye’s exposition.

²⁰³ Stephen A. Tyler, *India: An Anthropological Perspective* (Pacific Palisades: Goodyear Publishing Company, 1973), 149.

²⁰⁴ McKim Marriott, “Caste Ranking and Food Transactions: A Matrix Analysis” in *Structure and Change in Indian Society*, eds. Milton Singer and Bernard S. Cohn (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1968).

India was not uniform, but rather was based on the structure of a local community; castes were ranked through local interactions and economic power, but the interactions between communities could then map onto pan-Indian ritual hierarchies.²⁰⁵

In most of the ethnographies, castes appear as, in Andre Beteille's terms, "enduring groups" with "fixed boundaries."²⁰⁶ This is attributed to the rules of endogamy; caste membership, as Bernard Cohn writes, "is by birth. Caste status is ascriptive and unchanging for the individual."²⁰⁷ The hereditary nature of caste status is thus credited with the endurance of caste groups. In several ethnographies, the endurance – of both caste groups and the caste system – was also related to cultural consensus on the various aspects of caste. As Ghurye wrote, "Complete acceptance of the system in its broad outlines by the groups making up that system...not only prevented the exclusivist organization of the groups from splitting the system into independent units, but created harmony in civic life"; this was a "harmony of parts equally valued, but of units which are rigorously subordinated to one another."²⁰⁸ Concepts of equality and rights were deemed "modern," and thus only introduced to the subcontinent with European contact. S.C. Dube acknowledged that "Untouchables certainly resent their degraded status, but are careful not to voice their protests too loudly," but also claimed that "the fundamental concepts of the rights and equality mean little" to the villagers he studied.²⁰⁹ Michael Moffatt argued for a "fundamental cultural consensus," claiming that "Untouchables and higher caste actors hold virtually identical cultural constructs, that they are in total

²⁰⁵McKim Marriott, *Caste Ranking and Community Structure in Five Regions of India and Pakistan* (Poona: Deccan College and Postgraduate Research Institute, 1960).

²⁰⁶ Andre Beteille, *Caste, Class, and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965).

²⁰⁷ Bernard Cohn, *India: The Social Anthropology of a Civilization* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1971), 128.

²⁰⁸ Ghurye, *Caste and Race*, 28.

²⁰⁹ S.C. Dube, *Indian Village* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955), 224, 234.

conceptual and evaluative consensus with one another.”²¹⁰ He concluded that “those people who are, in egalitarian terms, among the most oppressed members of Indian society are also among the truest believers in the system that so oppresses them.”²¹¹

Joan Mencher refuted these claim of cultural consensus and argued that understandings of the caste system vary depending on perspective; lower caste people, she maintained, were far from complacent in their positions and had very different values from the upper caste.²¹² Her analysis explored beyond initial responses and immediate appearances and discovered that people on the lower end of the caste hierarchy tended to view it in more material terms and as a system of economic exploitation. Gail Omvedt has similarly argued against the assumption of consensus, pointing out that lower caste groups have a long history contesting caste values and mobilizing around rights and equality.²¹³

Mencher and Omvedt, however, remained minority voices in ethnography of caste; most studies either assumed consensus and harmony or explicitly cited it as a reason for the endurance of caste.

Ethnographic studies of caste reproduced nationalist assumptions about an underlying unity across Indian cultures, a unity created by Hindu ideology. M.N. Srinivas’ suggested the creation of “cultural uniformity” across India through lower caste emulation of the “Brahmanic way of life,” a process he termed “Sanskritization.”²¹⁴ This not only assumed the dominance of Brahmins across India, but also failed to conceive of Brahmanism as an ideology that subordinated lower castes. As Kamala Visweswaran

²¹⁰ Michael Moffatt, *An Untouchable Community in South India: Structure and Consensus* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 4, 291.

²¹¹ Moffatt, 304.

²¹² Joan Mencher, “The Caste System Upside Down, or the Not-So-Mysterious East,” *Current Anthropology* 15, no. 4(Dec. 1974): 469-493.

²¹³ Gail Omvedt, “The Downtrodden Among the Downtrodden: An Interview with A Dalit Agricultural Laborer” *Signs* 4, no. 4 (Summer 1979): 763-774,

²¹⁴ M.N. Srinivas, *Religion and Society*, 30.

argues, Srinivas “never seems to understand it [Sanskritization] as an oppressive ideology since the process of adopting sanskritic practices appeared to be voluntary.”²¹⁵

Furthermore, as Dirks points out, Srinivas ignored the role of colonialism and nationalism in making Brahmanic values and behaviors the “pervasive idiom of social mobility.”²¹⁶

A cultural uniformity across India was also assumed by Marriott, who interpreted this unity in terms of Sanskritic-Hindu concepts. His development of ethnosociology, an approach that was supposed to use Indian categories to avoid an ethnocentric bias and deliver a more accurate picture of Indian social life, reproduced Hindu textual categories for the analysis of social life and reinforced a holistic view of caste and Indian civilization in which religion was primary.²¹⁷

Since the 1980s, many of the conclusions made in the ethnological studies of caste – the structuralist and the ethnosociological – have been effectively critiqued. The notion of the caste system as a harmonious hierarchy has been supplemented with dalit perspectives on the violence of inequality and exploitation. The idea of timeless religious values structuring social life has been replaced with accounts of the impact of colonialism in flattening the role of power and politics and in privileging the religious in representations of Indian history. The concept of a pan-Indian Sanskritic Hindu foundation to cultural life has similarly been challenged by histories of nineteenth century socio-religious reform movements and nationalist resistance. While this scholarship is attentive to changes over time in the structure of caste and its variations across regions,

²¹⁵ Kamala Visweswaran, *Un/common Cultures: Racism and the Articulation of Cultural Difference* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 139. Visweswaran adds that Srinivas’ concept also made “Sanskritic-based Hinduism as the dominant frame for Indian sociology [which] has had powerful consequences for how we think o of India.”

²¹⁶ Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 253.

²¹⁷ See McKim Marriott, “Constructing an Indian Ethnosociology,” in *India Through Hindu Categories*, ed. McKim Marriott (New Delhi: Sage, 1990).

caste still appears in most scholarship as a set of relationships based in Hinduism and particular to the Indian subcontinent: caste is still a uniquely Indian phenomena and a phenomena unique to India. Consequently, a notion of caste's *difference* from any other form of social organization still seems to guide understandings of caste.²¹⁸ Contemporary dalit rights activists argue for a concept of caste that incorporates similarities with other forms of inequality and discrimination that exist around the world. They promote using these similarities, rather than their differences, as a mode of comprehending caste in India. In what follows, I offer a history of the conceptualizations of caste that privilege similarities with other forms of social organization, rather than the differences.

Caste as Slavery and Racism

As early as 1869, Charles Sumner, a Radical Republican senator from Massachusetts, used "caste" to refer to a system of inherited inequality. For Sumner, caste was a system with "two distinct elements: first, separation, with rank and privilege, or their opposite, with degradation and disability; second, descent from father to son, so that it was perpetual separation from generation to generation."²¹⁹ Sumner noted that while the term "signifies primarily the orders of ranks in India," caste also refers to, "by natural extension, any separate and fixed order of society in other countries." He applied the term to past societies such as "Assyria," "Egypt," and "Attica" and suggested that

²¹⁸ One exception to this in the scholarship I reviewed is found in Adrian Mayer's *Caste and Kinship in Central India: A Village and its Region*. Mayer shares a story about a "harijan" well that had run dry. The dalits in the community first asked upper caste women to get water for them, but then started demanding that they be able to access the community well. To put a stop to these demands, the community was able to have another well built from government funds earmarked for dalit advancement. The well, as Mayer points out, was constructed from "a Government which officially opposed such discrimination." He then concludes that "The principle of 'equal but separate facilities' does not belong to the Deep South of the U.S.A. alone." See Mayer, *Caste and Kinship*, 53.

²¹⁹ Hon. Charles Sumner, *Lecture: The Question of Caste* (Boston: Wright & Potter, 1869) 7.

although “hereditary discrimination” was found in modern Europe – where “the son of a noble being a noble, with great privileges” and “the son of a mechanic being a mechanic, with great disabilities” – the French Revolution made considerable progress towards destroying this system. This was because, as Sumner argues, “just in proportion to the triumph of Equality does Caste disappear.”²²⁰

Sumner describes the social organization in the U.S. under slavery in the U.S. as akin to caste in India. He even refers to caste in the Indian context as India’s “peculiar institutions,” – a euphemistic term used for the slavery in the South – cementing the equivalence between Indian caste and American slavery.²²¹ According to Sumner, in the United States – where “the Caste hereditary rank and privilege is white...[and] the Caste doomed to hereditary degradation and disability is black or yellow” – caste had continued after the abolition of slavery. The “white man,” Sumner writes, “is a Superior Caste not unlike the Brahmin, while the black man is an inferior Caste not unlike the Sudra, sometimes even the Pariah.”²²² Sumner argues that caste, whether in India or in the United States, is abhorrent to humanity’s moral senses and to the universal laws of nature; among humans, he writes, there is an “*overruling Unity*” and this “common humanity” precludes divisions such as caste. Delivered just four years after the abolition of slavery, Sumner’s lecture demanded the conferral of the equal rights and the protections of citizenship to all men within the country so that caste can be “trampled out.”²²³ Sumner professes that ridding the country of caste is in the “best interests of the

²²⁰ Charles Sumer, *The Question of Caste*, 7.

²²¹ Sumner uses *Caste opposed to Christianity*, edited by Rev. Joseph Roberts (London, 1847) for much of his information on caste in India as well as testimony from Bishop Reginald Herber, the writings of James Mill, and translations of the Laws of Manu.

²²² Charles Sumer, *The Question of Caste*, 10.

²²³ Charles Sumer, *The Question of Caste*, 31.

country and the best interests of mankind” and warns that if the country is to “let Caste prevail...civilization is thwarted.”²²⁴

‘Caste’ provides Sumner with an analytic concept that conveys the conditions under slavery as well as the legacy of slavery in the organization of society. ‘Caste’ highlights the perpetuation of an unequal and immoral system after slavery was legally abolished; it communicates the continued exclusion of segments of the population and the denial of the rights and protections that should be guaranteed to them in a liberal democratic republic. For Sumner, “caste” signified both the “dreadful system” of India as well as social principles – such as inherited entitlement and inequality – which stood in stark opposition to Enlightenment thinking, Christianity, and Republicanism. In other words, the rhetorical power of the term “caste” enabled Sumner to argue that the continuation of inequality in reconstruction-era America was contrary to the laws of God, citizenship, and human progress. As Sumner maintained, while the concept and term came from the Portuguese understanding of India, “caste” was far from a social system restricted to Hinduism or the Indian subcontinent; rather, it was a social system that had functioned in various societies, past and present. Sumner predicted that caste would be destroyed as acceptance of man’s “common humanity” grew and was replaced with a republicanism that offered universal and equal rights for all citizens. Sumner’s lecture illustrates how a term that emerges from the study of Indian society enters the vocabulary of political and sociological discourse and is made available for the analysis of other human societies.

Across the world in India and five years after Sumner’s treatise, (Mahatma) Jotirao Phule published *Slavery (in the Civilised British Government under the cloak of*

²²⁴ Charles Sumer, *The Question of Caste*, 31.

Brahmanism), which also used an analogy between slavery and caste to argue for governmental action against social inequality.²²⁵ For Phule, however, it is the rhetorical power of the term “slavery” that bolstered his demand that the colonial government intervene to cripple the functioning of caste in society. In *Slavery*, Phule offers a speculative history of India in which the Brahmins originate from Iran, conquer the Indian subcontinent and enslave its indigenous people. In this account, the shudras and atishudras of today are the descendants of the subcontinent’s indigenous population. In *Slavery*, Phule alleges that the Brahmins conquest subdued the subcontinent’s indigenous people through force, “compelled [many] to emigrate,” and carried out instances of “wholesale extermination.”²²⁶ The atrocities that accompanied this conquest were compared to those committed during the conquest of the Americas. As Phule writes, “the cruelties which the European settlers practiced on the American Indians on their first settlement in the new world, had certainly their parallel in India on the advent of the Aryans and their subjugation of the aborigines.”²²⁷ Phule claims that after the military defeat of the indigenous population, Brahmin dominance was institutionalized through “that weird system of mythology, the ordination of caste, and the code of cruel and inhuman laws.”²²⁸ Phule argued that the institutionalization of caste – and its accompanying gradation of privileges and economic exploitation – enchained the native

²²⁵ Jotirao Govindrao Phule, *Slavery (In the Civilised British Government under the Cloak of Brahmanism)* in *Collected Works of Mahatma Jotirao Phule, Vol. 1*, trans. Prof. P.G. Patil (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1991). This work was translated and published in honor of Phule on year of his death-centenary. The plan for its translation from Marathi into English was devised as part of the preparations for Nelson Mandela’s visit to India in 1990. Mandela, as leader of the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, emerged several times during my research as a hero to dalit and dalit-bahujan leaders and activists. The Phule Death-Centenary Central Committee hoped that Mandela would visit Bombay and that they would present him with a copy of Phule’s *Slavery* and Ambedkar’s *Annihilation of Caste*. Unfortunately, Mandela was unable to come to Bombay during his visit.

²²⁶ Phule, *Slavery*, xxxi.

²²⁷ Phule, *Slavery*, xxxi.

²²⁸ Phule, *Slavery*, xxxi.

population in a system of physical and mental slavery. He pointed out that British rule had brought an end to the physical slavery of the shudra and atishudras, but mental slavery, the perpetuation of ignorance and the inculcation of helplessness, continued unhindered under the British Raj. Phule divulged that the purpose of writing *Slavery* was not only to “tell my Shudra brethren how they have been duped by the Brahmin, but also to open the eyes of the Government.”²²⁹ He criticized the colonial state’s education policy, claiming that its focus on higher education perpetuated Brahmin dominance and the subjugation of the masses of India’s indigenous population. As he wrote,

the benevolent British Government have not addressed themselves to the important task of providing education to the said masses... That is why the Shudras continue to be ignorant, and hence, their ‘mental slavery,’ regarding the spurious religious tracts of the Bhats [Brahmins] continues unabated.²³⁰

Phule envisaged that the revelations of his account of India’s past would force the colonial state to “recognize the error of their ways” and “take the glory into their own hands of emancipating my Shudra brethren from the trammels of bondage which the Brahmins have woven around them like the coils of a serpent.”²³¹

Forty years after the abolition of slavery in the British Empire and eight years after its abolition in the United States, Phule harnesses the power of the term “slavery” to draw attention to the situation of the lower castes in India. The equivalence between caste and slavery is central to his rhetorical strategy for changing the colonial state’s thinking on caste. If caste was analogous to slavery, it was not an issue of social or religious tradition, issues theoretically beyond the purview of the colonial state after 1858, but rather was an issue of universal and fundamental rights and thus demanded political

²²⁹ Phule, *Slavery*, xxxvi.

²³⁰ Phule, *Slavery*, l-li.

²³¹ Phule, *Slavery*, xxxviii, xxxix.

intervention. According to Phule, the conditions experienced by lower castes in India and slaves in America were “identical.” “The hardships heaped upon the slaves in America,” he writes, “were also suffered by the depressed and downtrodden people in India at the hands of the Bhats [Brahmins].”²³² Phule notes only one difference between the kinds of subjugation experienced by the two groups: while slaves were “captured” in Africa and then enslaved in America, the lower castes were “conquered” within their homeland and then enslaved. Phule reports that many in Europe and America are now “genuinely ashamed of themselves for this heinous crime [of slavery]” and that “many liberal-minded souls in England and America tried hard to abolish this bad practice by waging war against their oppressors.”²³³ This has yet to take place in India and Phule implores the British government to end caste inequality and exploitation as it had abolished slavery. Here, the liberation of the “depressed and downtrodden” of India becomes part of a historic struggle for the abolition of slavery. Phule dedicates his account of the Brahmin conquest of India and enslavement of its indigenous people to the

good people of the United States as a token of admiration for their sublime disinterested and self-sacrificing devotion in the cause of Negro Slavery; and with an earnest desire, that my countrymen may take their noble example as their guide in the emancipation of the Sudra Brethren from the trammels of Brahmin tradition.²³⁴

In this passage, a perceived similarity in experiences also fosters solidarity with the former slaves in America. Phule writes that “the depressed and downtrodden people of India feel specially happy at this auspicious development [the abolition of slavery], because they alone or the slaves in America have experienced the many inhuman hardships and tortures attendant upon slavery.” Thus, not only does the equivalence

²³² Phule, *Slavery*, xlv.

²³³ Phule, *Slavery*, xlv.

²³⁴ Phule, *Slavery*, Dedication.

between caste and slavery provide a rhetorical strategy with which to appeal to the colonial government, but it also provides for an affective connection between the “depressed and downtrodden” of India and the former slaves of America.

Within the United States, the politically salient connotations of caste were supplemented with academic scholarship on the nature of caste. Caste appears in American sociology as an analytical category free of any reference to India as early as 1904. In an article focused primarily on the analysis of racism, William I. Thomas, a sociologist/social psychologist at the University of Chicago, argues that from a psychological perspective, “caste-feeling” and “race-prejudice” are the same phenomena.²³⁵ Although they are produced through different processes, they are, as he writes, “at the bottom the same thing, both being phases of an instinct of hate.”²³⁶ Thompson writes of racism as a reflex triggered by the very notion of people with different physical characteristics; it is an impermanent and instinctual response to physical difference, rooted in “the tribal stage of society, when solidarity in feeling and action were essential to the preservation of the group.” In Thompson’s assessment, the sentiments associated with caste, however, are generated through social interaction. Caste feeling is produced when the privileges of one group are dependent on the subordination and exploitation of another group. Thompson explains that caste-feelings develop when “the lower caste has either been conquered and captured, or gradually outstripped on account of mental or economic inferiority.”²³⁷ The higher caste must then enforce a sense of their superiority and the other’s inferiority to maintain the power imbalance

²³⁵ William I. Thomas, “The Psychology of Race-Prejudice,” *American Journal of Sociology* 9, no. 5 (March, 1904): 593-611.

²³⁶ William I. Thomas, “The Psychology of Race-Prejudice,” 609.

²³⁷ William I. Thomas, “The Psychology of Race-Prejudice,” 609.

between the groups. Thompson argues that while the feelings that whites have towards blacks are an example of race-prejudice, the sentiment felt in the South is an example of caste-feeling. Northerners have little contact with blacks, but nonetheless, Thomas writes, experience a “horror” and “repulsion” at the difference in skin color. In the South, a system of caste had been established and color indexed rank in this system; it consequently “was impossible for a southern white to think the negro into his own class.”²³⁸

Thompson’s article indicates that by the early twentieth century the social relations and accompanying psychology of caste had already been associated with racism in American sociological theory. Furthermore, caste in Thompson’s article has no association with India. Thompson employs the term without clarification and without any mention of potential objections to its application to the American South. While this application proves controversial later in the century, at this point, caste appears as if it is already a theoretical concept with a sociological meaning unanchored in India. The term is therefore available for the analysis of other geographical areas and social contexts. Although caste does not emerge as a significant concept in the anthropological and sociological study of the American South for another thirty years, this early use of caste indicates that neither the term’s meanings nor the range of its application had yet been fixed.

In 1916, Lala Lajpat Rai, an anti-colonial and nationalist leader, developed an analogy between race and caste in his account of his travels in the United States. In *The United States of America: A Hindu’s Impression and Study*, Rai claimed that the lower castes in India and African Americans in the United States lived under similar conditions.

²³⁸ William I. Thomas, “The Psychology of Race-Prejudice,” 610.

“The Negro is the PARIAH of America” he writes.²³⁹ He acknowledges that the situations in India and the U.S. are not exactly the same, but maintains that the similarities are strong enough to warrant a study of racial problems in the U.S. for the insights it would generate on caste problems in India. His primary purpose in developing the analogy between caste and race, however, seems to be to counter claims of the exceptionalism of India’s caste system and consequently, to repudiate arguments against India’s political advancement that were based on its presumed social backwardness. Rai argues that although “we are led to think that caste distinctions are a peculiarity of Hinduism and are to be found nowhere else in the world,” the underlying principles and social manifestations of discrimination are common to many other societies.²⁴⁰ For example, restrictions on inter-dining and inter-marriage as well as stark disparities in access to justice and education are viewed as elements of both caste-based and race-based inequality: “the worst features of the code of Manu,” Rai argues, “find their parallel in American life.”²⁴¹ For Rai, just as caste in India is attributed to Hinduism, the “color-line” in America is associated with Christianity, albeit a “standing comment on the doctrine of the equality of men and of universal brotherhood preached by Christianity.”²⁴² Rai derides the hypocrisy of “Christian writers” who do not object to the color-line in America, and yet write scathing and defamatory critiques of Hinduism and caste; he claims that popularity of the film *Birth of a Nation* is a “better and surer index of

²³⁹ Lala Lajpat Rai, *The United States of America: A Hindu’s Impression and a Study* (Calcutta: R. Chatterjee, 1916) 77. The English word Pariah comes from “Parayar,” one of the largest dalit communities in South India. The Tamil designation for this group was transfigured into the English word meaning ‘outcaste,’ ‘shunned,’ or ‘despised’ by the early 19th century.

²⁴⁰ Lala Lajpat Rai, *The United States of America*, 387.

²⁴¹ Lala Lajpat Rai, *The United States of America*, 390.

²⁴² Lala Lajpat Rai, *The United States of America*, 392.

Christian feeling in this country than any number of books written by Christian missionaries.”²⁴³

In this way, Rai uses the analogy between caste and the color-line to counter claims that social problems such as caste made India unfit for political autonomy. Rai also claims that the “color line...is not the only caste line in the Western world.”²⁴⁴ He suggests that feudal Europe, with the gradation of privileges and lack of social mobility among the serf, laborer, trader, feudal lord, and priest, operated like a caste system. While the feudal system may have been defeated, Rai points out that “modern industrial system is almost as cruel and crushing.”²⁴⁵ Rai concludes that America is in fact “doubly caste-ridden,” for both the color-line and modern industrial capitalism foster a rigid social structure and function to create discrimination and disabilities for groups of people.²⁴⁶ While the caste system in India was a “social curse and cannot but be denounced in the most unmeasured terms,” it thus was not a “bar to political advancement along the lines of the West.”²⁴⁷ According to Rai, not only was caste in India originally developed as a benevolent and economically efficient system, but even after it was corrupted and power and privileges were assumed by the Brahmins, it still did not approximate the social system created by a “soul-killing industrial system” in the modern West.²⁴⁸

²⁴³ Lala Lajpat Rai, *The United States of America*, 394.

²⁴⁴ Lala Lajpat Rai, *The United States of America*, 396.

²⁴⁵ Lala Lajpat Rai, *The United States of America*, 397.

²⁴⁶ Lala Lajpat Rai, *The United States of America*, 397.

²⁴⁷ Lala Lajpat Rai, *The United States of America*, 398.

²⁴⁸ Lala Lajpat Rai, *The United States of America*, 399. While not an apologist for caste, Rai idealizes the origins of the system and suggests that not only is the current manifestation of caste a perversion of the original but also that “the current ideas on caste are not necessarily part of Hinduism or the Hindu religion.” He also praises the Brahmins of ancient India, noting that “the world has yet to produce a class of high-minded, noble-spirited, self-denying and unselfish leaders of society such as the ancient Brahmins.” Rai, *The United States of America*, 398.

‘Caste’ in Rai’s work – as in Thompson, Phule, and Sumner’s – is not unique to India; caste or its equivalent is found across the world. For all four thinkers, “caste” is rendered analogous to the racial situation in America during slavery and/or post-Emancipation. While the meanings of “caste” and the political impetuses behind the use of the analogy with slavery or racial discrimination vary among Sumner, Phule, and Rai, caste emerges in all three tracts as a social phenomenon that has parallels in other societies; it is not a geographically fixed descriptor, but rather is rendered available for various political arguments. While not overtly political, Thompson’s usage of caste is significant. He does not qualify his use of the term and assumes that the application of caste to areas outside of India is neither ingenious nor controversial. The term’s place among sociological concepts is taken for granted and its utility for social analysis self-evident. Even the similarity between “race-prejudice” and “caste-feeling” is not argued as a unique contribution; rather, it is the proposed common origin of the two in a primordial bio-psychological instinct that is Thompson’s stated contribution.

Ethnographies of Caste in the American South

Caste reappears in American social science theory in the 1930s with the Caste School of Race Relations. In her recent book, *Un/common Cultures*, Kamala Visweswaran discusses the Caste School and its use of “caste” to understand social relations in the American South.²⁴⁹ Visweswaran’s book offers a history of the concept of “culture” in anthropological theory and argues that the discipline has been complicit in creating and reifying rigid notions of cultural difference which then serve as a substitute

²⁴⁹See Kamala Visweswaran, *Un/common Cultures: Racism and the Rearticulation of Cultural Difference* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

for hierarchal notions of race. She draws on the work of the Caste School of Race Relations to provide an example of a moment in the history of anthropology – albeit short-lived – when caste was not deemed a unique cultural phenomenon, but rather, was rendered analogous to racial discrimination. Visweswaran’s compelling account is focused on the genealogy of “culture” in disciplinary anthropology. While her work is suggestive of the implications of this concept for considerations of “caste,” it does not fully explore these implications – let alone those for dalit activism; her narrative seems to most powerfully impact understandings of anthropology’s history. My discussion of the Caste School of Race Relations, however, analyzes its usage of the concept of “caste” because it offers an example of “caste” as a generalizable category. In this way, the work of the Caste School provides an example of the historicity of “caste” as signifying a system of inherited inequality and thus becomes helpful to think with when considering dalit activism in the late twentieth and early twentieth century.

Primarily from the University of Chicago, the Caste School departed from the prevailing Marxian approach to the study of racial divisions in the American South and argued that caste, rather than class, was the most accurate category for understanding social relations in the South. Anthropologist W. Lloyd Warner’s 1936 article “American Caste and Class,” is considered to be the inaugural piece of this school of thought.²⁵⁰ Warner distinguishes between caste and class on the basis of social mobility. While a class structure maintained certain channels for vertical mobility, including interclass

²⁵⁰ W. Lloyd Warner, “American Caste and Caste” *The Journal of Sociology* 42, no. 2 (Sept., 1936): 234-237. Kamala Visweswaran points out that even though Warner’s article is conventionally seen as the foundational piece for the Caste School of Race Relations, sociologists and anthropologists in the 1920s had already employed a comparative approach to the study of caste. She gives the examples of Robert Park’s use of caste in his race-relations theory in 1928 and Alfred Kroeber’s understanding of caste in the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* in 1930. See Kamala Visweswaran, *Un/common Cultures*, 115.

marriage, a caste system inhibited social mobility. In Warner's account, a caste system has two primary characteristics: a system of graded inequality and endogamy.²⁵¹ These two characteristics are deemed responsible for perpetuating social divisions generation after generation.

In an essay published three years later, Warner and fellow anthropologist Allison Davis elaborate on the analytic concept of "caste" in anthropological and sociological inquiry. Warner and Davis offer a "comparative typology of the kinds of ranking found in the societies of the world."²⁵² Caste, with its prohibition of social mobility, and class, with its limited sanction of upward mobility, are two categories in this typology. Warner and Davis define caste as a "rank order of superior-superordinate orders with inferior-subordinate orders which practice endogamy, prevent vertical mobility, and unequally distribute the desirable and undesirable social symbols."²⁵³ Caste and "caste-like structures" are found throughout the world and even in India, they argue, caste is not found in its "classical" or "ideal form."²⁵⁴ Here, caste becomes a heuristic device, a conceptual tool with which social scientists can understand different forms of social relations and organization.

²⁵¹ Warner, "American Caste and Class," 237.

²⁵² W. Llyod Warner and Allison Davis, "A Comparative Study of American Caste," in *Race Relations and the Race Problem: A Definition and Analysis*, ed. Edgar T. Thompson (Durham: Duke University Press, 1939), 218.

²⁵³ W. Llyod Warner and Allison Davis, "A Comparative Study of American Caste," 229.

²⁵⁴ W. Llyod Warner and Allison Davis, "A Comparative Study of American Caste," 229, 231. Warner and Davis write that "one can say that where caste is supposed to be found in its most ideal form, India, it is not a rigidly organized, highly formalistic system with invariant rules of behavior but a variety of social systems which tend to recognize rules of endogamy, of descent, and of certain restrictions on relations which help preserve a not too rigidly organized rank order of relations. It must also be emphasized that constant change is the rule rather than the exception." W. Llyod Warner and Allison Davis, "A Comparative Study of American Caste," 231-232. They note that "caste is found in most of the major areas of the world: this is particularly true of Africa, Asia, and America." W. Llyod Warner and Allison Davis, "A Comparative Study of American Caste," 229.

Warner and Davis contend that while caste in India and the American South are distinct social systems with different historical causes and variations, they are “the same kind of social phenomena.”²⁵⁵ This, they claim, is significant not only for comparative anthropologists and sociologists trying to understand and categorize social life, but also for parties interested in changing the South. Warner and Davis argue that each caste in the South contains various classes, but that caste remains the determining factor in structuring life possibilities for an individual. Furthermore, they insist that the fundamental nature of inequality in the South can only be grasped by first recognizing its social relations as a form of caste. “Caste,” they argue, “is an interrelated system of controls,” and rather than focusing on the particulars of discrimination and violence, such as “prejudice” or “lynchings,” one must discern the interrelations in order to understand the social dynamic.²⁵⁶ Instances of discrimination and inequality are, in Warner and Davis’ terms, “symptoms,” and just as symptoms both reveal and disguise an ailment, a focus on the symptoms of race relations in the South does not offer an understanding of, let alone a resolution to, the real problem. Warner and Davis contend that only once the caste structure of the South is recognized, can the “system as a whole” be understood and “an efficient reorganization of the society” developed.²⁵⁷

Following Warner’s theoretical proposition, a series of ethnographic projects were undertaken by his students or scholars directly influenced by him. Warner had studied anthropology at University of California, Berkeley and had been heavily influenced by British functionalist and structural functionalist approaches, in particular by the work of

²⁵⁵ W. Llyod Warner and Allison Davis, “A Comparative Study of American Caste,” 232.

²⁵⁶ W. Llyod Warner and Allison Davis, “A Comparative Study of American Caste,” 244.

²⁵⁷ W. Llyod Warner and Allison Davis, “A Comparative Study of American Caste,” 244.

Bronislaw Malinowski and Alfred Radcliffe Brown.²⁵⁸ The ethnographies of caste in the American South showed this influence and accordingly, examined society as a discrete, systematically ordered unit and analyzed the relations and mechanisms that enabled the society to function. John Dollard, a professor at Yale who was trained in sociology at the University of Chicago, published *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* in 1937.²⁵⁹ Based on five months of research in “Southerntown,” a pseudonym for a town in the Southeast, Dollard provides a detailed account of the caste practices in this town and the disparities generated by caste structure, in particular, disparities in standards of living and access to resources. Dollard’s analysis focuses on the psychological consequences of caste or, as he puts it, the “emotional structure” that runs parallel to the “formal social structure.”²⁶⁰ This psychosocial approach was also taken by Buell Gallagher, who would later serve as Assistant Commissioner of Higher Education for the Department of Education and also as President of both Tallageda College in Alabama and City College of New York. In 1938, he published *American Caste and the Negro College*, which analyzed the detrimental effects of caste on the psychology of both whites and blacks.²⁶¹ He argued that caste can only be undone through a change in both individual and group perspectives and by revamping of traditional education facilities for blacks. In 1940, Allison Davis and John Dollard published their study on the effects of caste on the development of Southern black children and adolescents. In *Children of Bondage*, Davis and Dollard show how children of the lower caste, black children, have “terrifying experiences” with

²⁵⁸ Allison Davis studied under Bronislaw Malinowski at the London School of Economics.

²⁵⁹ John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (New Haven: Institute of Human Relations, Yale University Press, 1937).

²⁶⁰ Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, 8.

²⁶¹ Buell Gallagher, *American Caste and the Negro College* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938).

the upper caste, the white population.²⁶² They illustrate the damage these experiences inflict on children and the obstacles they present to the growth of an individual. A year later in 1941, Allison Davis along with Burleigh B. Gardener and Mary Gardener published *Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class*, an ethnography based on fieldwork conducted between 1933 and 1935 in rural Mississippi.²⁶³ Davis and his wife, Elizabeth Davis, both African American researchers, lived in the black section of the town and the Gardners, a white couple, lived in the white section. Together the four anthropologists provide a rich account of the practices and institutions that produced and reinforced a caste structure in the community they researched.

In all of these ethnographies, caste emerges as the key mechanism responsible for the distribution of resources, privileges, and opportunities and for the maintenance of social divisions. These accounts depict a social structure in which caste is established at birth and mobility exists within a caste but not across the caste-line; caste is rendered the ultimate determinant of life possibilities. All of the ethnographies cite sexual prohibitions as a key mechanism in the maintenance of a caste society. The researchers pointed out that legal family life could only occur within a caste, but that sexual relations between an upper caste man and a lower caste woman were common; in these situations, caste blocked “legitimate descent” and designated the children of these unions to the lower

²⁶² Allison Davis and John Dollard, *Children of Bondage: The Personality Development of Negro Youth in the Urban South* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1964). *Children of Bondage* was first published in 1940 by the American Council of Education.

²⁶³ Allison Davis, Burleigh B. Gardner, and Mary Gardener, *Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2009). *Deep South* was first published in 1941 by University of Chicago Press.

caste.²⁶⁴ Dollard explains that the upper caste man has sexual access to women of both castes and thus receives a “sexual gain” in the caste structure.²⁶⁵ The lower caste man, however, was deemed “disadvantaged” and a strict taboo policed against sexual relations between a lower caste man and an upper caste woman. As several ethnographers point out, this taboo was enforced in part through the monitoring of the respectability and proper sexual decorum of upper caste women and the threat of physical punishment to a lower caste man.²⁶⁶

The scholarship of the Caste School of Race Relations demonstrated that endogamy and sexual prohibitions effectively blocked mobility between groups in the South and that this lack of mobility was the defining characteristic of the caste structure. The ethnographers illustrated the multiple social exclusions that blocked mobility and consequently also blocked the acquisition of basic needs by restricting physical movement and the accrual and use of money. In *Children of Bondage*, Davis and Dollard discuss how “caste punishments,” which take the form of violence or less pay, are administered to the lower caste for violations of appropriate behavior.²⁶⁷ Davis, Gardner, and Gardner claim that the division between groups is honored through “a very definite code of behavior by which every individual knows how he should act and what he can expect from his relations with the other group”; part of this code of behavior is the “deference, the respectful yielding exhibited by the Negroes in their contact with

²⁶⁴ Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, 63. See also, Davis, Gardner, and Gardner, *Deep South*, 25.

²⁶⁵ Dollard, 134-172.

²⁶⁶ See Davis, Gardner, and Gardner, *Deep South*, 25; See also Davis and Dollard, *Children of Bondage*, 243-244.

²⁶⁷ Davis and Dollard, *Children of Bondage*, 239.

whites.”²⁶⁸ The ethnographers describe how the etiquette of caste is reinforced by all social institutions and how this maintains an unequal distribution of resources between groups and keeps the white caste in a position of power. For example, exclusion from political participation and an educational system that focuses on vocational training – which he argues is a “type of training that would prepare him for, but not beyond, the opportunities of lower-caste status” – also conspire to prevent mobility and uphold the caste system.²⁶⁹

Caste then emerges in these ethnographies as a system that preserves the distinctions in rank and resources that were created under slavery. As Dollard contends, caste has “replaced slavery as a means of maintaining the essence of the old status order in the South.”²⁷⁰ In a similar vein, Gallagher prefaces his study with the story of the *Amistad*. He discusses the founding of the American Missionary Society, which came about from the efforts to defend the mutineers of the *Amistad*. The Society made its central goal the eradication of “slave-holding, polygamy, and caste.”²⁷¹ Gallagher points out that while slavery and polygamy have since been legally abolished, caste was “as firmly entrenched and as powerful as it was a century ago.” He argues that caste has prevented the extension of full citizenship to black Americans and he warns that “caste-controlled America ... presents to the Negro today the same alternatives it held the illicit cargo of the *Amistad* – servitude or mutiny.”²⁷²

²⁶⁸ Davis, Gardner, and Gardner, *Deep South*, 57, 22. See also, Gallagher, *American Caste and the Negro College*, 113-114.

²⁶⁹ Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, 191.

²⁷⁰ Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, 62.

²⁷¹ Gallagher, *American Caste and the Negro College*, preface.

²⁷² Gallagher, *American Caste and the Negro College*, preface.

All of the ethnographies show that the affective structure of caste includes an “idea of uncleanness” and the fear among the white caste that “contact with them [blacks] may be contaminating.”²⁷³ Behavior to avoid pollution – such as avoiding inter-dining, using the same dishes used by the lower caste, or wearing clothing that had been worn by a member of the lower caste – is not deemed a central mechanism of caste, as endogamy is, but rather, an accompanying set of practices that reinforces the logic of separation. To violate these sanctions is to violate caste. For example, as Gallagher writes, to sit at the same table is “to break eating taboos is to defy caste.”²⁷⁴ These sanctions are also evident in the depiction of the spatial separation among the castes. The ethnographies document how the upper and lower castes live in separate neighborhoods and illustrate how spatial segregation is not only a symbolic means of expressing social divisions and subordinating the black caste, but also correlates to stark differences in infrastructure and material amenities.

In a project contemporary to, but distinct from, the scholarship of the Caste School of Race Relations, Gunnar Myrdal, a Swedish economist, also employed the category of ‘caste’ to describe relations between blacks and whites in the South. Myrdal had been commissioned in 1938 by the Carnegie Corporation of New York to study the situation of African Americans in the South. His findings, published as *An American Dilemma* in 1944, argued that intergroup dynamics in America were in sharp contradiction with the “American creed.” Myrdal described this creed as the strong conviction that all people possess rights to equality, liberty, and justice and claimed that the dissonance between the conditions of blacks in the U.S. and these ideals constituted a

²⁷³ Davis, Gardner, and Gardner, *Deep South*, 16.

²⁷⁴ Gallagher, *American Caste and the Negro College*, 95.

grave dilemma for the American people.²⁷⁵ Like many of the anthropologists of the Caste School, Myrdal saw caste as the product of a history of slavery. The caste system, he argued, was “fundamentally a system of disabilities forced by the whites upon the Negroes.”²⁷⁶ For Myrdal, the categories of “race” and “class” could not accurately represent the nature of social relations in the South. For Myrdal, race – understood as an objective, biological fact – was deemed largely meaningless for the “interracial” Southern population and class systems were considered more “open and mobile” than the system in place in the South.²⁷⁷ In his view, a caste system maintained its stratifications by eliminating competition. As Myrdal writes, a caste system “consists of such drastic restrictions of free competition in the various spheres of life that the individual in a lower caste cannot, by any means, change his status.”²⁷⁸

Myrdal granted that the particulars of caste varied in different contexts, but argued that the similarities across contexts were too significant to preclude generalizations. He added that even in the antebellum, slave-holding South and in Hindu India, two contexts where the term “caste” was applied without controversy, there were many regional and historical variations of the phenomenon.²⁷⁹ Myrdal acknowledged that caste is always already an abstraction: it provided the outline of fundamental power relations without reference to historical or social specifics. As Myrdal writes, “concepts are our created instruments and have no other form of reality than in our own usage”; the

²⁷⁵ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964). *An American Dilemma* was first published by Harper & Row in 1944.

²⁷⁶ Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 669.

²⁷⁷ Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 668.

²⁷⁸ Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 674-675. Myrdal writes that caste status is accorded at birth and can only be changed by the lightest of the lower caste who have the opportunity to “pass” as a member of the white caste.

²⁷⁹ Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 668.

determining factor behind the use of a concept is “practicality.”²⁸⁰ For Myrdal and the scholars of Caste School of Race Relations, the concept of ‘caste’ captured an aspect of the social reality that ‘class’ or ‘race’ could not. Caste referenced not just a system of inequality, but an array of social practices and beliefs that together subordinated and denigrated a group of people. Caste conveyed the feeling of being stuck, of having little recourse to justice, and of being denied one’s full humanity. Here, caste relations and the caste system bear a trace of the Indian context, but are rendered sociological descriptors available for the analysis of other social contexts.

One of the strongest challenges to this use of caste and the approach to race relations taken by Myrdal and the Caste School came from Oliver Cox, a sociologist originally from Trinidad who also trained at the University of Chicago. Cox’s work is also significant because of its influence on Louis Dumont, a French cultural anthropologist whose scholarship on caste dominated the field for decades. In a series of articles in the early 1940s and in *Caste, Class, and Race*, published in 1948, Cox argued that caste was unique to India and was not an appropriate category for the analysis of race relations in the South. Social dynamics in the South, he added, could most accurately be described in terms of class, rather than caste. Cox condemned the work of the Caste School of Race Relations and Myrdal for providing what he considered to be a theoretical justification for the violence and inequality of race relations in the U.S. His argument, however, was based on a misreading of Indian caste, a reading which reproduced some of the most pernicious orientalist assumptions about India. In Cox’s account, Indian civilization had functioned harmoniously with little change over the centuries. The absence of universal values in India, Cox claimed, enabled a passive acceptance of caste

²⁸⁰ Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 667.

inequality. India, in Cox's view, was an "assimilated society," in which different segments of society worked together without antagonism despite the persistence of gradations in rights and privileges.²⁸¹ The caste system, Cox argued, produced a culture that is "nonconflictive, nonpathological, ... [and] lacking in aspiration and progressiveness."²⁸²

Cox's analysis of Indian caste did not consider the violence of enforcing caste distinctions.²⁸³ Instead, Cox assumed that the lower castes, lacking a belief in universal values or rights, did not contest their position and that a mutual desire for distance impaired social relations between castes. He insisted that "in India the theory of 'liberty, equality, and fraternity' could have universal meaning only as a weapon against the foreigners who invented it. Even the depressed classes could not conceive of themselves as aspiring to this state."²⁸⁴ The caste system, he contended, created "personalities" that were "normal for that society" and thus, although the caste system produced a structure of inherited differential privileges and disabilities, social relations in India could not be described as discriminatory.²⁸⁵

With this understanding of caste in India, Cox denounced the application of the term to race relations in the American South. He argued that

The caste interpretation of race relations in the South does not see that the intermarriage restriction laws are a social affront to Negroes; it cannot perceive that Negroes are smarting under the Jim Crow laws; it may not recognize the

²⁸¹ Cox, "Race and Caste: A Distinction," 363.

²⁸² Oliver Cox, "Race and Caste: A Distinction" *American Journal of Sociology* 50:5 (March 1945), 360.

²⁸³ Cox writes of Indian caste as a "stable social adjustment...in which the beliefs of a people are in harmony with their practices and in which the social system itself never comes up for critical discussion." Despite Cox's investigations into Indian history and society, he seems to have neglected to research India's long history of anti-caste movements. See Cox, "Race and Caste: A Distinction," 364.

²⁸⁴ Oliver Cromwell Cox, *Caste, Class, and Race: A Study in Social Dynamics* (New York: Modern Reader Paperbacks, 1948) 45.

²⁸⁵ Oliver Cox, "The Modern Caste School of Race Relations," *Social Forces* 21, no. 2 (Dec. 1942) 218-226, 222.

overwhelming aspiration among Negroes for equality of social opportunity; it could never realize that the superiority of the white race is due principally to the fact that it has developed the necessary devices for maintaining incontestable control over the shooting iron; and it does not know that 'race hatred' may be reckoned in terms of white man's interest.²⁸⁶

This evaluation of the Caste School of Race Relations stems from Cox's failure to discern the relations of power that enforce caste in India and as well as his misreading of lower caste subjectivities.²⁸⁷ Cox's argument also relies on the construction of fundamental differences between India and the West. The caste system, he claimed, creates only corporate identities and unlike Western societies, does not allow for individuation. Cox added that the cultural underpinnings of Indian caste are fundamentally different from Christianity.²⁸⁸ In his view, the exceptional character of modern society precluded comparisons between Western social phenomena and caste. Whereas previous societies were "based mainly upon production for a 'sufficiency of existence,'" modern society is an "aggressively exploitative, profit-making system."²⁸⁹ Thus, for Cox, race relations could only be analyzed in terms of "class exploitation" and the capitalist system.²⁹⁰

Although Cox discussed race in terms of social relations, he also collapsed the category into a biological essence to further discredit the analogy between racially-divided and caste-divided societies. In an argument that foreshadows future arguments against the analogy between race and caste, Cox maintained that the nature of inheritance was substantially different in systems of racial and caste stratification. While caste was a system of inherited "cultural or personality attributes," racial inheritance was physical; it

²⁸⁶ Cox, "The Modern Caste School of Race Relations," 221.

²⁸⁷ Cox writes that "In the caste system, group inequality is a social virtue appreciated by the whole hierarchy of castes." See Cox, *Caste, Class, and Race*, 24.

²⁸⁸ Cox, *Class, Caste, and Race*, 45.

²⁸⁹ Cox, "Race and Caste: A Distinction," 360.

²⁹⁰ Cox, "Race and Caste: A Distinction," 360.

was the inheritance of physical characteristics which visibly marked an individual in a way that caste did not.²⁹¹ In neither case did Cox conceive of heredity as the inheritance of social relations, an embodied identity, or inequality and disadvantage.

Caste in Typologies of Inequality

While the Caste School of Race Relations was not active after the mid-1940s, the analogy between caste-based discrimination and racial discrimination continued to be discussed, utilized, and critiqued among anthropologists and sociologists. In 1959, Gerald Berreman, an anthropologist trained at Cornell University who later taught at University of California, Berkeley, delivered a paper at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association on the similarities between caste relations in India and race relations in the U.S. Later published in the *American Journal of Sociology*, Berreman's paper draws on ethnographic research conducted in Sirkanda, a village in northern Uttar Pradesh and compares the relations between "touchable" and "untouchable" castes in India to relations between whites and blacks in the American South.²⁹² Berreman had spent two years, 1953 to 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama before beginning his graduate studies. During this time, Berreman bore witness to the social effects of events such as the Supreme Court's ruling prohibiting racial segregation in public schools, the formation of the White Citizens Council in Alabama, and the racial integration of the military. Berreman investigated illegal segregation at the Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama and an incident of racially motivated charges against a black soldier at the base. He acknowledged that these experiences affected his view of caste when he encountered it

²⁹¹ Cox, *Class, Caste, and Race*, 457.

²⁹² Gerald D. Berreman, "Caste in India and the United States" *The American Journal of Sociology* 66:2 (Sept., 1960).

during his doctoral research in India. He writes that though he was struck by the differences between the situation in the South and that in India, he was “more impressed by the similarities.”²⁹³ Since the similarities could not be attributed to parallel historical processes, he came to recognize that, as he writes, “birth ascribed stratification has common consequences for the people who live it and the societies which harbor it.”²⁹⁴ Berreman renders caste relations and race relations analogous by stripping them of their “cultural details” and focusing on their core processes and structure.²⁹⁵ He notes that while any social phenomena can be defined narrowly enough to be location and time specific, cross-cultural comparisons can only be made through abstractions and generalizations. He explains that within India there is considerable variation in the details of caste. Thus, even the defining of “Indian caste” requires the evacuation of variations and specificities and the abstraction of general principles. Accordingly, he offers a definition of the ideal type of the caste system: a “hierarchy of endogamous divisions in which membership is hereditary and permanent” and concludes that race relations in the American South constitute a caste system.²⁹⁶ Berreman writes that both social structures are maintained by the imposition of “rigid rules of avoidance between castes” and “powerful sanctions” by the higher castes on the lower castes.²⁹⁷ The lower castes in both systems are obligated to perform an etiquette of deference, while the upper castes benefit from economic and sexual gains. Berreman explicitly confronts Cox’s assumptions about caste in India and his argument against the application of the concept

²⁹³ Gerald Berreman, “Introduction,” *Caste and Other Inequities: Essays on Inequality* (Meerut: Folklore Institute, 1979) xiii.

²⁹⁴ Berreman, “Introduction,” *Caste and Other Inequalities*, xiii.

²⁹⁵ Berreman, “Caste in India and the United States,” 122.

²⁹⁶ Berreman, “Caste in India and the United States,” 120.

²⁹⁷ Berreman, “Caste in India and the United States,” 122, 123.

to the American South. He condemns the assumption that the caste system in India is the stable and “nonconflictive” social structure Cox describes. He explains that the lower caste feel deep resentment at their caste position but do not express this resentment publicly. Berreman recounts witnessing many private expressions of this anger and discontent during his field research. He concludes on the basis of his cross-cultural analysis of caste in India and the American South that “no group of people is content to be low in a caste hierarchy – to live a life of inherited deprivation and subjection – regardless of the rationalizations offered them by their superiors or constructed by themselves.”²⁹⁸

Oliver Cox responded to Berreman’s article in a letter to the editor of the *American Journal of Sociology*. He reaffirmed his argument about the distinctiveness of Indian caste and again argued that caste divisions could only be understood through the logic of Hinduism.²⁹⁹ He criticized Berreman for misconceiving the system and for underestimating the role of religion and religiosity in Indian caste as well as its difference from Christianity in the U.S. He erroneously stated that India had not seen a “progressive social movement for betterment among outcaste castes” nor did it present “any tendencies for radical social change in the caste system.”³⁰⁰ Cox reasserted that the comparison between race relations and caste relations served to obfuscate the social reality of both and that the caste system was a social phenomenon unique to India. Berreman in turn responded with another letter to the editor in which he proposed that that Cox’s “view of

²⁹⁸ Berreman, “Caste in India and the United States,” 127.

²⁹⁹ Oliver C. Cox, “Berreman’s ‘Caste in India and the United States’” *American Journal of Sociology* 66: no. 5 (Mar., 1961).

³⁰⁰ Cox, “Berreman’s ‘Caste in India and the United States,’” 511.

static Indian caste” was analogous to a “White Citizen Council member’s view of race relations ‘in the good old days.’”³⁰¹

Cox’s disagreement with both the Caste School of Race Relations and Gerald Berreman foreshadows debates about the scope and definition of caste that, decades later, would become of utmost significance to dalit international activism. The question of whether caste was unique to India, however, does not disappear from the intellectual landscape of American sociology and anthropology. For example, George de Vos, an anthropologist trained at the University of Chicago, co-edited a volume on caste and race in 1966.³⁰² De Vos had researched the situation of the Burakumin, an outcaste community in Japan, and was struck by the similarities among the situation of Burakumin in Japan, dalits in India, and African Americans in the United States. The volume included essays from scholars of Japan and India, two of which were authored by Gerald Berreman.³⁰³ The volume worked off the premise that, as stated in the introduction, “from the viewpoint of comparative sociology or social anthropology, and from the view point of human psychology, racism and caste attitudes are one and the same phenomenon.”³⁰⁴ It criticized the assumed biological basis of race and argued that caste and race can only be viewed as social phenomenon: Whereas racism is rooted in a “secularized pseudo-

³⁰¹ Gerald D. Berreman, “Rejoinder” *American Journal of Sociology* 66:5 (Mar., 1961), 511.

³⁰² George de Vos and Hiroshi Wagatsuma, eds. *Japan’s Invisible Race: Caste in Culture and Personality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966). Almost two decades later, de Vos co-authored a report on the Burakumin and other marginalized minority groups in Japan. See George A. de Vos and William O. Wetherall, “Japan’s Minorities: Burakumin, Koreans, Ainu and Okinawans,” *Minority Rights Group*, No 3, 1983. Interestingly, while this report repeatedly compares the situation of the Burakumin to that of African Americans and the black minority in England and France, it does not compare the Burakumin to the dalits of India nor does it use the term caste or outcaste to describe the social predicament of the Burakumin.

³⁰³ See Gerald D. Berreman “Structure and Function of Caste Systems” and “Concomitants of Caste Organization” in *Japan’s Invisible Race: Caste in Culture and Personality*, eds. George de Vos and Hiroshi Wagatsuma, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).

³⁰⁴ George de Vos and Hiroshi Wagatsuma, “The Problem: Caste and Race, A Syncretic View” in *Japan’s Invisible Race: Caste in Culture and Personality*, eds. George de Vos and Hiroshi Wagatsuma (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), xx.

scientific biological mythology,” caste ideologies are based on “pseudo-historical mythology.”³⁰⁵ Both are thus socially manufactured.

De Vos had approached the Ciba Foundation in 1964 with an idea for an international conference on caste and race in 1964. The conference, held in 1966, was chaired by Gunnar Myrdal and brought anthropologists, sociologists, historians, and social psychologists together to discuss caste and race relations through a comparative perspective. Its participants included Gerald Berreman and Louis Dumont, among others.³⁰⁶ Given the same year as the French publication of *Homo Hierarchicus*, Dumont’s paper, “Caste: A Phenomenon of Social Structure or an Aspect of Indian Culture,” argued that caste was uniquely Indian and could only be understood through the logic of Hindu culture.³⁰⁷ Dumont claimed that caste could not be abstracted from the whole of culture and turned into a category for general or comparative social analysis, an argument very similar to that made by Oliver Cox almost twenty years earlier. Caste, in Dumont’s account, was not simply a system of social divisions; rather, these divisions were implicated in a larger cultural structure. This structure was brought together through an ideology of hierarchy motivated by a religiously inspired opposition between pure and impure. In Dumont’s view, terms like “discrimination” were thus inapplicable to caste structures. Like Cox, Dumont concluded that the classification of caste and race relations under the same analytic category was detrimental to the understanding of both.

³⁰⁵ George de Vos and Hiroshi Wagatsuma, “The Problem: Caste and Race, A Syncretic View,” xx.

³⁰⁶ The papers from this symposium are published in Anthony de Reuck and Julie Knight, eds. *Caste and Race: Comparative Approaches, a Ciba Foundation Volume*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company: 1967).

³⁰⁷ Louis Dumont, “Caste: A Phenomenon of Social Structure or an Aspect of Indian Culture,” *Caste and Race: Comparative Approaches*, eds., Anthony de Reuck and Julie Knight (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967).

Dumont directly addressed the work of the Caste School of Race Relations and Oliver Cox in “Caste, Racism and ‘Stratification’: Reflections of a Social Anthropologist,” an essay first published in French in 1960, six years before *Homo Hierarchicus*.³⁰⁸ In the essay, Dumont takes on the question of whether “caste” exists outside of India. He directly addresses the work of Lloyd Warner, Allison Davis, and Gunnar Myrdal and argues that Indian caste can only be understood through a structural analysis of the whole of Hindu culture.³⁰⁹ The Caste School of Race Relations, he claims, had severed features, such as endogamy and lack of vertical social mobility, from the whole of culture to define caste. Borrowing from structural linguistic analysis, Dumont argued that these features were implicated in relationships within the cultural structure and derived their meaning from these relationships. He warned that these same features could have different meanings if differently positioned and that sociologists needed to be more attentive to the ideology that created the relationships between different cultural features. For example, Dumont argues that endogamy can have different meanings in different cultures and that the Caste School of Race Relations erred by confusing endogamy as a “fact of behavior” rather than a “fact of value.”³¹⁰ Dumont adds that a caste system can only exist if “the entire society must without remainder be made up of a set of castes.”³¹¹ By this, Dumont suggests the society must include multiple castes and

³⁰⁸ “Caste, Racism and ‘Stratification’: Reflections of a Social Anthropologist” was translated and included as Appendix A in the first English edition of *Homo Hierarchicus* in 1970.

³⁰⁹ Dumont explains the presence of caste or caste-like phenomena among non-Hindu groups in India by citing the effects of proximity to Hindus. He writes in chapter ten of *Homo Hierarchicus*, “Comparison: Are Their Castes Among Non-Hindus and Outside India?” that Muslim and Christian groups in India “cannot be regarded as independent of the environment in which it is set, as really constituting a society by itself, however its own values push it in this direction.” See Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 210.

³¹⁰ Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, 254.

³¹¹ Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, 215.

that a society with a bi-partite division, such as that in the American South or Japan, cannot be described as a caste society.

Alongside his critique of the Caste School of Race Relations, Dumont also praises Oliver Cox for his “admirable insight” on the issue of caste.³¹² He notes that although Cox was working with secondary and tertiary sources, he still accurately made “the essential point: the Indian system is a coherent social system based on the principle of inequality, while the American ‘colour bar’ contradicts the egalitarian system within which it occurs.”³¹³ Thus, in Dumont’s view, a dramatic divergence in essential cultural values and ideologies – equality in America and hierarchy in India – precludes the use of the same analytic concept for both societies.

This sketch of the different usages of caste and their surrounding debates reveal certain general themes in the meanings ascribed to the caste system. When caste is defined as exclusive to the Indian subcontinent or Hinduism, it appears as a scripture-based ideal that is, for the most part, stable throughout India’s history. In these accounts, caste inequality does not produce dissent or discord and Indian history is largely static. While caste is seen as in symbiosis with the values of Indian society, race relations are in sharp contrast to the values of American society. In this assessment, reform movements such as Bhakti, Buddhism, and non-Brahmanism are ignored in both evaluations of the caste system and in narratives of Indian history. In addition, any change to the system or even the desire to change the system is attributed to an external force, namely, colonialism and the Western, universal ideologies accompanying it. These accounts also

³¹² Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, 254.

³¹³ Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, 255.

make a distinction between an apparent biological basis to race relations and the strictly cultural ideology behind caste relations.

If caste is deemed a general phenomenon and accordingly, a category in anthropological and sociological theory, it is defined through a synchronic analysis of its features. Differences in the historical production of these features are acknowledged, but do not factor significantly into the evaluation of the social structure. Among the features given the most attention in this scheme are restrictions on mobility and sexual prohibitions, such as endogamy and upper caste men's sexual access to lower caste women. Here, caste formations most often refer to bi-partite divisions of society, with one marginalized, outcaste group and a general, unmarked population. These accounts attempt an understanding of the psychological harms of caste, on both the upper and lower castes, and also detail the practices that constitute caste as a lived reality. The caste system does not generate harmonious social functioning in these assessments, but rather, breeds conflict and discord. When conflict is incorporated into understandings of the caste system, such as in the speech of Charles Sumner or the scholarship of the Caste School of Race Relations and Gerald Berreman, the struggle against the caste system is also rendered part of a global and universal struggle equality and dignity.

Gerald Berreman points out that the issue at hand is essentially one of definition in the social sciences. Caste can be defined to restrict its application to India; alternatively it can also be defined more broadly so that it describes, as Berreman writes, "societies that bear no historical connection to India."³¹⁴ Either conceptualization could stand, as long as it is applied consistently. Why then have a broader definition?

³¹⁴ Gerald D. Berreman, "Structure and Function of Caste Systems" George de Vos and Hiroshi Wagatsuma, eds. *Japan's Invisible Race: Caste in Culture and Personality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966) 277.

According to Berreman, limiting the definition of caste to Hinduism or India precludes cross-cultural analysis and “cross-cultural comparisons,” he argues, “are essential to progress in social science.”³¹⁵ He writes that his own cross-cultural comparison of caste relations in India and the United States have led to the conclusion that “no group of people is content to be low in a caste hierarchy, to live a life of inherited deprivation and subjection, regardless of the rationalizations offered them by their superiors or constructed by themselves.”³¹⁶

For Berreman, cross-cultural analysis revealed a social universal – a desire for a life of dignity, security, and equality – that had been disputed by the privileged and powerful of both societies. The definition of caste, and indeed any sociological term, carries political implications. In later chapters, I discuss how dalit activists have reflexively conceptualized the category of caste. By arguing for an analytic concept of caste unanchored in India and Hinduism, dalit transnational activism has framed the movement against caste as part of the universal struggle for human rights. This conceptualization of caste not only had the promise of cross-cultural comparison, but also enabled cross-border political alliances. A broader definition of caste has enabled dalit activists to frame their struggles as part of a global movement for human rights and forge connections with other social justice movements.

As Appadurai stated in “Theory in Anthropology: Center and Periphery,” the connection between places and concepts in anthropological theory is not without political

³¹⁵ Berreman, “Structure and Function of Caste Systems,” 277.

³¹⁶ Berreman, “Structure and Function of Caste Systems,” 296.

significance. The close association between caste and India has not only impeded anthropological inquiry, but has also led to a warped representation of India as an unchanging society with a rigid, religiously-inspired hierarchy. What Appadurai did not appreciate, however, was that the conceptualization of 'caste' has had other political implications as well. For the subjects of caste, the association between concept and place has been more than a theoretical problem; it has also been of enormous practical concern. By delinking caste and India and arguing that caste was a category of social relations found across the world, dalit activists have been able to render caste inequality a universal wrong. In this chapter, I have provided a deeper history to the conceptualization of caste – that of caste as inherited inequality – that recurs in dalit human rights campaigns. In doing so, I have tried to illustrate the power and politics behind the production and use of social scientific categories. The sense and reference of 'caste' has a long political and intellectual history and remains of great significance to the many who use the concept to express and negotiate the structural impediments to their experience of equality and dignity.

Chapter 4

The NCDHR's *Black Paper*: Countering State Neglect with Dalit Human Rights

Since at least the early 1980s, dalit activists have turned to the institutional and discursive complex of human rights to seek redress to caste inequality. They have appealed the United Nation treaty bodies and lobbied international human rights organizations to recognize caste discrimination as a human rights violation. This turn to rights was given institutional form in India with the creation of the NCDHR in 1998. The NCDHR and dalit human rights activism, however, have faced considerable obstacles. First, the Indian state's official laws against caste discrimination made the claim of human rights violations largely untenable. The NCDHR also faced resistance from the government of India, which maintained that caste-discrimination was an internal issue, beyond the purview of international law, and that the state's laws and policies were sufficient evidence of its commitment to the betterment of its Scheduled Caste population.

In this chapter, I analyze the issues surrounding the use human rights by dalit activists through a discussion of the formation of the NCDHR and its articulation of human rights. I begin by offering an overview of the Indian state's laws and policies regarding caste discrimination and then turn to the inaugural campaign of the NCDHR. This initial campaign, published as the *Black Paper*, demonstrated that caste was a grave problem in India, despite its laws and policies, and in addition, claimed that caste discrimination and violence could only occur at such epidemic proportions with state complicity. This complicity was argued by citing the poor implementation of laws, the

collusion of agents of the state in violence against dalit, and the withdrawal of the state from its responsibilities to protect and advance its more vulnerable citizens, a contention I conceptualize as the violence of neglect. While arguing against caste discrimination in the language of human rights, the NCDHR also challenged the liberal precepts undergirding the principles of rights. The NCDHR laid out its conceptualization of human rights in its “Campaign Manifesto” that was included as part of the *Black Paper*. The NCDHR’s conceptualization of universal rights critiqued the scope of acceptable liberty in liberal theory, challenged the state-centered approach implicit in both the theory and practice of human rights, highlighted the need for positive obligations from the state, and underscored the violence of neglect. In short, the NCDHR deemed the existing framework of human rights both inadequate and potentially injurious.

The Promise of the Constitution and the “Caste-minded” State

In a section of his autobiography titled “Atoning for the Injustices,” Martin Luther King, Jr. compared the state in India and in the United States with respect to its work towards ending discrimination and empowering its vulnerable minority populations.³¹⁷ He pointed out that although both countries had federal laws against discrimination, the government in India had taken on an active role in facilitating the integration of dalits. “India,” he wrote, “appeared to be integrating its untouchables faster than the United States was integrating its Negro minority.” Furthermore, in his view, the state in India had made the integration and advancement of this community “a matter of moral and

³¹⁷ Martin Luther King Jr, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carso (New York, Warner Books, 1998, 132-134).

ethical responsibility.”³¹⁸ He referred to the constitutional provisions for reservations in higher education and noted that Nehru had described these reservations as “our way of atoning for the centuries of injustices we have inflicted upon these people.” King lamented that the U.S. had not yet “reached this level of morality” and that it still needed to develop “its own ways for atoning for the injustices she has inflicted upon her Negro citizens.”

King correctly identified the role of the state as described in the Indian Constitution. The Constitution disavowed the perpetuation of privilege and discrimination and also established an active role for the state in advancing its historically disadvantaged groups to equality. In the late colonial period, as Anupama Rao has shown, “equality” was interpreted in relation to manifest inequities and was ingeniously rearticulated by B.R. Ambedkar as *caste equality*.³¹⁹ The Directive Principles of the Indian Constitution call for a state that would be a proactive agent for social change and would have positive obligations towards its most vulnerable citizens: “The State shall *promote* with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, and shall *protect* them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation” (emphasis mine).³²⁰ Although “promoting” the interests of certain sections of civil society and “protecting” select populations may stray from classical interpretations of the role of the state under liberal constitutionalism, the Indian state – as King accurately imparts – was given the task of rectifying past injustices in order to produce a future of greater equality. Legal scholar

³¹⁸ King, 132.

³¹⁹ See Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

³²⁰ Article 46, Part IV, Directive Principles of State Policy, The Constitution of India.

Marc Galanter contends that while this represented “a deliberate departure from formal norms of equality,” it was pursued “in order to offset the historical inequalities of these groups.”³²¹

The Constitution of India provides for several measures to rectify caste inequalities. Article 17 abolishes untouchability and criminalizes the imposition of disabilities associated with the practice, and Article 17 promises the right to life and liberty, which the Supreme Court has construed as including the right to be free from degrading treatment. The Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955 – which punishes prohibitions on entering places of worship and sharing water supplies, among other practices – was enacted to better enforce Article 17. The Protection of Civil Rights Cell, 1973 amended the 1955 Act because the latter had not yielded convictions. In 1989, the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act was passed and included more severe regulations against untouchability. The Act categorized both symbolic degradation and physical violence as caste “atrocities” and saw the growth of a bureaucratic complex to monitor caste violence.³²² The promotion of the political participation of dalits is addressed in Articles 300 and 332, which call for a reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes in the Lok Sabha and in the state legislative assemblies. Article 15 (4) empowers the state to take additional measures for the advancement for disadvantaged groups. This article has supported the reservation of seats for members of the Scheduled Castes in government employment and higher education, measures which are overseen by the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Tribes and the Ministry of Welfare of individual state governments.

³²¹ Marc Galanter, *Competing Equalities: Law and the Backward Classes in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 39.

³²² See Rao, *The Caste Question*.

While the Constitution provides for special measures directed at the development of the Scheduled Castes and federal legislation includes comprehensive laws punishing the imposition of untouchability, activists contend that the state remains implicated in rights violations. They argue that agents of the state and the criminal justice system remain biased against dalits and that cases of violence and discrimination are underreported and often go unregistered by the police when they are reported. This was explained to me early in my research when I met a dalit scholar and activist in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. She worked with dalit labor migrants and refugees from village violence that had come to live and work in the city. After describing the continued occurrence of untouchability and the prevalence of caste-based violence and discrimination in India, she lamented the ineffectiveness of the state structures meant to protect and advance dalits. “All the systems in India – the police, the courts, the government – are caste-minded,” she said, “So, where can we go for help.”³²³ In her view, the turn to human rights activism was precipitated by the failings of a legal system that stalled justice and a state that was apathetic to the plight of millions of its dalit citizens.

Many activists pointed out that in addition to its failure to live up to its promises, the state was also susceptible to reproducing hierarchal social differentiation. Martin Macwan, co-founder of the NCDHR, explained to me how caste beliefs can skew the interpretation of law:

So, we have a case where a dalit boy of ten or something was overrun by a truck and he died. It was an accident. Now, they [the boy’s family] claimed a case for compensation and the insurance claim came to a judge, district judge. Now the company was willing to pay but the judge says...that much money should not be paid. So, he wrote in the judgment. ‘He’s a boy, who is an untouchable. His

³²³ Interview with Scholar/Activist, Ahmedabad, India July 2008.

parents are laborers. No way he is going to be a doctor. No way he is going to be an engineer. He would have lived a life of laborers. So, even if I give him 10,000 rupees, his parents will be happy about it.’ When the company was going to give him one lakh [100,000]. The judge thinks that 10,000 is enough. In another story, a judge in Uttar Pradesh, washed his entire courthouse with holy water from Ganges river when the previous occupant was a dalit, a dalit judge. So we think that a judge can give justice, but we are not looking at a person’s socialization in the garb of the judiciary.³²⁴

In the story Macwan shared, there was no universal standard by which justice for the loss of life and the trauma of losing a child could be conceived. Instead caste status acted as the determining variable in calculating the cost of death and the value of life. Caste ideology, not the abstract humanism that grounds law in a modern democratic republic, informed the idea of justice. As Mr. Macwan argued, the “the caste system is more powerful than the Constitution.”

The Founding of the NCDHR and the “Ambedkar Yuga”

The internationalization of dalit issues and the use of human rights as a language of both protest and demands has been framed as a response to the ineffectiveness of the Indian Constitution and state policies in annihilating caste inequality. Dalit activists had courted international human rights organizations for over a decade when Human Rights Watch (HRW) agreed to undertake a report on caste-discrimination and violence in India. HRW’s project, funded by a grant from the Ford Foundation, subsequently provided the infrastructure for the founding of a national human rights advocacy organization for dalits, the NCDHR. The NCDHR was founded in 1998 after a series of three meetings arranged by HRW brought together dalit activists from across India. These meetings were organized by HRW to get assistance in identifying the most pressing issues facing dalit

³²⁴ Martin Macwan, interview by author, August 2009, Village Nani Devti, Gujarat, India.

communities. The activists that gathered for the meetings were keenly aware of the importance of a national organization for internationalizing dalit issues, and mobilization around the HRW report was instrumental in helping develop the NCDHR.³²⁵ In addition, part of the Ford Foundation grant to HRW was earmarked for the support of dalit activism at both the national and international levels.

The NCDHR was founded with an institutional structure consisting of one national committee and ten state-level committees. Now housed in a building in northeast New Delhi, the NCDHR established a branch for dalit women's rights – the All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM) [All India Dalit Women's Rights Forum] – in 2006. AIDMAM was launched after four of the founding figures of the NCDHR recognized, in the words of one activist, “that the leadership of the dalit movement was in the hands of men” and that dalit organizations “were not too gender sensitive.”³²⁶ At the time of my fieldwork, the AIDMAM took up the second floor of the building. The main office was a floor above and consisted of several rooms in which researchers and activists worked in cubicles on various projects, ranging from outreach to international organizations to preparing survivors of violence to present their stories as testimony at conferences. The ground floor included a library and selection of the NCDHR's projects and campaigns; this center for research and documentation was initiated after the 2001 campaign at WCAR.

From its inception, the organization adopted “a human rights perspective” for dalit issues. This “perspective” was one which analyzed the issues confronting dalits in terms of human rights conventions and moved away from an understanding that

³²⁵ Clifford Bob, “‘Dalit Rights are Human Rights’: Caste Discrimination, International Activism, and the Construction of a New Human Rights Issue” *Human Rights Quarterly* 29 (2007): 167-193, 179.

³²⁶ Interview with activist, September, 2009, New Delhi.

explained the situation of dalits in terms of a Hindu caste system. It avoided cultural or religious framings and articulated caste violence and discrimination as human rights violations. This perspective dismantled a sense of the ‘exceptionalism’ and ‘uniqueness’ of caste discrimination and described the structural position and experiences of dalits as akin to other marginalized communities around the globe. A change in the addressees of dalit complaints also accompanied the adoption of a language of human rights: activists now addressed a global public of concerned individuals and international human rights organizations in addition to the Indian nation-state and Indian public.

The founding of the NCDHR was initially criticized by other human rights organizations in India, who claimed that the inclusion of a caste analysis into an already universalist perspective was unnecessary and divisive.³²⁷ Despite this criticism, activists launched the NCDHR with a year of various protests aimed at increasing the visibility of rights violations and at challenging the government’s complacency on dalit issues. Among the activities planned for this year was a national public hearing on human rights violations; a signature campaign with the goal of collecting 1 *crore*, or 10 million, signatures from across the country and submitting them to the Indian Prime Minister and the U.N. High Commissioner of Human Rights; and the dissemination of the *Black Paper* – a booklet which described the condition of dalits in India and laid out their demands.

The NCDHR’s *Black Paper* consisted of a series of factsheets and a manifesto which laid out the Campaign’s conception of rights. The document was framed as an articulation of dalits’ “anguish,” “anger,” “protest,” and “identity,” and was intended to serve as an “instrument of campaign,” “symbol of assertion,” “cry of appeal,” and

³²⁷ Dr. SDJM Prasad, NCDHR, interview by author, September 2009, Delhi. Dr. Prasad stated that now all of the major human rights organizations in India are supportive of the NCDHR.

“charter of right.”³²⁸ Addressed to the Government of India, the United Nations, and international human rights organizations, the *Black Paper* laid out the NCDHR’s specific demands of each entity. It asked that the Indian state ensure the protection of dalits from violence and discrimination, provide dalits with both the land and financial resources to improve their social condition, and produce a White Paper on atrocities against dalits and the implementation of reservations since 1947. The NCDHR asked the U.N. to appoint a Special Rapporteur or Working Group on untouchability in Asia and explicitly include caste as a form of descent-based discrimination. In order to achieve these goals, it requested the international human rights community to support their demands and mobilize around the goal of eradicating untouchability. The *Black Paper’s* central appeal, an appeal made to all three entities, was for the immediate recognition of “dalit rights as human rights.” The inclusion of the United Nations and international human rights organizations indicates a use of a politics of shaming; by addressing institutions beyond the state and deriding the Indian state to an international forum, activists used a threat to India’s international reputation to demand for both more accountability and action.³²⁹ Coming shortly after the economic reforms of the early 1990, addressing entities outside of the state also alludes to another grievance of dalit activists: the enervation of the state’s agency with economic liberalization.

The recent passing of the fiftieth anniversary of Indian independence in August 1997 and the upcoming fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in December 1998 provided a symbolic occasion for the inauguration of the NCDHR. The symbolism of time is furthered with the announcement in the *Black Paper*

³²⁸NCDHR, “What is this Black Paper,” in *The Black Paper* (Secuderabad, India, 1998).

³²⁹ See Thomas Keenan, “Moblizing Shame,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 102, no. 2/3 (2004):435-449.

that the next millennium would be declared the “Ambedkar Yuga.” The Ambedkar Yuga was described as a time in which dalits would assert themselves “as Dalits shedding all our other identities that have been made to cling to us through the compulsions of history.”³³⁰ This era would see the amelioration of caste-induced suffering and the revitalization of dalit culture. The very characterization of this better future as the “Ambedkar Yuga” meshes secular time and Hindu conceptions of temporality. This allows the NCDHR to replace the Brahmanical dystopic notion of the Kali Yuga, the age of moral degeneration, with a vision of the next millennium as a time when the struggle for dalit human rights and Ambedkar’s ideals would be actualized.³³¹

The future regeneration of dalit culture imagined by the Ambedkar Yuga was premised on the notion that dalits once constituted a culturally and ethnically homogenous group that was indigenous to the subcontinent, but was conquered, divided, and ranked into a caste system by a foreign group. Dalits were conceptualized in the *Black Paper* as “the earth dependent indigenous people” that have suffered centuries of “subjugation.” The NCDHR predicted that in the future – in the Ambedkar Yuga – dalits would “take pride in asserting our indigenous culture which was wantonly and systematically destroyed by the invading alien culture.” This future was projected as the “affirmation of the submerged aspirations of these people of this land for Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, Self-respect, Self-reliance”; it was the revival of dalits’ ancient, egalitarian culture, a culture which also existed “in defiance of the existing normative

³³⁰ NCDHR, “What is this Black Paper?”

³³¹ Gail Omvedt analyzes the significance of the kali yuga as a “guiding metaphor” for Brahmanic understandings of history. In her discussion of anti-caste utopian visions, she analyzes the resignification of time by anti-caste thinkers in their imagining of a more socially just future. See Gail Omvedt, *Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anticaste Intellectuals* (New Delhi: Navayana Press, 2008).

order” and constituted a “counter-culture statement of the subaltern groups.”³³² The NCDHR internationalized the significance of its campaign by proclaiming that the Ambedkar Yuga would be “an era when Ambedkar will be declared as one of the World Leaders of oppressed peoples” and “an era which has relevance not only for the Dalits but for the whole of humanity.”³³³ In this passage, the NCDHR projected a unity among the world’s “oppressed peoples” and asserted the significance of its message for the restructuring of power relations across the globe.

The NCDHR framed its objectives as the ‘submerged aspirations’ of dalits. While the organization’s campaign boasted a universal resonance to its message, it also perpetuated the notion of dalits’ difference from other Indians. Dalits appeared in this campaign as a distinct ethnic group in India with distinct historical origins. While this “ethnicization” held possibilities for the unity of dalits across South Asia, it also erased important differences in national, regional, linguistic, class, and religious identity and in power differentials among dalit groups.³³⁴ Furthermore, this conceptualization of dalits represented a significant departure from the convictions of the campaign’s key symbol, Ambedkar: while Ambedkar argued for dalit difference in terms of political interest, he rejected the idea that dalits were an indigenous group. Ambedkar always maintained that caste distinctions were not based in racial or ethnic distinctions. In Ambedkar’s account, untouchability was a punitive measure against those groups that refused to convert to Brahmanism after the fall of Buddhism; it was not the result of the conquest of a foreign group. While Ambedkar’s account did establish an ancient, egalitarian culture for the

³³² NCDHR, “What is this Black Paper?”

³³³ NCDHR, “What is this Black Paper?”

³³⁴ Deepa Reddy discusses how contemporary dalit activism’s rearticulation of caste resembles the sociological concept of ethnicity. See Deepa Reddy, “The Ethnicity of Caste,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 78:3 (Summer 2005) 543-584.

ancestors of today's dalits – that of Buddhism – this culture was not unique to dalits, but rather was shared by the entire subcontinent. While the claim of indigeneity then departed from Ambedkar's message, it does correspond with the claims of other anti-caste leaders, such as Jotirao Phule and E. V. Ramaswami (Periyar). In addition, this claim proved expedient for it aligned dalit rights with human rights movements by indigenous groups in the Americas and Australia.

Dalit Human Rights: A Critique of State Neglect and the Violence of Inaction

The NCDHR's representations of dalit history coupled with its use of the modern language of rights cast the Ambedkar Yuga as an iteration of the past as well as the fulfillment of political modernity. The NCDHR used the terminology of international agreements on human rights to describe both the adversities facing dalits as well as their future resolution. Each factsheet in the *Black Paper* focused on a particular internationally-recognized right – such as the right to livelihood, education, life, and security – that was systematically violated or denied to dalits. The factsheets began with guidelines established by the UDHR, ICESR, ICERD, CEDAW, and the Indian Constitution and concluded with relevant quotes from Ambedkar, thereby incorporating two different discourses of protest and ethics into its campaign.

The *Black Paper* used official government statistics to portray the state's failure to facilitate the realization of rights to livelihood, education, land, life, security, reservations, and employment. While many of these rights may be deemed outside of the formal obligations of the state, the NCDHR maintained that the policies that constitute

this “departure” were core elements of the “governance system in India.”³³⁵ The *Black Paper* argued that the “preferential treatment of the Dalits in all areas of national life” is part of the commitment to governance “based on social justice,” a commitment established by the Indian Constitution. The NCDHR contended that the objective of this commitment was to “enable... Dalits to emancipate ourselves from the centuries-old generational slavery perpetuated by the caste system.” The factsheets in the *Black Paper* cited deep disparities between dalits and the general population in development indicators such as literacy, poverty, electricity, sanitation, infant mortality, and malnourishment and argued that the Indian state, through both sheer disregard and complicity with the dominant castes, had failed to create an environment where basic human rights could be realized by dalits. The state was faulted for privileging wealthier sectors of society and for having become “callous to the very basic needs and rights of Dalit citizens” and “desensitised to the situation and basic needs of the poor class.”

This assessment of the state reads as a moral indictment. The *Black Paper* also translated the (in)action of the state into the language of human rights as a “crime against humanity” and “genocide of a different order against a vast section of its Dalits citizens.”³³⁶ This is not genocide through orchestrated and purposeful acts, but rather, through lack of concern and care, through what I characterize as “neglect.” I conceptualize “neglect” as a relation constructed when the care and assistance that is promised and expected is not provided. The charge of neglect is a morally tinged denouncement that, in the case of dalits, is directly related to the ideals of social justice laid out in the Constitution. The NCDHR suggested that neglect can be just as effective

³³⁵ NCDHR, *Black Paper*.

³³⁶ NCDHR, “Fact Sheet I: Dalit Right to Livelihood,” in *Black Paper*.

in violating the right to life, dignity, security, and livelihood as direct, agentive acts. The NCDHR thus demanded that the state maintain its positive obligations – its responsibility to ‘promote’ and ‘protect’ dalits – and argued that the failure to uphold these obligations constituted a human rights violation.

The violence of neglect has been under-theorized in the scholarship on human rights. It seems that the theory and practice of human rights law is premised on the model of sovereign power rather than, in Foucault’s terms, that of governmentality, one of the principal facets of political power in modernity.³³⁷ Human rights law counters power in the negative sense. This is power that, as Foucault’s states, “excludes,” “represses,” “censors,” “abstracts,” “masks,” “conceals”; it does not, however, address the power that “produces.”³³⁸ Governmentality, while not forsaking power in the negative sense, works through the power that produces. Historically, this mode of governance emerged alongside the growth of administrative structures and statistics, which revealed and isolated a new social unit, that of the “population.” Foucault argues that governmentality developed as governments recognized that an intensification of power towards its population, in particular, towards its well-being, was the most viable means of increasing its dominance. Elaborating on Foucault’s theory, political theorist John Ransom explains that “one of the chief ways states could increase their power and influence was to promote the health, morals, fecundity and attitudes of their

³³⁷ See Michel Foucault, “Governmentality,” in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality with Two Lectures by and an Interview with Michel Foucault* eds. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, eds., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). See also, Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume I* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

³³⁸ See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Modern Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994) 194.

population.”³³⁹ This was accomplished through governmental interventions, both through direct and indirect technologies, which worked to align the interests of the individual with that of the population.

While governmentality is often considered critically – for example, in terms of the production of “rituals of truth,” “docile bodies” and “technologies of self” – dalit activists seemed to identify certain processes of governmentality that need to be strengthened and extended. The NCDHR argued that state neglect – the absence of sufficient and appropriate governmentality – amounted to conditions which precluded the realization of human rights. On the one hand, factsheets in the *Black Paper* called attention to the violence of certain forms of governmentality. The NCDHR documented acts such as police sanction of crimes against dalits, police brutality towards dalits, and the imposition of degrading occupations and argued that this kind of governmentality harmed dalits in order to preserve the privileges and comforts of other segments of the population. The overriding picture represented in the *Black Paper*, however, was of insufficient governmentality, of the state’s failure to work in the interests of marginalized communities and its profound governmental neglect of dalits. The NCDHR demanded an increased governmental response to the conditions facing dalits. It called for more state protection from violence, the promotion of the development of SC/ST communities, access to free education, the fulfillment of reservation quotas, and the improvement of facilities providing food, water, housing, and healthcare.³⁴⁰

³³⁹ John Ransom, *Foucault’s Discipline: The Politics of Subjectivity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997) 62.

³⁴⁰ Another example of this is the demand by activists that dalit women be officially recognized as a separate social category so that the government can produce statistics and knowledge specific to their situations.

Life under conditions of governmental neglect can be described as what philosopher Giorgio Agamben theorizes as “bare life.”³⁴¹ Bare life is neither *zoe*, natural life, or *bios*, qualified life within society, but rather is “life exposed to death.” Agamben shows that in today’s political world, life and death have become political concepts, not natural or scientific ones, and that politics itself “has transformed into the power to decide the point at which life ceases to be politically relevant.”³⁴² Agamben’s argument helps make sense of the NCDHR’s demands of positive obligations from the state. “Governance,” the NCDHR claimed, “is a key factor in the promotion, protection as well as in the violation of human rights.” It suggested that in the contemporary political and economic world, lack of governance results in a denial of human rights, in a condition in which individuals are made vulnerable through a lack of access to governmental structures; subsequently, living is transformed into “life exposed to death.” The NCDHR’s *Black Paper* portrays a situation where the inaction of the sovereign power and its neglect of segments of its population, results in these communities being reduced to bare life. Its inaugural document argues that in order for human rights to become a more effective tool for the world’s marginalized and poor, the continued and systematic production of preventable suffering – a violence created through neglect – must be internationally recognized as a crime against humanity.

The NCDHR’s conceptualization of human rights was thus not limited to entitlements against state power, but rather incorporated entitlements that mandate certain

³⁴¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). It is also interesting that the very definition of the *homo sacer*, one who is included by his or her very exclusion, who is inside by virtue of being outside, also applies to the logic of dalits within the caste system. In theory, dalits, also termed *avarna* (without varna) or *panchama* (the fifth varna), are excluded from the varna system but this exclusion constitutes their inclusion within the whole of social organization.

³⁴² Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 142.

types of state action; the state's failure to pursue such actions was rendered equivalent to the violation of human rights. The organization maintained that the state had a responsibility to provide some measure of social and economic equality and reiterated Ambedkar's critique of the "contradiction" of political democracy without social democracy, of formal equality in a context of economic and social inequality. The NCDHR contended that the state's move away from socialist policies and its "opting for the market economy" after 1991 had only deepened this contradiction, claiming that it had rendered dalits "the hapless victims of liberal democracy." This characterization of dalits – as "hapless victims of liberal democracy" – points to another aspect of the NCDHR's interpretation of human rights, namely its critique of the liberal underpinnings of rights.

A Critique of Human Rights

The NCDHR's interpretation of human rights was more fully explicated in its "National Campaign Manifesto," which was also included in the *Black Paper* portfolio. This text articulated the NCDHR's revision of the tenets of internationally recognized human rights and also critically assessed the politics and practice of human rights. While the organization did not forsake human rights as a liberating discourse, it called for a radical revision, contending that human rights have become a tool with which to further exploit marginalized communities. The "National Campaign Manifesto" expounded the NCDHR's critiques and interpretations of the meanings and limits of rights. These interpretations depart from liberal notions of the subject of rights, the relationship between liberty and security, equality, and the role of the state in human rights violations.

The “National Campaign Manifesto” illustrated how the conceptualization of the bearer of rights in liberalism did not sufficiently address the needs of the dalit subject. The bearer of rights in liberal discourse is an autonomous, self-possessed, and self-determining individual. This subject is a juridical abstraction; it is an individual conceptualized without relational and historical content, an isolated individual that is both outside of context and exists pre-context. Critics argue that the unitary and autonomous self of liberal theory is based on an erroneous premise: it denies the complexity of the self, its contradictory elements, as well as the critical function of intersubjectivity in identity formation. The NCDHR’s critique centered on the need for a conception of the collective as a bearer of rights and on the necessity of a historical and relational context for identifying this subject. It suggested that for groups such as dalits, who experience cultural subordination based on group dynamics alongside institutional and interpersonal discrimination and violence, the notion of the individual in the liberal theory of rights was inadequate. Activists argued that in matters of cultural, minority, or collective rights, a different notion of the bearer of rights was required. This was reiterated in the statement “dalit rights are human rights,” a statement which recurs throughout *the Black Paper* and other documents inaugurating the inception of NCDHR. The NCDHR claimed – as feminist and indigenous groups have also done – that the abstract criteria that constitutes the universal subject of the liberal discourse of rights was inherently exclusionary.

The “National Campaign Manifesto” defined dalits as a separate group in India, a group differentiated and “distinct from others because of...[their] specific historical context, violations, exploitation and atrocities.”³⁴³ The NCDHR argued that a theory of human rights could only be meaningful to dalits if this context of past and present

³⁴³ National Campaign Manifesto, 26.

relations of exploitation, discrimination, and violation were recognized, as the Indian Constitution had done. A theory of collective rights could appreciate that rights were denied or violated on the basis of group membership and could identify the individual through his or her membership in a group. The NCDHR also maintained that cultural subordination could only be overcome if the individual was not been seen in isolation, but rather, be viewed as a part of a social collective.³⁴⁴ As scholars of human rights have pointed out, social collectivities are themselves relationally and historically produced and individual subjects within the collectivity cannot be conceptualized *a priori*; group identity, like the identity of the self, is created through social relations and subsequent social differentiation. In other words, whereas the liberal theory of rights conceptualized individuals in social isolation, a theory of collective rights could view individuals as members of groups in social relationships.³⁴⁵ The NCDHR claimed that the situation of dalits in India and many other marginalized communities in the world highlighted the need for an understanding of collectivities as subjects of rights and the need “to advocate the corporate rights of the people.”³⁴⁶

The centering of the individual in the liberal theory of rights has also been criticized for the propagation of self-interest and the legitimization of exploitative economic structures. Most famously argued in the mid-nineteenth century – a century before the development of internationally recognized human rights – by Karl Marx in his

³⁴⁴ Veena Das makes this argument in regards to minority rights and cultural rights. See Veena Das, “Community Rights and the Definition of Community,” in *The Rights of Subordinated Peoples*, eds. Oliver Mendelsohn and Upendra Baxi (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994). See also Veena Das, *Critical Event: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).

³⁴⁵ Lynn Hunt traces the historical processes through which this understanding of the individual develops. See Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007). She claims that the “ever-rising threshold of shame about bodily functions and the growing sense of bodily decorum,” led to a form of individuation which consisted of “greater respect for bodily integrity and clearer lines of demarcation between individual bodies.” Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, 29-30.

³⁴⁶ National Campaign Manifesto, 21.

prescient essay “On the Jewish Question,” this critique argues that liberal rights undermine human beings’ natural social interdependence by separating humans from one another and encouraging the pursuit of self-interest. The valorization of liberty in classical liberalism provides a basis for the pursuit of self-interest while impeding the development of social solidarity. As Marx writes, “liberty as a right of man is not based on the association of man with man but rather on the separation of man from man. It is the *right* of this separation, the right of the limited individual limited to himself.”³⁴⁷ Marx adds that the right to liberty is intended for the protection of the right to private property, which, he maintains, is the “right to enjoy and dispose one’s possessions as one wills, without regard for other men and independently of society.” It is the right to pursue one’s self-interest without consideration of other and according to Marx, this right and the valorization of the individual on which it is premised enables and legitimizes harm to others.³⁴⁸

I find this critique of liberal rights reverberating in the NCDHR’s “Campaign Manifesto.” The NCDHR stated that rights were initially only applicable to “men of property” and that “the question of right itself has come from a retarded political positioning.”³⁴⁹ This “positioning” is the “Liberalism of the Enlightenment period” and according to the NCDHR, it has skewed the development and interpretation of rights towards the benefits of some at the expense of many. The NCDHR locates one of the main hindrances to a fully emancipatory theory of rights in the tenet of individual liberty:

³⁴⁷ Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, trans. and eds. D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1967) 235, 236.

³⁴⁸ Bhikhu Parekh argues that Marx’s critique of the modern theory of rights centers on his pronouncement of rights as the “ideological rationalization of the capitalist society.” See Bhiku Parekh, “The Modern Conception of Right and its Marxist Critique,” in *The Right to be Human* ed. Upendra Baxi, co-eds. Geeti Sen and Jeanette Fernandes, (New Delhi: Lancer International, 1987), 15.

³⁴⁹ National Campaign Manifesto, 19.

The discourse on individual liberty has ultimately led to liberalism which in terms of security victimizes and marginalizes communities of people. The very same individual liberty has denied freedom of access to benefits of liberty to the poor in different parts of the world.³⁵⁰

The NCDHR conceptualized this problem as the contradiction between liberty and security. It explained that individual liberty, the ability to pursue self-interest and private wealth without regard for others, posed a threat to the security of other people, the maintenance of their livelihood and integrity of their bodies. The NCDHR defined “security” as rights to resources and to the processes by which resources are allocated and contended that the right to security is denied to communities, not individuals. In other words, one’s community affiliation determines one’s capacity to realize the right to security.³⁵¹ The NCDHR claimed that it is the exercise of liberty by the ruling sections of society that results in the marginalization of groups such as dalits. As the “Manifesto” claimed, “The ‘swaraj’ of the dominant order would violate the security of the communities of Dalits and other backward caste peoples.”³⁵²

In an essay that argues for a “right-to-be-human approach” in modern human rights theory, legal scholar Upendra Baxi conceptualizes the contradiction between liberty and security as the tension between human needs and human rights.³⁵³ He argues that “the model of universal human rights for all human beings contradicts the idea that

³⁵⁰ National Campaign Manifesto, 1.

³⁵¹ The NCDHR notes that in India, the groups consistently denied this right are “Dalits, Women and Tribals.” Writing just five years after the violence of 1992, however, NCDHR, does not include Muslims in this group nor does it discuss the lack of security experienced by many Muslim communities in India. National Campaign Manifesto, 2.

³⁵² National Campaign Manifesto, 6.

³⁵³ Upendra Baxi, *Inhuman Wrongs and Human Rights: Unconventional Essays* (New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 1994). Baxi maintains the liberating potential of human rights. He also notes that while the needs approach has provided justification for authoritarian regimes, this does not mean that we need to reject this approach. Rather, he calls for resolution to the contradictions between needs and rights.

all human beings, *without exception*, have the right to be human.”³⁵⁴ Baxi notes that the right to liberty precludes categorizing many forms of exploitation that are endemic to capitalism as harms; in fact, the exercise of the right to liberty actually produces a space within society for exploitation and domination. Far from guaranteeing the security of livelihood and, indeed of life, of the marginalized, the right to liberty actually precludes the fulfillment of their basic needs, such as nourishment, shelter, health care, education, and dignity. “In order that some *classes* may have human rights,” Baxi writes, “*masses* have to *cease* being human.” Baxi argues that the neglect of basic needs in modern human rights theory makes it utterly ineffective in confronting the problems most pressing to the world’s poor. A theory of human rights, he suggests, must address issues of “redistribution, access, and needs” in order to work in the interests of social justice. The NCDHR argues that this is a matter of security – of protecting the right to life – of marginalized communities. For the NCDHR, in order for human rights to be a more meaningful theory of justice and liberation, it must have as its foundation in the security, the rights to resources and to the power to distribute them, of subordinated communities.

In a similar vein, the NCDHR argued that the concept of security enshrined in modern human rights theory was an extension of the privileging of individual liberty. It claimed that the institutions of the state, such as the police or military, functioned to protect the interests of a small segment of society at the expense of the well-being of the masses. The “Campaign Manifesto” stated that

The discourses of national security by the state imply generally the security of the ruling class to such an extent that majority of the people’s security and interest would be sacrificed by the state to safeguard the interest and security of the ruling class minority...The state either subdues or eliminates by the indiscriminate use

³⁵⁴ Upendra Baxi, *Inhuman Wrongs and Human Rights*, 8.

of the State Machinery, those who genuinely endeavor to make the State a level playing field for all communities of people.³⁵⁵

In this account, the discourse of national security protected the ruling classes' access to resources and their power to allocate resources. Since hunger, preventable illness, or poverty was not considered a violation of one's rights to security, the concept was made available for the protection of the wealth, property, and liberty of the dominant groups. The NCDHR added that the discourse of security extends beyond society and the nation and has functioned globally to maintain an international imbalance of power; "global security" protected the interests of powerful nations while thwarting the attempts of less powerful nations to create a more just international order."³⁵⁶ "Under the garb of global security," the "Manifesto" declared, "the rights of nations are violated and in turn under the garb of national security the rights of people are violated while both take shelter under the discourse of individual liberty"; the discourses of individual liberty, national security, and global security "join together to deny individual and community security to people in the subjugated sphere of the world."³⁵⁷

The NCDHR's "Campaign Manifesto" critically analyzed the concept of equality in the modern theory of human rights, a concept grounded in the liberal humanist idea of the individual. Scholars have shown that equality in liberal theory is premised on anthropological notions of the commonality or sameness among humans.³⁵⁸ Equality in

³⁵⁵ National Campaign Manifesto, 3-5.

³⁵⁶ The National Campaign Manifesto points to other contradictions in the discourse of security. For example, it notes that although nuclear weapons are justified through the language of national security, "the struggles of the oppressed people for a just societal order are thwarted with crude forms of torture and are camouflaged as anti-nationalism." National Campaign Manifesto, 3.

³⁵⁷ National Campaign Manifesto, 5, 1.

³⁵⁸ See, for example, Uday Mehta, "Liberal Strategies of Exclusion" in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in A Bourgeois World* ed. Fredrick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Catherine A. MacKinnon, "Crimes of War, Crimes of Peace," in Stephen Shute

the liberal discourse of rights is conceptualized in terms of abstract human attributes; equality is not grounded in the context of actual social relationships and provides little recourse to those suffering endemic material inequality.³⁵⁹ As feminist legal scholar Catherine MacKinnon has explained, the idea of equality in the “international human rights tradition” is “more abstract than concrete, more transcendent than secular, more descendent from natural law than admittedly socially based.”³⁶⁰ In a similar vein, the NCDHR argued that while liberal theory proclaimed a natural or metaphysical equality among human beings, it permitted, even enabled, social and material inequalities.³⁶¹ Accordingly, it proclaimed that “the needs of the Dalits, are in the material realm and not in the metaphysical realm” and that the denial of equal access to basic material needs for survival constituted a violation of dalits’ human right to equality.³⁶² For the NCDHR, a principle of equality could only work effectively in situations of systemic inequality if supplemented with an approach to rights that viewed the state as a key agent in protecting and enabling the realization of rights.

Accordingly, the “Campaign Manifesto” demanded that the Indian state take all necessary steps to ensure that every citizen enjoy equality in access to rights and here, its demands of the state constituted a key intervention into the prevailing practice of human

and Susan Harley, eds., *On Human Rights: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures, 1993* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

³⁵⁹ Parekh notes that “as concrete and socially situated beings, men belong to different classes and possess unequal resources, and are obviously unequal in their powers, capacities opportunities. Although the rights they possess are equal, those they exercise or enjoy are therefore necessarily unequal.” Parekh thus argues that “the formal equality of rights is thus a little more than a device to veil and legitimize the stark reality of inequality.” See Bhikhu Parekh, “The Modern Conception of Right and its Marxist Critique ,” 16.

³⁶⁰ MacKinnon, “Crimes of War, Crimes of Peace,” 100.

³⁶¹ Mehta, “Liberal Strategies of Exclusion,” 64.

³⁶² National Campaign Manifesto, 28.

rights. Liberal rights protect the individual from the power of the state.³⁶³ While the state is prevented from certain actions, such as the arbitrary arrest or inhumane treatment of its citizens, it is not obligated to provide an environment in which all citizens can enjoy their rights or even have access to them.³⁶⁴ The state is only prevented from violating human rights; it does not have any positive obligations to its citizenry. The “Campaign Manifesto,” however, argued that the state had an obligation in the “provisioning, safeguarding and protecting the rights of equal opportunity” to access “education, health, communication, technology, markets, etc.”³⁶⁵ In this way, the NCDHR suggested that the Directive Principles of the Indian Constitution provided a better guideline for the duties of the state vis-à-vis its citizens than the international human rights tradition.

Noting that dalits are “a people who have been systematically deprived of their right to information and knowledge systems,” the “Campaign Manifesto” reiterated the state’s responsibility to rectify past injustice and repair imbalances in material and ideological power among its different communities. In the NCDHR’s conceptualization of human rights, the failure to create an environment for the enjoyment of rights becomes equivalent to the violation of rights, and the state’s failure to fulfill its positive obligations amounts to complicity in crimes against humanity. As the “Campaign Manifesto” stated, “the way to establishing Human Rights is not simply monitoring

³⁶³ Veena Das writes that in human rights theory “the state and the individual form two poles around which legal personalities are organized.” She notes that the experience of WWII has a very significant impact on the conceptualization of human rights protected by international law. Drawing on theories of natural law, human rights “essentially tried to empower the individual against oppressive state structures.” See Veena Das “Community Rights and the Definition of Community,” 121.

³⁶⁴ See, for example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

³⁶⁵ National Campaign Manifesto, 30. Reservations can also be considered the state’s positive obligation towards dalits. In this way, the Indian state has enacted a positive obligation towards its citizens since its inception.

violations but looking at Human Rights as a key constituent element of governance.”³⁶⁶

The NCDHR argued that the Indian state lacked the commitment to implement laws prohibiting discrimination and violence against dalits and claimed the poor standing of dalits on all major development indicators as evidence of inadequate and improper governance. This assessment of the state renders its failure to fulfill positive obligations – its neglect of its citizens – as a “crime against dalits” and a “crime against humanity.”

The NCDHR also called for a more complex understanding of the perpetrator of human rights violations. Since liberal notions of human rights, emerging from natural law theory, are conceptualized as restrictions on the power of the state, it follows that state involvement in a wrongful act is what distinguishes human rights violations from other crimes.³⁶⁷ In India, the official laws have made it difficult to show state involvement in caste-related crimes. Moreover, the Indian state has argued internationally that caste-based problems are social issues and not governmental ones.³⁶⁸ While this position has impeded the recognition of caste-based discrimination as a human rights violation, activists have highlighted state neglect of dalits and collusion in acts of violence and in the maintenance of discriminatory structures. For example, the NCDHR has pointed out that officials at the local, state, and national levels have denied dalits proper protection and blocked dalit attempts at legal recourse for injustices. In addition, police forces have also been known to tolerate and even participate in violence against dalits. Local government officials, it argues, have defied federal and state law in hiring

³⁶⁶ National Campaign Manifesto, 20.

³⁶⁷ See Richard A. Wilson, “Representing Human Rights Violations: Social Contexts and Subjectivities” in *Human Rights, Culture and Context: Anthropological Perspectives* ed. Richard A. Wilson (London: Pluto Press, 1997) 140.

³⁶⁸ Clifford Bob notes that it is easier to “spark international action around de jure discrimination and violations by state authorities, than by de facto discrimination by private actors.” See Bob, ““Dalit Rights are Human Rights,”” 190.

practices. For example, even though manual scavenging has been outlawed, local governments, especially in Gujarat and Rajasthan, have been known to hire manual scavengers. By pointing to such acts, dalit activists have shown that the distinction between state and civil society, the distinction upon which the notion of ‘human rights violations’ is premised, is not universally relevant or accurate.

The NCDHR’s “Campaign Manifesto” demonstrated that a conventional state-centered approach to rights violations also failed to recognize violations by economic bodies and by the dominant sectors of society, both of which, the NCDHR contended, were in alliance with the state. The “Manifesto” claimed that “as political governance is gradually being replaced by economic governance, violations of Human Rights by economic bodies is increasing and will increase.”³⁶⁹ The theory and practice of human rights, it argued, thus must account for these kinds of violations. The NCDHR explained that the acts of multinational and transnational corporations, acts which exercise the “liberal rights of individuals,” have been devastating to groups across the world: “scores of communities of people have been decimated and have been brought to nothingness” by these acts.³⁷⁰ The NCDHR added that, although not always immediately visible, there were alliances and links of complicity between the state and these economic bodies. It characterized the Indian state as “an active conniver with economic forces of exploitation” and claimed that despite the state’s laws and Constitution, “civil rights [were] constantly being violated through collaboration of the state machinery.”³⁷¹ The NCDHR suggested that this was because the state was also in collusion with “that part of the civil society which assiduously seeks to maintain the hegemony it has established

³⁶⁹ National Campaign Manifesto, 8.

³⁷⁰ National Campaign Manifesto, 8.

³⁷¹ National Campaign Manifest, 9.

over the indigenous people and women.” Untouchability, it argued, was a tool to maintain this hegemony and served as an “agent of the caste system.”³⁷² It followed that the state was complicit in wrongful acts attributed to economic or social bodies within society. The separation of state and civil society in the liberal theory of human rights was again shown as inaccurate and not meaningful for marginalized communities such as dalits in India.

With its claim of indiginity, the NCDHR argued that dalits needed the protection of their cultural rights. Here, the NCDHR claims “dalit difference” from other Indians, but, in contrast to Ambedkar, this difference is cultural and ethnic, not political. Dalits’ cultural rights were premised on the notion put forth in the *Black Paper* that dalits were a distinct ethnic group in India; also, here echoing Ambedkar, the NCDHR claimed that unique experience and history of “violations, exploitations, and atrocities” made dalits a distinct group in India.³⁷³ The “Campaign Manifesto” asserted that dalits “do not belong to the Hindu religion but possess a deeply spiritual and indigenous religion of our own.”³⁷⁴ It argued that the state had a positive obligation to preserve dalit culture and protect dalits from the “hegemony of dominant castes.”³⁷⁵

The NCDHR’s activism thus did not indicate a turn to human rights as a discourse of emancipation; indeed, the Indian Constitution emerges in the NCDHR’s campaign as a better guide for social justice than the decrees of the United Nations.

³⁷² National Campaign Manifesto, 9.

³⁷³ National Campaign Manifesto, 26.

³⁷⁴ National Campaign Manifesto, 26.

³⁷⁵ National Campaign Manifesto, 13.

Unlike other human rights campaigns, the NCDHR does not protest the state's laws, but rather, uses human rights to challenge state neglect. It censures the state for its failure to live up to its commitments, as it censures the human rights regime for its condoning, if not enabling, social, economic, and cultural inequality. The internationalization of caste discrimination and the turn to human rights as the dominant language of protest and demands may seem unlikely in this context, but human rights activism at a global scale can galvanize discussion about caste in both the national and global public. The next chapter turns to the NCDHR's largest and most globally visible campaign: its campaign for the inclusion of caste discrimination at the WCAR, 2001. As exemplified by the NCDHR's activism at Durban, international activism generates visibility and forges alliances between dalit activists and other social justice activists; also, as in the case of WCAR, it can force questioning of the very terms and premises used to analyze caste.

Chapter 5

Dalit Activism at WCAR, 2001

In 2001, the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) helped organize over 200 dalit activists to travel to Durban, South Africa to protest caste-based discrimination and violence at the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance (WCAR).³⁷⁶ The NCDHR had one primary message for the United Nations and the international human rights community: the caste system constituted discrimination and in particular, a type of discrimination analogous in form and effects to racism. This understanding of caste, although with significant precedent, represented a rhetorical shift in dalit activism as it worked to build global support. At Durban, as in other transnational dalit campaigns, caste appeared as a form of “discrimination based on work and descent,” a category of social relations unequivocally in violation of international human rights law. Activists also maintained that caste was a practice not unique India and that “caste-affected” societies existed across the world. As one scholar wrote regarding dalit activism at Durban, “Once you see caste as ‘parochial’...caste is reduced to local politics even if it encompasses 240 million people...Racism is recognizable as a universal pathology while caste is read as a local aberration. Unfortunately, local aberrations do not usually command universal attention

³⁷⁶ WCAR was the third U.N. conference on the elimination of racial discrimination. The previous two conferences were held in 1978 and 1983, both in Geneva, Switzerland were focused on ending apartheid in South Africa. In 1997, the U.N. General Assembly passed Resolution 52/111, which laid plans for the conference. 2001 had been declared both the “Year of Dialogue among Civilizations” and “Year of Mobilization against Racism, Racial Discrimination and Xenophobia and Related Intolerance.

of UN or international agencies.”³⁷⁷ The success of dalit activism at international human rights forums thus hinged on the globalizing of caste and the translation of caste-based discrimination as a human rights violation.

The Government of India, however, had obstructed the internationalization of caste discrimination for over two decades when at the WCAR and its preparatory conferences it opposed dalit activists’ concept of caste and caste-based discrimination. The Indian state’s opposition to the NCDHR comprised of two main arguments: (1) that through its laws and policies, the state had already established its commitment to betterment of its Scheduled Caste population, thereby making human rights activism unnecessary and redundant; (2) that caste issues were domestic, social ones, thus outside the purview of the international human rights bodies. In the months leading up to the WCAR, the debate over the meaning and scope of caste went beyond official declarations and entered the mainstream Indian media. By tracing the different meanings attributed to caste in the discussions leading up to and at WCAR, I hope to draw attention to shifting parameters of “caste” and the political stakes of this debate.

In this chapter, I focus on the debates and discussions leading up to and at the WCAR. In the months prior to the conference, debate over the meaning and scope of caste went beyond official declarations and entered the mainstream India media. In many ways, the disputes over the definitions of caste paralleled the discussions of caste in American anthropology and sociology over a half-century earlier discussed in Chapter 3. Although not historically connected to the earlier discussions, the debate over the

³⁷⁷ Shiv Visvanathan, “Durban and Dalit Discourse,” in *Caste, Race, and Discrimination: Discourses in International Context*, eds. Sukhadeo Thorat and Umakant (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2004).

inclusion of caste at WCAR is another example of the analogy between caste-based discrimination and racism and of the conceptualization of caste as a form of inherited inequality.

World Conference Against Racism: Background and Framing Documents

The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) was entered into force in 1969. While the Convention does not define “race,” it condemns racial discrimination and any notion of superiority based on race. It specifically targets racial segregation and apartheid and reaffirms the U.N.’s denunciation of colonialism as contrary to the principle of dignity and equality enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations. The scope of racial discrimination delineated in Article 1 of the Convention includes “any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin.” Ironically, it was the Indian state that insisted on the inclusion of “descent” during the drafting of the Convention.³⁷⁸ India ratified ICERD in 1968, but has since maintained that “descent” in the Convention refers only to race and does not refer to caste.³⁷⁹ Dalit activists, however, used this part of Article 1 to support their claim for the inclusion of caste-based discrimination at WCAR.

The discussion of racial discrimination at WCAR and its preparatory and NGO meetings was as much about interpreting the past and its legacy as it was about contemporary manifestations of racism. For example, two of the conference’s three main

³⁷⁸ A.S. Narang, “Caste at Durban: Why and How,” Sukhdeo Thorat and Umakant, eds. *Caste, Race, and Discrimination: Discourses in International Context*. (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2004) 208.

³⁷⁹ See, for example, paragraph 7 of India’s 1994 report. See CERD, “Consideration of Reports Submitted by States Parties Under Article 9 of the Convention, India,” CERD/C/299/Add.3, 29 April 1996.

themes – the causes of racism, the victims of racism, and recommendations for ending racism and compensating its victims – required a historical assessment of discrimination and intolerance. The conference identified the slave trade, slavery, and colonialism as the main historical causes of racism today and as having affected “lasting economic and social inequalities in many parts of the world.”³⁸⁰ Accordingly, the Conference report recognizes “Africans and people of African descent,” “Asians and people of Asian descent,” and “indigenous peoples” as victims of racial discrimination. The very design of the conference was premised on the conviction that the agenda for the future progress of humanity required that the “truths” of the past be officially recognized and collectively remembered. The past in discussions at Durban thus was not an abstract concept, but rather a crucial ontological site populated by countless victims seeking recognition and justice. Commenting on the importance of recognizing the crimes of the past and establishing a shared memory, Kofi Annan, then Secretary General of the United Nations, stated in his closing remarks that,

The dead, through their descendants, cry out for justice. Tracing a connection with past crimes may not always be the most constructive way to redress present inequalities, in material terms. But man does not live on bread alone. The sense of continuity with the past is an integral part of each man’s or each woman’s identity...there is still continuity between the societies and States of today and those that committed the original crimes...Each of us has an obligation to consider where he or she belongs in this complex historical chain.³⁸¹

Implicit in conference discussions was the establishment of a narrative of the past and the chains of causality relevant for understanding the contemporary world. This also

³⁸⁰ CERD, Report of the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, WCAR Report A/CONF.189/12, page 12, para 14.

³⁸¹ WCAR Report, 148.

required the demarcation of global processes and ‘world history,’ the unspoken alternative of which would be particular, local, or culturally-specific histories.³⁸²

In the WCAR report, the histories that explained racial discrimination were those of the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism, large-scale processes that traversed oceans and continents. The victims of racial discrimination were identified in terms of broad social categories and corresponded to geographical areas that had been conquered. This evaluation of discrimination and its causes and consequences, while vital and necessary to global social justice projects, proved limiting for groups such as dalits who do not identify European colonialism or the transatlantic slave trade as the primary causes of their oppression or the discrimination they experienced. Implicit in the WCAR evaluation of discrimination was an assessment of what events, processes, and characters constituted ‘world history.’ Consequently, other historical processes linked to contemporary forms of discrimination were relegated to particular or local histories. The historical narrative developed at WCAR thus proved limiting to the dalit campaign and was vulnerable to manipulation by the Indian state in its attempts to block the discussion of caste discrimination.

Statements by the Government of India and CERD

Even before WCAR, statements by the Government of India to the U.N. projected a vision of India’s past that circumscribed caste to India, thereby also rendering it a phenomenon inassimilable into a narrative of global history. For example, India’s 1996

³⁸² The representatives from Australia and New Zealand at the conference objected to the association of racism as foundational to colonialism and took issue with the use of the same language used to condemn apartheid in the condemnation of colonialism, citing that both Australia and New Zealand’s “good governance and strong democratic traditions and institutions derive directly from its colonial history.”

report to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) presented the dominant nationalist narrative of Indian history, a narrative which embedded a politically conservative understanding of caste.³⁸³ Echoing Gandhian and Nehruvian visions of India's past, the 1996 report cited the "assimilative character of the Indian civilization" and India's history of "intermingling of inhabitants with waves of immigration."³⁸⁴ Here, Indian history becomes a story of the relatively peaceful and harmonious mixture of various groups. Where anti-caste thinkers such as Phule, Ambedkar, and Periyar had identified processes of differentiation, segregation, and discrimination, the Indian state recognized only processes of "intermingling." The 1996 report also cited a benevolent origin to the caste system: the caste system, it stated, "has its origins in the functional division of Indian society during ancient times."³⁸⁵ According to the report, the caste system, unlike systems of racial differentiation, was not inherently exploitative; it was originally an effective and efficient form of social organization, and one that served the harmonious operation of society.

In this report, the Indian state insisted that caste was particular to India. "Communities which fall under the definition of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes," it claimed, "are unique to Indian society and its historical process."³⁸⁶ Reminiscent of both Cox's and Dumont's assessment of caste, the Government of India maintained that the particularities of the development and manifestation of caste in India precluded comparison with other forms of discrimination, such as racism. The report also

³⁸³ See CERD/C/299/Add.3, 29 April, 1996, para 2. As a party to ICERD, India is required to submit a report on racial discrimination to CERD every two years. Reports were due on 1988, 1990, 1992, 1994 but India only submitted a report in 1996. The Government explained its ten year delay by stating that issues of race were practically non-existent in India and thus, it was difficult to get information for the report.. See CERD/C/299/Add.3, 29 April, 1996, para 2.

³⁸⁴ CERD/C/299/Add.3, 29 April, 1996, para 5.

³⁸⁵ CERD/C/299/Add.3, 29 April, 1996, para 6.

³⁸⁶ CERD/C/299/Add.3, 29 April, 1996, para 7.

contended that the term ‘descent’ in the ICERD’s definition of racial discrimination referred only to race and thus, although caste was a system based on descent, the Convention could not apply to caste-based discrimination.³⁸⁷ The report argued that unlike racial discrimination, which is a product of global historical processes, caste discrimination was specific to India, having developed from local and particular processes, and thus was outside the purview of U.N. covenants on discrimination. With this understanding of discrimination, India reminded the CERD committee of its historic role in the struggle against racial discrimination. The report stated that India had been “in the forefront of actions of the international community” in the effort to eliminate racial discrimination, which was evidenced by Mahatma Gandhi’s passive resistance movement and India’s post-independent role in anti-Apartheid campaigns and the Non-Aligned movement.³⁸⁸ By strategically restricting its understanding of discrimination to those forms directly connected to European colonialism, India emerged as both a victim of racism and an ardent champion of its elimination. This narrow definition of racial discrimination relegated caste to an internal issue and left no room for the Indian state as complicit in discrimination that is prohibited by human rights law.

With an argument similar to that of the critics of the Caste School of Race Relations, the Indian state maintained that Indians were a racial “mix” and distinctions based on race did “not impinge on the consciousness or outlook of Indian citizens in their social relations.”³⁸⁹ “Caste,” it stated, “denotes a ‘social’ and ‘class’ distinction and is not based on race.”³⁹⁰ With this assumption of a biological notion of race, the Indian state put

³⁸⁷ CERD/C/299/Add.3, 29 April, 1996, para 7.

³⁸⁸ CERD/C/299/Add.3, 29 April, 1996, para 21, 22.

³⁸⁹ CERD/C/299/Add.3, 29 April, 1996, para 5.

³⁹⁰ CERD/C/299/Add.3, 29 April, 1996, para 6.

forth another factor invalidating the analogy between race and caste. Rather than viewing race as a social construction generated from within a project of domination, the Government of India erroneously assumed that race corresponded to some biological, genetic, or physiological reality. Thus, by suggesting that race existed outside its social manifestations, the report obfuscated the similarities between race and caste, namely how both demarcate relations of power and are socially constructed categories – albeit embodied experiences.

In its response to the Indian state’s report, the CERD Committee disputed the exclusion of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes from the scope of the Convention and stated that the “system of castes” was “among the factors which impede the full implementation of the Convention [in India].”³⁹¹ It also challenged the Indian state’s contention that “descent” in Article 1 of the Convention referred only to race. The Committee declared that “the situation of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes falls within the scope of the Convention” and underscored its “great concern” about the Indian state’s refusal to recognize this.³⁹² While it acknowledged the many constitutional and legislative protections guaranteed to SC/ST populations, the Committee also noted the continued “widespread discrimination and the relative impunity of those who abuse them [SC/ST].”³⁹³

These statements laid the groundwork for future U.N. deliberations on caste. By implicitly broadening the definition of racial discrimination to include caste discrimination and by explicitly recognizing that caste discrimination was within the

³⁹¹ CERD, “Consideration of Reports Submitted by States Parties Under Article 9 of the Convention, Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, India” CERD/C/304/Add.13, 17 September 1996, para 4.

³⁹² CERD/C/304/Add.13, 17 September 1996, para 14.

³⁹³ CERD/C/304/Add.13, 17 September 1996, para 23.

purview of the Convention, the CERD Committee statement provided a foundation for the consideration of caste discrimination as a human rights violation.³⁹⁴ Accordingly, the interest of international human rights organizations in caste and untouchability increased after 1996 and advocacy at the U.N. became viable. The CERD Committee's statement on India was among the key factors that convinced Human Rights Watch in 1997 to conduct a report on the problem of caste-based violence and untouchability in India.

WCAR Preparatory Meetings

In the years following the CERD Committee report, dalit activism gained momentum as international human rights organizations began mobilizing against caste-based discrimination. In March 1999, HRW released its report, *Broken People: Caste Violence Against India's Untouchables*, which greatly increased the global visibility of the problem of caste-based discrimination. The formation of the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) in 1998 facilitated dalit international activism and, in particular, advocacy at the human rights treaty bodies of the United Nations. In the months preceding the WCAR, dalit activists utilized the connections that had been made following the HRW report and lobbied foreign governments and international institutions for the inclusion of caste-based discrimination at the conference.

In January 2000, Paul Divakar, a co-founder of NCDHR, represented the organization at the Bellagio Consultation, a preparatory meeting for the WCAR supported by the Rockefeller Foundation and convened by Gay J. McDougall, executive

³⁹⁴ After this statement, in January 1999 the UN Special Rapporteur on Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance stated that the Scheduled Castes suffered "social discrimination," and in February 2000, both the Committee on the Right of the Child and the Committee for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination stated concern about the situation of dalit children and dalit women.

director of the Washington-based International Human Rights Law Group and member of CERD. The Consultation recommended that “caste systems” be explicitly included in the WCAR Declaration under “Forms and Manifestations of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia Intolerance” and that dalits and the Burakumin of Japan be identified as “victims” of discrimination based on descent. In March 2000, the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) was officially established in London and began lobbying organizations such as the International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination (IMADR) and the Lutheran World Federation. Two months later in May, a delegation of dalit activists travelled to Strasbourg and Brussels to appeal to the European Union at the European Regional Preparatory Meeting for WCAR. International dalit activism was given another significant boost in November 2000 when Martin Macwan, also a founding member of the NCDHR, received the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Human Rights Award. The award not only increased the international visibility of dalit issues, but also provided lobbying services by the RFK Center’s staff in Washington D.C. These developments in activism and visibility helped achieve an important U.N. development: in August 2000, the fifty-second session of the Sub-commission for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights passed Resolution 2000/4. This Resolution declared discrimination based on work and descent to be illegal under international law and also stated that this type of discrimination was a global problem, a “feature of societies in different regions of the world” that “has affected a significant proportion overall of the world’s population.”³⁹⁵ The Resolution arranged for the preparation of a Working Paper

³⁹⁵Commission on Human Rights, “Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Indigenous Peoples and Minorities,” E/CN.4/Sub.2/Res/2004/4

on discrimination based on work and descent in order to determine which communities were affected and to develop strategies for the elimination of this form of discrimination.

A series of preparatory conferences for the WCAR took place over the next year. Dalit activists lobbied to have caste discrimination included in their reports and declarations, but were consistently opposed and blocked by the Government of India. The Indian state argued that racism and caste-based discrimination were distinct phenomena and insisted that caste was outside the purview of the WCAR. According to several sources, the government also established dubious NGOs which sent dalit representatives that supported the state's position to the WCAR preparatory conferences.³⁹⁶

Activism on the behalf of dalit women was crucial to calling attention to caste-based discrimination at the preparatory conferences. Ruth Manorama, founder of the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) served as vice-chairperson of the Expert Group Meeting on Gender and Racism, held in Zagreb, Croatia in November 2000. The statement from this meeting categorized dalit women as "marginalized women" who were "directly impacted" by discrimination and intolerance; it also called upon the conference to provide sufficient representation to dalit women. The Beijing Platform of Action, adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women, had already provided a basis for recognizing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and had also facilitated a discussion of the specific predicament of dalit women in international forums. In the meetings before Durban, dalit activists asserted that dalit women were among the most

³⁹⁶ Manjula Pradeep, Navsarjan, interview by author, July August 2008, Ahmedabad, India; Navsarjan pamphlet; See also, Bob, "Dalit Human Rights," 84.

marginalized in India and demanded that the intersectionality of their oppression be understood so that their needs could be better served.³⁹⁷

The regional preparatory meetings also included parallel NGO forums which passed their own resolutions and recommendation. For example, while the Government of India blocked the inclusion of caste-based discrimination in the declaration and recommendations of the Asian Preparatory Meeting, held in Tehran, Iran in February 2001, the activism of the NCDHR was able to secure the inclusion of caste discrimination in the NGO declaration.³⁹⁸ The NGO declaration imparted a global conception of caste. In this statement, caste was described as “an immutable characteristic determined by one’s birth...irrespective of the faith they practice,” and thus was severed from roots in Hinduism.³⁹⁹ Caste in Indian society was deemed a form of “hidden apartheid,” “modern day slavery,” and “extreme forms of discrimination, exploitation, and violence.” The terminology used – specifically “apartheid” and slavery” – not only translates the experience of caste into a globally recognized wrong, but is also an example of practices that mobilized transnational activist movements. The use of “apartheid,” given the history of the ICERD and its conferences, also renders the issue of caste discrimination a grave offense that requires urgent global action. The NGO statement maintains that caste-

³⁹⁷ See also, National Federation of Dalit Women, “NGO Declaration on Gender and Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance,” WCAR, August 28 –September 7, 2001. The NFDW’s discussion of the intersectionality of race/caste, gender and class is discussed in more detail in chapter 6.

³⁹⁸ For the report of the Asian Preparatory Meeting, Tehran, 19-21 February 2001, see A/CONF.189/PC.2/9 10 April 2001. Prior to this meeting, the September 2000 Conference in Bangkok, the Asian Regional Seminar of Experts in Preparation for the World Conference Against Racism: Migrants and Trafficking in Persons with Particular Reference to Women and Children recognized caste discrimination as a factor that contributed to migration and trafficking. See para 17 and 20 of “Conclusions and Recommendations.” The NGO participants of this Conference recommended in their declaration that WCAR “give full consideration to the elimination of caste as an insidious and deeply entrenched form of discrimination on the basis of work and descent.” See Joint Statement of Asia Pacific Non-Governmental Organizations.

³⁹⁹ See NGO Statement on Discrimination on the Basis of Occupation and Descent to the Asian Preparatory Meeting

discrimination is not limited to South Asia, but is found in several parts of Asia and West Africa. It specifically names dalits in India and the Burakumin in Japan as victims of this form of discrimination and maintains that although constitutional and legislative acts were in place to combat discrimination, such laws largely remain unenforced. The NGO declaration describes the experiences of dalits, in particular social prohibitions and differential access to resources, and contends that for them, “caste remains a determinative factor for the attainment of social, political, civil, and economic rights.”⁴⁰⁰

Following the Asian Regional Preparatory Meeting, dalit activists organized a conference in New Delhi to discuss caste-based discrimination and the upcoming WCAR conference.⁴⁰¹ Attended by representatives from thirteen countries, the Global Dalits Conference Against Racism and Caste-based Discrimination heard testimonies from victims of caste-based discrimination and presentations from activists and scholars.⁴⁰² The final declaration of the conference put forth a global conceptualization of caste. It described caste as a form of discrimination that impacted millions of people “irrespective of religion” in South Asia, East Asia, and West Africa. This declaration also explicitly stated that caste-based discrimination was a “distinct form of racism” and that its manifestations amounted to “a form of apartheid” and a “crime against humanity.”⁴⁰³

The statement prepared at the Asia-Pacific NGO Networking Meeting, which took place

⁴⁰⁰ To demonstrate this, Martin Macwan, speaking as a representative of the NCDHR, began his presentation with a moment of silence for the victims of the earthquakes that had just weeks prior devastated Gujarat. “A mere twenty-four hours after the mayhem that was caused,” he said, “people are asking, ‘what caste do you belong to?’” He then recounted incidences of discrimination based on caste in the relief efforts after the earthquake. Reports of segregation in emergency camps also circulated in the international media, which added support to Macwan’s presentation and recommendations. See, for example, “Indian quake widens rifts between the castes,” *The Guardian*, February 17, 2001.

⁴⁰¹ The Government of India also set up a committee after the Asian regional conference to investigate the merits of including caste-based discrimination in WCAR. Many activists report that this committee was established to assist in blocking the inclusion.

⁴⁰² Participants in the conference were from India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, South Africa, Japan, Sri Lanka, the Netherlands, Denmark, Germany, Hong Kong SAR, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

⁴⁰³ Final Declaration

in Kathmandu, Nepal in April 2001, reiterated these claims as well as the arguments from the Tehran NGO statement. The Kathmandu statement added that “casteism and racism operate at personal, social and structural levels,” and that it “condemns” the efforts of both the governments of India and Japan to block the inclusion of caste-based discrimination in WCAR. It again described the manifestations of caste as a form of apartheid and boldly asserted that “untouchability is a crime against humanity.”

Debates in the Media

Following the preparatory conference in Tehran, the question of whether caste discrimination could or should be considered at WCAR became the focus of a series of newspaper articles and television programs in India. The debate in the media focused on two main issues: whether caste was akin to race and whether caste-based discrimination should be discussed in an international forum. The conceptualization of the first issue was a warped representation of the key matter in question: that of discrimination and whether caste-based discrimination was analogous to race-based discrimination. Prominent social scientists, such as Andre Beteille and Dipankar Gupta, published articles on the nature of caste and race, and by using both anthropological and sociological theory and their authority as ‘experts,’ they argued that the two were fundamentally incomparable. In the economy of knowledge on caste, these scholars supplied the expert assessment that provided the social theory to corroborate the Indian state’s position. While retorts from dalit activists and scholars of the dalit movement were also published, the government was able to use expert opinions to marginalize the statements made by dalit activists.

Then attorney general of India, Soli J. Sorabjee, represented the government at the preparatory conference in Tehran and published an article about the conference on March 4, 2001 in the *Times of India*. Sorabjee resurrected a biological notion of race and used the separate mention of race and caste in the Indian Constitution to dismiss activists' claims, thereby averting the issue of discrimination all together.⁴⁰⁴ He described the effort by dalit activists to get caste discrimination included in WCAR as "misconceived."⁴⁰⁵ On March 9th, the *Times of India* published a rejoinder from Smita Narula, lead author of the Human Rights Watch report on dalits in India.⁴⁰⁶ Narula described caste discrimination as a global phenomenon, one not limited to India but rather "rampant in numerous Asian countries." Millions, she wrote, continued to suffer from the "segregation, modern-day slavery and extreme forms of exploitation and violence" endemic to this kind of discrimination. Narula argued that the Attorney General's position "effectively undermine[s] India's commitment to the universality of human rights" and that this position had been advanced without consulting Parliament, the National Human Rights

⁴⁰⁴ Sorabjee concludes the article with somewhat cryptic discussion of public toilets as an index of "level of civilization." He notes that most public toilets have an "unbearable stench." He proceeds to describe a Hong Kong jewelry store which has a toilet made out of twenty-four carat gold. Sorabjee explains that the jewelry store owner was inspired by a statement from Lenin in which he apparently said that he would make toilets out of gold for the public after the triumph of socialism. Sorabjee then explains that this vision would be inappropriate for India: "None of this capitalist opulence for socialist India though. We will rest content with clean-functioning toilets. Is this a utopian fancy?" Arjun Appadurai's discussion of the "the politics of shit... a node at which concerns of the human body, dignity, and technology meet," seems useful here. Basil Fernando of the Asian Human Rights Commission wrote a letter in response to Sorabjee's article which reads his discussion of toilets in terms of the 'politics of shit.' See Arjun Appadurai, "Deep Democracy: Urban Governmentality and the Horizon of Politics" *Public Culture* 14:(1), page 39 and Basil Fernando, "The Dirtiest Engagement of Indian Diplomacy: Operation Toilet, A Letter in Reply to Soli Sorabjee, attorney general of India, *Times of India* [find citation]. Fernando states that a significant number of dalits are condemned to "collecting shit" and reads the attorney general's statement as suggestion that this situation should continue. "To prevent the Untouchables from walking out of their toilets," he contends, "is what the Brahmins and their spokespersons are struggling for at this conference and in other forums. A world where caste will be annihilated is seen by them as a Utopia for these discriminated masses and as a smelly place for themselves."

⁴⁰⁵ Soli Sorabjee, "Racism, Name-Changing and Toilets" *Times of India*, March 4, 2001.

⁴⁰⁶ Smita Narula, "Caste Away," Letters to the Editor, *Times of India*, March 9, 2001.

Council, or the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Sorabjee responded to Narula with another letter in which he reiterated his earlier arguments, but added that his arguments had been supported by the expert opinion of social anthropologist Andre Beteille.⁴⁰⁷ Sorabjee also pointed out that Narula lived in New York and worked for a “U.S. NGO,” thereby implicitly evoking a common theme in WCAR discussions: that foreign parties had both initiated and propagated dalit activism to weaken the Indian nation.

Andre Beteille, prominent social anthropologist and professor at Delhi University, had published his assessment of the controversy in *The Hindu* on March 10, one day after the publication of Narula’s letter.⁴⁰⁸ Beteille, who has written extensively on caste in India, highlighted his training as a social anthropologist and identified himself as an expert on the sociological understandings of caste and race.⁴⁰⁹ Using Franz Boas’ work on the distinctions between race, language, and culture, Beteille argued that caste, a social category, had no relation to race, a biological category. Beteille explained that race corresponded to a biological reality and that the Indian population could not be meaningfully categorized by race. He opposed the dalit appeal for inclusion at WCAR as both “politically mischievous” and “scientifically nonsensical.”⁴¹⁰ He claimed that grouping caste and race in the same social category was politically convenient for “interested parties,” but that it amounted to “an act of political and moral

⁴⁰⁷ Soli Sorabjee, “Caste vs. Race,” Letters to the Editor, *Times of India*.

⁴⁰⁸ Andre Beteille, “Race and Caste,” *The Hindu*, March 10, 2001.

⁴⁰⁹ See, for example *Caste, Class, Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965); *Inequality and Social Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972); *Studies in Agrarian Structure* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974); *Essays in Comparative Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁴¹⁰ Interestingly, Beteille also authored an article comparing the social dynamics of race and caste in which he describes the similarities between the two systems. For example, he shows that women at the lowest rungs of both hierarchies are subject to sexual violence from men at the highest. See Andre Beteille, “Race, Caste, and Gender,” *Man*, 25:3 (Sept. 1990) 489- 504.

irresponsibility.” He compared the “irresponsibility” of including caste in WCAR discussions to claims for “superior rights” by white supremacists:

We cannot throw out the concept of race by the front door when it is misused for asserting social superiority and bring it in again through the back door to misuse it in the cause of the oppressed. The metaphor of race is a dangerous weapon whether it is used for asserting white supremacy or for making demands on behalf of disadvantaged groups.

By upholding a biological notion of race, Beteille was able to ignore the social relations that produced the very ideas of human races and consequently, could ignore how race, like caste, is always already accompanied with some form of discrimination and inequality.⁴¹¹

Gail Omvedt, esteemed scholar of B.R. Ambedkar and the dalit movement, responded to Beteille in an article in *The Hindu* on April 10th. Omvedt pointed out the contradictions in Beteille’s understanding of caste and race and reintroduced the issue of discrimination into the debate. She pointed out that while caste and race have distinct histories, the central question in the debate over the inclusion of caste in WCAR was whether caste-based discrimination was comparable to racism. Omvedt contended that both racism and caste-based discrimination “attribute ‘natural’ or essential qualities to people born in specific social groups” and thus the “justifications for caste-based discrimination” are very much related to the “social phenomenon of ‘racism.’” Kalpana Kannabiran, a law professor at NALSAR University of Law in Hyderabad, also

⁴¹¹ In a critique of Beteille’s statement, Zaheer Baber offers a concept of ‘racialization’ to counter his argument. For Baber, ‘racialization’ refers to the “processes through which human groups are categorized, their differences are sought to be naturalized or imparted some biologically inherent properties and to apprehend precisely how this categorization...generates specific structures of social inequality.” Racialization would thus encompass the processes through which individuals are rendered untouchables as well as how individuals are rendered ‘black.’ See Zaheer Baber, “Racism without Races: Reflections on Racialization and Racial Projects,” *Sociology Compass* 4/4 (2010): 241-248.

intervened in the debate with a critique of Beteille.⁴¹² She questioned the “science” that Beteille claimed for the category of race and argued that the division of humans into races was historically “part of a larger exercise of domination.” Dalit activists had translated caste as discrimination and had, as she wrote, revealed the “exclusion, untouchability, denial of constitutional rights and guarantees, violent subjugation and histories of slavery” that constituted the experience of many dalits in India. Kannabiran also claimed that this understanding of caste had its own “intellectual history,” one that did not date to disciplinary anthropology, but rather to “the political work of Indian ideologues who were committed to the establishment of an egalitarian order, and who in that endeavor saw caste as the single most powerful obstacle to the realization of that commitment.” Kannabiran included Jotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, Pandita Ramabai, Periyar and Ambedkar as among these thinkers and leaders. The discussion of caste at WCAR and its inclusion within the purview of the ICERD, she concluded, would be “part of an effort to realize the visions of anti-caste movements in the earlier part of this century.”

An article by another scholar, P. Radhakrishnan, a professor at the Madras Institute of Development Studies, rejected this intellectual history and implicitly accused the activists demanding the inclusion of caste at WCAR of opposing the interests of the nation.⁴¹³ In his essay, Radhakrishnan cited Beteille and the Government of India, and argued that caste and race were distinct phenomena and that caste based discrimination did not meet the sociological definition required for inclusion in the WCAR. Caste, he noted, was an “internal” matter and it was neither appropriate nor prudent to expose

⁴¹² Kalpana Kannabiran, “Race and Caste: A Response to Andre Beteille” *PUCB Bulletin*, August 2001.

⁴¹³ P. Radhakrishnan, “Dalits and Durban,” *The Hindu*, August 27, 2001.

caste-discrimination to an international audience. Like Sorabjee, Radhakrishnan suggested that the move to include caste in WCAR had been initiated by foreign parties. He blamed foreign activists and NGOs for instigating the move to include caste at the WCAR and pointed out that international Christian organizations, such as the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation, supported the dalit activist agenda for WCAR. He also suggested that this agenda was not beneficial to dalits in India. "Ambedkar himself," he writes, "would have found it ludicrous and even abhorrent to showcase caste, even as a tableaux, in an alien land and through a world body of which India is a member-country." Radhakrishnan questioned the motivations of dalit activists and accused dalit activists of "the political appropriation of the caste system" and of personally benefiting from the "Western dole." In argument of spurious logic, he concluded that "if the Dalits could spawn such aggressive, articulate, globetrotting, and internationally acclaimed and influential leaders, they would have overcome long ago their precarious plight as the despised and the damned, the depressed and the downtrodden of the caste society." Radhakrishnan's statement reveals how activists' internationalization of caste discrimination was met with accusations of disloyalty to the nation and of disingenuousness, two accusations that have plagued anti-caste movements since Ambedkar's time. Radhakrishnan seems to suggest that caste discrimination and violence are not as serious as activists contend and in addition, that activists, motivated by self-interest, are guilty of exaggeration and of unfairly harming the nation's international reputation. Policing the nation's reputation seems to be a paramount concern and then renders dalit activism a threat to national interests.

Discussions at WCAR

Two additional preparatory conferences took place the summer before the WCAR. Both meetings – the first from May 17 to June 1 and the second from July 31 to August 10 – were held in Geneva and were attempts to reach a consensus on the draft statement for the WCAR. Martin Macwan, co-founder and then head of the NCDHR, presented his appeal for the inclusion of caste discrimination at WCAR at the May conference. According to the records at his organization in Gujarat, Navsarjan, Macwan was approached by a government official after his presentation. The government official conceded that dalits did indeed face discrimination, but argued to Macwan, in a vein similar to Radhakrishnan, that “we should not wash dirty linen in public.”⁴¹⁴ Macwan replied, “At least you’ve admitted that the linen was dirty and needed to be washed. Now what remains to be decided is that who will do it.” Despite the government’s opposition, Macwan’s presentation in Geneva helped secure plans for a study on the situation of dalits in India. Moreover, the draft declaration for WCAR included a discussion of discrimination based on occupation and descent: Paragraph 73 advocated for all “necessary constitutional, legislative and administrative measures, including appropriate forms of affirmative action, . . . to prohibit and redress discrimination on the basis of work and descent, and that such measures are respected and implemented by all State authorities at all levels.”⁴¹⁵

Just before the WCAR, in August 2001, the Working Paper called for by Resolution 2000/4 on non-discrimination on the basis of work and descent was presented to the fifty-third session of the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of

⁴¹⁴ Navsarjan booklet and organizational records

⁴¹⁵ Draft Programme of Action, WCAR, A/CONF.189/5, August 22, 2001. Para 73.

Human Rights. The report – called the Goonesekere Report for its chief author, Rajendra Kalidas Wimala Goonesekere – reiterated that discrimination based on work and descent violated international human rights law. It also reaffirmed that “descent” in the ICERD did not solely refer to race and also referred to “tribal or caste distinctions as well.”⁴¹⁶ The sketch of discrimination based on work and descent offered in the Goonesekere Report paralleled earlier sociological understandings of caste. The report stated that discrimination based on descent affected those who have “membership in an endogamous group that has been isolated socially and occupationally from other groups in society”; discrimination based on work was described as a form of dual discrimination in which people were “suffering first from the work they must perform and suffering again by the denial of their rights because they perform work that is unacceptable.”⁴¹⁷ It added that both forms of discrimination manifested themselves in terms of prohibitions on marriage, restrictions on access to resources, physical segregation, and restrictions on social contacts and relations. The report discussed discrimination based on work and descent in five countries – India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Japan, and Pakistan – but recognized that this form of discrimination may occur in other places in Asia, in Africa, and in South America. Among the groups identified as victims of this form of discrimination were the “untouchables” of India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Pakistan as well as the Rodiyas or Rodi of Sri Lanka and the Burakumin of Japan. Like the sociological studies conducted in the U.S. over fifty years earlier, the report made an implicit distinction between caste and class, describing India as a “stratified or compartmental society not based on class but on

⁴¹⁶ E/CN.4/Sub.2/2001/16, 14 June 2001, para 4.

⁴¹⁷ E/CN.4/Sub.2/2001/16, 14 June 2001, para 7.

descent or occupation.”⁴¹⁸ The report also discussed differences in the ideologies supporting this kind of discrimination. For example, while a concept of uncleanness or pollution often accompanies systems of discrimination based on descent and work, the report noted that in Pakistan, the concept of “ritual pollution” was not present, but ideas of “privilege and shame” served the same function.⁴¹⁹ The report argued that regardless of these differences, the discriminatory relations in these places were to be categorized under one concept in human rights theory, that of discrimination based on work and descent. It concluded that although the groups mentioned in the report may not constitute a race “as understood in the international instruments,” nonetheless these groups are “in fact a race of broken people with commonalities that bring them together. They speak in many tongues but with one voice to ask for social justice and good governance that will end the miseries in their daily lives. They are a people subject to violations of their human rights.”⁴²⁰

Despite the strength of this statement, coming just days before the start of the Conference, dalit activists were not successful in overcoming the Indian state’s opposition to the inclusion of any reference to caste-based discrimination in the final WCAR declaration and programme of action. On September 2nd, the third day of the Conference, Omar Abdullah, Minister of State for External Affairs, spoke on behalf of the Indian state.⁴²¹ Abdullah celebrated the historic struggle against apartheid in South Africa and referenced India’s international role in fighting racism as well as its domestic

⁴¹⁸ E/CN.4/Sub.2/2001/16, 14 June 2001, para 11.

⁴¹⁹ E/CN.4/Sub.2/2001/16, 14 June 2001, para 43.

⁴²⁰ E/CN.4/Sub.2/2001/16, 14 June 2001, para 48. The report also maintains that states need to do more than pass legislation against discrimination and that they have a positive obligation to these victimized communities. See para 48.

⁴²¹ India Statement by H.E. Mr. Omar Abdullah, Minister of State for External Affairs, WCAR, Durban, South Africa, September 2, 2001. Available at un.org/WCAR/statements/indiaE.htm

commitment, “inspired by Mahatma Gandhi and guided by the legacy of Dr. Ambedkar,” to eliminating discrimination. Despite the reference to Dr. Ambedkar, there was little mention of caste-based discrimination. Abdullah applauded the work the state has done towards eradicating discrimination and criticized dalit appeals to include caste discrimination in WCAR: “In the run up to the world conference,” he stated, “there has been propaganda, highly exaggerated and misleading, often based on anecdotal evidence, regarding caste-based discrimination in India.” Abdullah attempted to block discussion of caste by repudiating the claims of dalit activists and by dismissing the perspective generated from their experiences as “anecdotal” and thus unsuited for such a venue. He added that the government did not consider caste an “appropriate” topic for the Conference, explaining that the purpose of the conference was to check against state-sponsored racism, not, as he puts it, “to engage in social engineering within member states. It is neither legitimate nor feasible nor practical for this Conference or, for that matter, even the UN to legislate, let alone police individual behavior in our societies.” In this statement, the internationalization of caste-based discrimination was couched as a threat and challenge to India’s sovereignty.⁴²² Global support for dalit activism was deemed an act of “social engineering” and an infringement on the fundamental rights of the Indian nation-state in the international community.⁴²³

⁴²² Gail Omvedt discusses India’s opposition to earlier attempts to internationalize caste based discrimination. She writes of a conference on untouchability and racism in 1986 at Columbia University. The government of India blocked a follow-up conference in India and refused research visas to the American organizers of the conference. See Omvedt, “The UN, Racism, and Caste.”

⁴²³ Interestingly, the Government of India was at odds with its own human rights commission at the WCAR. Justice K. Ramaswamy of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) spoke at the Conference on September 5th and affirmed that caste-based discrimination should be discussed at WCAR. “It is not so much the nomenclature of the form of discrimination that must engage our attention,” he explained, “but the fact of its persistence that must cause concern.” Ramaswamy argued that the WCAR held a “singular opportunity to the international community” to discuss the persistence of discrimination and recommend ways of ending it. The NHRC thus argued that caste-based discrimination was within the

Dalit activists, however, were successful in getting a lengthy discussion of caste discrimination included in the final declaration of the WCAR NGO Forum. This statement unequivocally pronounced caste discrimination a global problem: “the caste system,” the Declaration reads, “discriminates against and enables segregation of communities on the basis of work and descent, such as Dalits in South Asia, the Buraku people of Japan, the Osu and Oru people of Nigeria and the Griots of Senegal.”⁴²⁴ Caste discrimination was not causally linked to Hinduism nor was it singularly associated with any one religion. The NGO statement also described the condition of dalits in some of the most powerful terminology in the language of human rights. It proclaimed that caste-discrimination constituted a “system of ‘Hidden apartheid,’ and that “caste discrimination and ‘untouchability’ practiced against Dalits for centuries amounted to systemic ‘generational and cultural Dalitcide,’ which is the mass-scale destruction of their individual and collective identity, dignity, and self-respect.”⁴²⁵ The term “dalitcide” evokes the gravity of genocide and mandates immediate international action. Moreover, the statement recommends that “work and descent based discrimination, including caste discrimination,” be internationally declared “Crimes against Humanity.”⁴²⁶ The NGO statement also declares that communities most negatively impacted by caste and discrimination based on work and descent, such as the dalits and Buraku people, are entitled to reparations for “centuries-old wrongdoings committed against these communities.”⁴²⁷ Effected governments were asked to introduce mechanisms “for the

purview of the WCAR. See Statement of the National Human Rights Commission of India, Dr. Justice K. Ramaswamy, Member. Available at un.org/WCAR/statements/india_hrE.htm

⁴²⁴ WCAR NGO Forum Declaration, September 3, 2001, para 52.

⁴²⁵ WCAR NGO Forum Declaration, para 86 and 87.

⁴²⁶ WCAR NGO Forum Declaration, para 268.

⁴²⁷ WCAR NGO Forum Declaration, para 275.

purpose of restitution, monetary compensation, rehabilitation and for ensuring guarantees of non-repetition.”

At the onset of the conference, Paragraph 73 – the only reference to discrimination on the basis of work and descent and therefore caste discrimination – was supported by several countries; in fact, only the People’s Republic of China sided with the Indian government that this form of discrimination should not be included in the Conference document. Despite public protests by dalit activists and a hunger strike by dalit representatives, Paragraph 73 was bracketed and left open to negotiation. By the end of the conference, Paragraph 73, along with fifty paragraphs related mostly to the situation of the Palestinians and reparations for the transatlantic slave trade, was dropped. The final Conference declaration did not include any language about caste discrimination or discrimination on the basis of work and descent. India’s “delay tactics” along with “trade-offs” with the USA and European countries – in which Indian support on issues related to the Palestinians and reparations for slavery was exchanged for support on the caste issue – were suspected in causing the removal of Paragraph 73.⁴²⁸

“It was a repetition of the Second Roundtable Conference,” said Martin Macwan, describing the WCAR in our interview.⁴²⁹ Just as Ambedkar’s proposal for separate electorates was derailed by Gandhi’s refusal to see the Depressed Classes as a minority distinct from the Hindu community, the Government of India, Macwan suggested, similarly blocked the inclusion of any reference to caste-based discrimination in the final

⁴²⁸ See essays by Macwan, Divakar, and Prove in *Caste, Race and Discrimination* .

⁴²⁹ Interview with Martin Macwan.

WCAR conference statement. Gandhi had insisted that the problem of untouchability be resolved from within the Hindu community, through repentance and service to the downtrodden. Ultimately, however, it was not Gandhi's argument against separate electorates, but rather, his "fast unto death" that forced Ambedkar to settle for reserved seats in the general electorate, a much more diluted form of political empowerment than that offered by separate electorates. Nearly seventy years later, with an argument similar to Gandhi's, the Government of India claimed that caste-based discrimination was an internal matter, specific to India and outside the scope of international human rights instruments. Once again, it was not the strength of the argument or rhetoric about caste as an internal matter that thwarted the dalit political agenda, but instead, as many suspected, a politically convenient alliance between India, the United States, and European countries. There were other striking similarities between these two moments of the internationalization of caste discrimination.⁴³⁰ Accusations of disloyalty to the nation and of subverting the interests of the nation marred dalit activism at Durban as it had Ambedkar in negotiations with the British. Both events also blocked a key political mechanism for dalit empowerment and were experienced by many dalits as a betrayal.

Despite the failure of the dalit initiative to obtain the international legal protections available to victims of race-based discrimination at WCAR, many activists saw the event as a success. Dalit activists had succeeded in galvanizing considerable support and increasing the visibility of caste-based discrimination and the plight of dalits

⁴³⁰ B.R. Ambedkar advocacy for separate electorates for the depressed classes is considered by many dalit activists to be the first time caste-based discrimination was discussed at an international forum. See, for example, Paul Divakar, "Post-Durban Reflections: Color Line – Caste Line," in Sukhdeo Thorat and Umakant, eds. *Caste, Race and Discrimination: Discourses in International Context* (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2004) 319. Divakar also writes that Ambedkar said that he would not accept dominion status unless there was a guarantee that untouchability would be abolished.

in India. Activists were also able to bolster existing transnational alliances and create new ones. Furthermore, after the 2001 conference, not only did U.N. human rights bodies explicitly reference caste-based discrimination as a violation of human rights, but also in December 2006 Prime Minister Manmohan Singh conceded the gravity of the problem of caste and untouchability in contemporary India by comparing it to Apartheid.⁴³¹ These post-Durban successes for dalit activism were due in part to the creative use of human rights and the definition and scope of “caste” in international dalit activism.

⁴³¹ Derrida’s comment on the use of the term ‘Apartheid’ seems relevant here. He writes, “One name for another, a part for the whole: the historic violence of Apartheid can always be treated as a metonym. In its past as well as in its present. By diverse paths (condensation, displacement, expression, or representation), one can always decipher through its singularity so many other kinds of violence going on in the world. At once part, cause, effect, example, what is happening there translates what takes place here, always here, wherever one is and wherever one looks, closest to home. Infinite responsibility, therefore, no rest allowed for any form of good conscience.” See Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 2006) xv.

Chapter 6

The NFDW and Transnational Dalit Feminist Activism

In 1985, Ruth Manorama, a dalit social worker and community activist from Tamil Nadu, participated in what she described as a “cultural exchange program between blacks and dalits.”⁴³² During an interview I had with her in 2009, Manorama spoke about her participation in the program. She said that she had been perplexed by black women’s relationship to the woman’s movement in the United States and had been interested in learning about why, as she said, “they are called black feminists” instead of just “feminists.” Manorama studied the issues affecting black women and their exclusion from the mainstream feminist movement in the United States. She also researched the situation of black women in South Africa and their participation in the movement against apartheid. She recalled that what she learned helped her discern a similarity in condition and struggle with black women in the U.S. and South Africa: their lives, she claimed, are “so similar to the life of the dalits.” Ruth said that the program also enabled her to recognize that the predicaments facing dalit women – predicaments that were different from both other Indian women and dalit men – were shared by other marginalized communities and that a global perspective, a turn outward and abroad for alliances, could benefit dalit women. Ruth recounted that it was during the program that she first recognized the importance of asserting dalit women’s difference and of having, as she put it, “a dalit woman’s separate platform, a separate organization.”

⁴³² Ruth Manorama, interview by author, September 2009, Bangalore, India.

In this chapter, I discuss this “separate platform” through an analysis of the development, ideology, and activities of the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW), an organization founded by Manorama to connect and represent dalit women from across India. The NFDW provides a platform for dalit women to contend with two challenges: one, the male-dominated dalit movement; and two, a women’s movement in India dominated by upper-caste women, issues and concerns.

In an article that came out shortly after the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, Gopal Guru discussed the formation of autonomous dalit women’s organizations, such as the NFDW, and the rise of identity politics by dalit women.⁴³³ He argued that that dalit women “need to talk differently” because of factors internal and external to the dalit community: they experienced political and cultural marginalization within the dalit community, and mainstream feminists were resistant to analyzing caste in addition to class and gender inequality. Dalit women, he maintained, thus could not be represented by dalit men or non-dalit women; they could only represent themselves. Guru celebrated the emergence of a politics of difference among dalit women and suggested that it avoided many of the problems of identity-based politics. As he concluded, “dalit women’s perception while critical of the homogenization of a dominant discourse does not make a fetish of its own reality, and therefore prevents the ghettoisation of dalithood.”⁴³⁴ Guru failed to consider, however, that the problem with identity politics extends beyond the possibility of ghettoization; rather, it risks excluding some groups and fixing and privileging particular identities as authentic.

⁴³³ Gopal Guru, “Dalit Women Talk Differently,” *Economic and Political Weekly* (Oct. 14-21, 1995): 2548-2550.

⁴³⁴ Guru, “Dalit Women Talk Differently,” 2550.

Sharmila Rege contested Guru's suggestion that experience yields more authentic knowledge, the premise of his celebration of a politics of difference, and argued that his notion of "difference" could actually dilute the emancipatory potential of dalit women's perspectives. Such a concept of 'difference,' she cautioned, "could render dalit women's independent assertion an exclusive politics of identity."⁴³⁵ Rege argued that the concept of difference had "limited political and analytical use" if not put into dialogue with other ideological positions. The mere assertion of difference and difference in epistemological standpoint would then simply lead to a plurality of standpoints, without interrogating upper caste/class assumptions. She notes that an analysis of patriarchy that captured how caste hierarchy was part and parcel of gender subordination had been glaringly absent in the major feminist campaigns of the 1970s and 1980s. For the leftist women's organization of that time, the notion of sisterhood and an undifferentiated feminist standpoint superseded class and caste differences; in addition, caste as a category of analysis was subsumed by class and rendered redundant. The establishment of autonomous dalit women's organizations, such as the NFDW, thus heralded more than a mere assertion of difference. As she concluded, "It is apparent that the issues underlined by the new dalit women's movement go beyond the naming of 'difference' of dalit women and calls for a revolutionary epistemological shift to a dalit feminist standpoint."⁴³⁶

In this chapter, I draw from both Guru and Rege's insights on autonomous dalit feminist organizing, but argue that the assertion of difference – difference in structural

⁴³⁵ See Sharmila Rege, "Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of 'Difference' and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position," *Economic and Political Weekly* 33, 44 (Oct. 31-Nov. 6, 1998): WS39-WS46; and Sharmila Rege, *Writing Caste/ Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006).

⁴³⁶ Rege, "A Critique of Difference," W45.

position and epistemological standpoint – from both other Indian women and dalit men has also enabled affective and political bonds across nation-state borders. The concept of “difference” has been utilized for transnational activism and to put forth a critique of the mainstream social justice movements in India. This chapter demonstrates that NFDW aspires to overcome the limitations of these social movements by connecting with other comparably ‘marginalized’ communities of women and participating in transnational alliances.

Establishing the NFDW, and ‘Dalit Women’

After completing the “exchange program between blacks and dalits,” Ruth Manorama joined Women’s Voice, a Bangalore-based NGO that worked with the urban poor. While at Women’s Voice, Ruth collaborated on a circular which invited dalit women from across India to attend a conference in Bangalore on International Women’s Day, March 8, 1987.⁴³⁷ The circular claimed that dalit women’s experiences were not being represented by the mainstream feminist movement. Dalit women, it argued, are “triple-alienated” and their condition in society could only be understood by analyzing the intersections of caste, class, and gender inequality in their lives.⁴³⁸ This announcement initiated the movement for identifying dalit women as a distinct social category, a process that would lead to the founding of the National Federation of Dalit Women in 1995.

⁴³⁷ Ruth also told me that she also invited “a black women from America... She was working in Geneva on a program on racism,” thereby indicating that as early as 1987, she was thinking about getting the support of other marginalized women and taking the problems faced by dalit women to the UN.

⁴³⁸ Ruth recalls using the term “triple alienated” or something approximate in the circular.

The 1987 meeting was sponsored by Women's Voice and the Christian Dalit Liberation Movement, a national organization based in Vellore, Tamil Nadu.⁴³⁹ The meeting brought together dalit women from across the country and provided a space to discuss issues specific to their lives. Ruth recalled that the women at the meeting shared a loss of faith in the institutions and ideologies that were supposed to deliver justice and a better quality of life: the state, they lamented, had failed to fulfill its Constitutional obligations; the Indian women's movement had neglected issues affecting dalit women and did not give dalits leadership roles; and dalit and other leftist movements exhibited a clear masculinist bias and did not properly address issues affecting women. Dalit feminism emerged from this crisis in received models for change and offered a new ideology for the restructuring of social relations. According to official accounts, participants at the conference recognized both the "need to organize themselves in order to address their special needs and problems" and the urgency of making 'dalit women' into a visible social constituency.⁴⁴⁰ Following the preliminary meeting in 1987, a national taskforce of seventeen women from different regions was created and dalit women's groups began convening at both the state and regional levels.

In the early 1990s, mainstream women's organizations in India were preparing for the Fourth World Conference on Women, to be held in Beijing, China in 1995 ("Beijing Conference"). Given their experience of exclusion from the mainstream Indian feminist movement, Dalit activists felt a need for separate representation at the Conference and

⁴³⁹ Women's Voice was one of over a score of organizations interviewed for Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah's survey of the contemporary women's movement in India. See Nandita Shah and Nandita Gandhi. *The Issues at Stake: Theory and Practice in the Contemporary Women's Movement in India*. (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1991). Interestingly, neither the 1987 meeting of dalit women nor the organization's work with dalit women was recognized in the book.

⁴⁴⁰ NFDW, "National Federation of Dalit Women" (Bangalore, India).

also believed that it held a “golden opportunity to mobilize, educate and disseminate information.” In preparation for the Conference, Women’s Voice and the Asian Women’s Human Rights Council held a public hearing in Bangalore on crimes against dalits and particularly against dalit women. The forum heard testimonies from hundreds of victims/survivors and provided a public space for sharing experiences of caste-based violence and injustice for the first time in India.⁴⁴¹ With the Beijing Conference approaching, dalit feminists from the Women’s Voice helped assemble a delegation for the Conference and officially established the National Federation of Dalit Women as a “secular, autonomous and democratic” organization on August 11, 1995. At the time of my fieldwork, the organization was housed in a small three-room office in Bangalore. Despite the seeming shortage of space, staff, technology (the organization seemed to have only one computer, printer, and copier), and repair-work to the aging building, the office managed to generate a significant national and transnational presence through this office. The office included a library and archive of the NFDW’s activities, to which I was generously given full and free access.

The organization was created for the dual purpose of concretizing the category of “dalit women” and representing the community nationally and internationally.⁴⁴² Early goals of the organization included the development of a national human rights

⁴⁴¹ I am using the term “victim/survivor” because while I find both terms inadequate. I do not want to assume the passivity implied by “victim,” and the term “survivor” not only implies a recovery I cannot attest to, but it also does not give proper respect to people who have died from violence. Barbara Ehrenreich discusses how the term “survivor” in cancer discourse is insulting to the dead. See Barbara Ehrenreich, “Welcome to Cancerland: A Mammogram Leads to a Cult of Pink Kitsch” *Harpers* (Nov. 2001).

⁴⁴² Gayatri Spivak’s discussion of the dual meaning of “representation” is useful here: “representation” means both “portrait” and “proxy.” To represent is to depict and stand for/speak for. NFDW is actually striving to do both by arguing that dalit women constitute a distinct political category. This seems similar to Ambedkar’s attempt to make the Depressed Classes a separate political category with separate electorates. See Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan1988), 271-313.

commission to monitor crimes against dalits, the establishment of state-level committees, and the creation resources, such as scholarships, for dalit women's education. From its founding, the NFDW listed "building international solidarity and linkages with other oppressed groups" one of its central goals and argued that a transnational approach was indispensable to solving the problems facing dalit women.

The Beijing Conference provided the NFDW a fortuitous opening into the international arena of women's rights; it increased the visibility of caste-based issues and enabled dalit feminists to network with other activists.⁴⁴³ The NFDW helped over eighty dalit women participate in Beijing and organized a seminar on the conditions of dalits in India. Ruth Manorama, as key spokesperson for the NFDW, delivered the main presentation, entitled "Dalit Women in Struggle: Transforming Pain into Power."⁴⁴⁴ The presentation described the caste system and untouchability in terms that could resonate globally. Manorama constructed equivalences and made analogies between caste-based discrimination and more internationally visible forms of discrimination, arguing, for example, that "racial discrimination on the basis of the caste system is probably the longest surviving hierarchal system in existence in the world today."⁴⁴⁵ Manorama also evoked the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and provided examples of how the rights of "life, liberty and security of person and property rights" were consistently denied or violently violated, often with state complicity. By framing "life, struggles, and aspirations" of dalit women in terms of the struggle for human rights

⁴⁴³ For example, after meeting members of the NFDW at Beijing, Nepali dalit women were inspired to establish their own organization.

⁴⁴⁴ See Ruth Manorama, "Dalit Women in Struggle: Transforming Pain into Power," presented at the International Seminar on Dalit Women: Life, Struggles and Aspirations, held at the NGO Forum of the Fourth World Conference on women, 1995, Beijing, China.

⁴⁴⁵ See Ruth Manorama, "Dalit Women in Struggle." It seems significant that in 1995, six years before the Durban conference, dalit activists are framing caste-based discrimination as a form of racial discrimination.

and against racial discrimination, Manorama's presentation was able to counter the assumed "uniqueness" of caste and placed the annihilation of the caste system and the protection of dalits within the scope of global social justice movements.

In her presentation at the Beijing Conference, Manorama argued that dalits, despite being a "heterogeneous people" with regional, linguistic, religious, and class differences, constituted a discrete social unit and "still preserve[d] distinct ethnic and religious cultural heritage." She claimed that dalits were the "indigenous people of India," but today, were "politically voiceless," "a lost humanity, a dispossessed community... living in segregated condition[s]." Dalits, she explained, were subject to degrading and humiliating violence that was designed to enforce a low status in society. Although dalit women suffered the brunt of this violence, she added, the women's movement in India had not "seriously" taken up this issue. Manorama deemed dalit women the most marginalized in society: a group "thrice alienated on the basis of their class (poor), caste (outcaste), and gender" and forced to live in a "culture of silence" about their experiences. In Ruth's assessment, this position made the perspective and aspirations of dalit women all the more important for the dalit movement:

The role of Dalit women is crucial and it is [the] center of Dalit liberation and Dalit identity, in the larger movement and struggle of the Dalits. The place of women in the Dalit vision is more than an equal partner with men and this must form the main path of alternative consciousness. In essence, the Dalit vision and alternative consciousness is primarily feminist, non-patriarchal, non-hierarchical and positively ecological.

Manorama called for the reevaluation and re-centering of the dominant social justice philosophies in India and claimed that dalit feminism was crucial to this reassessment.

"To this end," Ruth stated, "the Dalit women in India look towards international women for solidarity and support."

At the Beijing Conference, Ruth also drew attention to the “growing fundamentalist, communalist and castist forces in India.” The NFDW’s alternative social vision, she argued, worked to counteract these forces and subvert their impact on the political and social climate in India. The idea that dalit feminism provided a necessary and urgent corrective to discriminatory ideologies in India and abroad was a recurring theme in NFDW’s international work. The organization stated that dalit feminism, as both a political and cultural movement, “will serve as a medium to counter ideas of globalization and Hindutva, which devalue women, homogenize diversity and erode the egalitarian practice that are part of dalit women’s lives.”⁴⁴⁶ The NFDW reiterated this idea in 2001 at the NGO forum of the World Conference Against Racism.⁴⁴⁷ The organization’s statement cited the evisceration of the values of the Indian Constitution and the “systematic undermining of the right to life, livelihood and dignity” by Hindutva forces. It also implicitly connected the plight of dalits to the plights of many in countries compelled to liberalize their economies. The “globalization of the economy,” it argued, “has led to a crisis of survival.” The NFDW maintained that a dalit feminist perspective – one that insists on equity in opportunity, the economic empowerment of the marginalized, and the environmental protection of natural resources – served as a timely intervention into ongoing and destructive global processes.

On the national level, the NFDW periodically holds conventions, conferences and workshops. These conventions gather dalit women from across the country and provide a

⁴⁴⁶ NFDW, “National Federation of Dalit Women.”

⁴⁴⁷ Here too, the statement situates the issues in terms of the “universality of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the growing consensus on the indivisibility and interdependence of human rights generally.”

space to cultivate new forms of leadership and coordination.⁴⁴⁸ The national conventions also foster alliances across states and regions and enable discussion of key issues and concerns. Conferences reach beyond the dalit community to raise awareness in the Indian public and thus also serve as advocacy for dalit women. For example, in 2006, the NFDW and National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) joined efforts to convene the first national conference on violence against dalit women. Held in New Delhi, the conference served as a forum for survivors, activists, politicians, and scholars to come together, exchange knowledge, and strategize on ways to protect and support dalit women. While hoping to direct the country's attention to the conditions many dalit women face, the NFDW and NCDHR also used the opportunity to publically censure the state for its "failure...to protect and promote Dalit women's rights."⁴⁴⁹

The conference statement ("Delhi Declaration") was symbolically passed on International Women's Day, March 8, 2006. It discussed both the contributions of dalit women to the country, and the consequences of the exploitation of their labor: "the surplus capital created by them [dalit women] by not accessing statutory minimum and equal wages for her labour...run into millions of rupees, contributing to the wealth and comfort of families and communities at the cost of her self-development, health and family."⁴⁵⁰ The conference declaration also detailed disparities in the prevalence of violence, poverty, and sickness between dalit women and other populations and identified the caste and gender ideologies that underlie these disparities. For example, the

⁴⁴⁸ The models provided by other organizational structures and ways of functioning have been deemed inadequate by the NFDW. For example, The NFDW critiques "the male dominated dalit movement and varied organizations of the oppressed castes" for "adopting the ways of functioning of the upper caste dominated mainstream political organizations." See NFDW, "Declaration from Fifth National Convention."

⁴⁴⁹ NFDW and NCDHR, "Delhi Declaration: National Conference on Violence Against Dalit Women," (New Delhi, March 7-8, 2006).

⁴⁵⁰ NFDW and NCDHR, "Delhi Declaration."

“‘worldview’ of the dominant caste” was shown to endanger dalit women; by marking them as “inferior, impure, low character, easily available and accessible,” this view exposed dalit women to greater vulnerability to violence. The Delhi Declaration noted that this view was prevalent among “dominant caste women” who “have in some instances been found to support and encourage their men to commit crimes against Dalit women.” Here, the statement reiterated one of the central arguments of the dalit feminist critique: “Indian women” do not constitute one coherent category; some women have more access to power than others and hold power over other women.⁴⁵¹ This argument provided the primary reasoning for the NFDW’s insistence that dalit women constituted a distinct and separate social category, a demand restated in the Delhi Declaration.

The Delhi conference identified two primary forms of violence against dalit women: violence within the family and violence that is embedded in the functioning of the larger society. Violence in the home was related to the prevalence of “patriarchal values” in dalit communities; the conference statement explained that demands for money and often, abuse of alcohol by men resulted in violence towards mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters.⁴⁵² Alternatively, violence that was “rooted in the caste ethos” served to enforce social hierarchy; it became a “weapon for the continued caste-class-gender subjugation and exploitation of dalit women and the community as a whole.” The conference statement argued that this category of violence, a particularly “gruesome” form, “seems to be reserved for dalit women.” This was violence designed to reinforce

⁴⁵¹ Both Aida Hurtado and Chandra Talpade Mohanty discuss the relations of power between women context of the United States and the global North and South, respectively. See Aida Hurtado, *The Color of Privilege* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996); Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

⁴⁵² Patriarchal values include the “inability to bear children, not bearing male children, suspected extra-marital relationship, being good looking in some cases or ugly in others, denying sex to husband, demanding property, demanding freedom or asserting her space and rights.”

traditional obligations and duties and was often retribution for the exercise of legitimate, state-endowed powers and rights.⁴⁵³ It was violence that not only assaulted the body, but also shamed and humiliated; it functioned to strip an individual and community of dignity and was “often a tool to perpetuate a culture of silence and crush the spirit.”⁴⁵⁴ Although staged as a national conference, the declaration concluded with a plea to the international community, in particular to women’s rights and development organizations, to recognize caste-based discrimination as a human rights violation, integrate an assessment of caste into development programs, and “extend solidarity to Dalit women’s causes and concerns.”

At the conclusion of the Delhi Conference, activists called for an international conference on violence against dalit women. A conference at a global venue held the possibility of generating more international interest in dalit rights and building stronger transnational relationships for the dalit movement. In November 2006, just a few months after the National Conference on Violence Against Dalit Women, the NFDW and NCDHR joined with the Feminist Dalit Organisation of Nepal, the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN), Dalit Network Netherlands (DNN), and Justicia et Pax Netherlands to hold the International Conference on the Human Rights of Dalit Women in the Hague, Netherlands. Thematically, the conference continued the focus of the New Delhi conference, namely, on how “caste, class and gender discrimination prevents Dalit women from enjoying their basic human rights” and how violence sustains “systemic

⁴⁵³ These powers and rights include voting in line with preference, trying to work in a position of authority, participating in religious or cultural events, trying to get a crime registered, marrying across caste boundaries, and “simply questioning the illegal or extra-legal behavior of dominant caste members or deciding to seek justice in an atrocity.”

⁴⁵⁴ For example, the declaration cites “extreme filthy verbal abuse and sexual epithets, naked parading, dismemberment, forced to drink urine and feces, tied to a pole and beaten, branding, pulling out of teeth/tongue/nail, and violence” as among this form of violence. See NFDW and NCDHR, “Delhi Declaration.”

discrimination.”⁴⁵⁵ The Hague Conference also categorized violence against dalit women in terms of violence within the family and violence committed by more dominant castes. Instead of merely pointing out the state’s failure to protect dalit women, however, the declaration at the Hague Conference went one step further than the Delhi Declaration: it identified a “collusion between the state and dominant castes” and cited this relationship as explanation for why perpetrators can violate the rights and freedoms of dalit women with impunity. It argued that two parallel systems of authority, one deriving power from the Constitution and the other from caste ideology, operate in society and that the protections, rights and freedoms guaranteed by the state are meaningless when confronted by the latter. As the declaration stated, “the modern rule of law has no place in the hierarchal order of socioeconomic and political power relationships, as caste-based power supersedes state-derived executive authority.” The Hague Declaration called on the governments of Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka to “take seriously the voices of Dalit women” and implored the international community for assistance. It asked the international community to “express its outrage” at the situation of dalits in South Asia and “undertake and support every possible measure to fight the widespread discrimination, violence and impunity committed against Dalit women.”

The NFDW was one among multiple organizations that sponsored the Hague Conference. Although the Hague Declaration is consistent with its platform, materials circulated at the conference seem to diverge from the politics of the NFDW. For example, a portfolio distributed by the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights, entitled *3,000*

⁴⁵⁵ The conference statement, however, uses the term “intersectional” to describe the discrimination faced by dalit women. The use of this term may indicate the resonance of the theories behind multiracial feminism and may also point to how dalit women are aligning themselves with a particular line of feminist thought. See “The Hague Declaration on the Human Rights and Dignity of Dalit Women,” The Hague, November 21, 2006.

Years...How Much Longer, put forth an analysis of violence that deviates from, and at times contradicts, that of the NFDW. A factsheet in the portfolio states that “the Dalit woman faces violence at home from Dalit men, who compensate for their humiliation and lack of power by venting their frustration on their wives, daughters and mothers.”⁴⁵⁶

While the NFDW views “patriarchal values” as underlying family violence, the NCDHR factsheet suggests that the disempowered condition of dalit men is one of the root causes of family violence. According to this logic, it is not the dismantling of patriarchy and the empowerment of women that would reduce violence against women, but rather, the empowerment of men.⁴⁵⁷ In the NCDHR’s assessment, “patriarchal values” are not addressed and caste hierarchy explains the problem of family violence.

A similar privileging of the male dalit experience pervades the NCDHR’s analysis of upper caste violence against dalit women. The same factsheet in the portfolio stated that the dalit woman is

routinely molested, offensively groped and gangraped by upper caste men to teach her community a lesson. To remind them of their position in society. Cases have been recorded of feudal landlords bursting into a dalit marriage to claim ‘the first night privilege with the bride.’

Here, “community” seems to stand in for “men.” Whereas NFDW literature explained that the prevalence of “patriarchal notions of community honour residing in women” created a context in which “dominant caste violence against dalit women...punish[es] the entire Dalit community,” the NCDHR’s factsheet assumed the perspective of an

⁴⁵⁶ NCDHR, “In search of justice,” in *3,000...How Much Longer?*, conference portfolio at The International Conference on the Human Rights of Dalit Women, Hague, Netherlands, 2006.

⁴⁵⁷ Also, if disempowerment is a causal factor, it would manifests itself as violence against women because of an underlying patriarchal structure in society.

emasculated man and failed to explain the context in which violating a dalit woman would teach “her community” a lesson.

The NCDHR portfolio used representations of dalit women’s suffering that subtly, yet significantly, diverged from those of the NFDW. While descriptions of suffering and humiliation help translate untouchability and make its experiences accessible to a global audience, some descriptions in the NCDHR portfolio were so replete with lurid and gruesome detail that they bordered on the sensationalistic. For example, the back cover of the conference portfolio prepared by the NCDHR for the Hague Conference listed terms that provided a sketch of the experiences endured by dalit women. Printed in a light gray ink against a dark gray background, the terms – “molestation, sexual abuse, discrimination, oppression, exclusion, outcaste, untouchable, spat upon, rape, murder, beaten, humiliated, stripped, disrobed, paraded naked, forced to eat shit and urine, kicked, tortured, burnt to death, blinded, scalded, hot oil poured” – are listed in English in a vertical column and followed by five columns of translations into Dutch, French, German, Spanish and Italian. The cover enumerated many of the spectacular dimensions of violence against dalit women, but in the absence of an analysis of everyday structural conditions or connection to an individual’s account, it seemed to work against the political project of dalit feminism. Instead of portraying the “strength,” “resistance,” and “contributions” of dalit women, descriptions like the ones used by the NCDHR at the Hague Conference, objectify the survivor/victim of caste and gender based crimes and exploit tropes of third-world women’s victimhood.⁴⁵⁸ The NCDHR also

⁴⁵⁸ For example, the Hague Conference declaration makes a point to assert that dalit women are not “passive victims,” but rather have continuously “turned their ‘suffering’ into... resistance” and have “contributed to the welfare of their families, sustained their communities, given their labour for producing food and wealth for their countries.”

described the experience of dalit women in the superlative. For example, a factsheet stated that “Women the world over suffer discrimination. But never in the history of the universe has any group faced over 4000 years of persistent and continued oppression.”⁴⁵⁹ The NCDHR campaign implied that dalit women suffer the most and experience the worst forms of oppression. This placed them at the top of an economy of suffering that seems to inform the international market in women’s issues, thereby rendering them the most in need of international assistance.

The use of such representations suggests a continued insensitivity to gender issues in the dominant dalit movement. Sapna, a dalit activist, spoke to me about the frustration she’s felt with the images and rhetoric that have been used to advertise the dalit cause.⁴⁶⁰ While international campaigns sometimes hinged on depictions of dalit women’s suffering and humiliation, the insensitivity of male activists to the interests of dalit women were apparent in how they framed the problems of caste and untouchability. For example, Sapna told me about an incident in which an international dalit organization posted a photograph of a woman who had been stripped and gang-raped. Taken soon after the assault, the photograph showed the woman prostrate, bruised and nearly naked. The photograph was posted to the NGO’s website without consulting the woman or getting her consent.

Sapna explained how publication of the photograph worked against the interests of the woman and actually produced more harm to her. By exposing the woman’s nearly naked and vulnerable body to countless viewers, the organization, which was supposed to work for dalit empowerment and rights, further violated the woman’s dignity, privacy

⁴⁵⁹ NCDHR, *3,000...How Much Longer?*

⁴⁶⁰ This name has been changed to protect the informant’s privacy. Interview with activist by author.

and modesty, perhaps amplifying the trauma of the primary assault. In an attempt to galvanize an international public and increase awareness of the condition of dalits in India, the NGO failed to consider the actual concerns of the woman by publicizing her assault. Sapna argued that the organization's disregard for the actual concerns and well-being of the woman shown in the picture, and more generally, dalit women, revealed an extreme insensitivity to gender among some dalit leaders. When Sapna posted her criticism of the publication of the photograph on an activist list serve and demanded that the photograph be removed from the website, she found that she was the lone voice of opposition. Not only were her criticisms not supported by other activists, but Sapna was reproached by several activists for her comments.

Difference as Critique and Possibility

The intellectual project of dalit feminism, as imagined by the NFDW, is premised on two principles: one, that “women” or “Indian women” do not constitute a unitary social category and two, that gender inequality cannot be assessed in isolation, but rather, must be analyzed alongside other social variables such as class and caste status. As Manorama explained, “today, in an Indian context, when you look at women as a whole, you don't have the same or homogenous issues to relate to. We have different issues...because we are at the lowest in the hierarchy of society.” Dalit women, in Manorama's words, “share very specific discrimination”; they share a difference in position, perspective, and experience from other communities of women. “Therefore,” Manorama argues, “we need to look at ourselves as a very specific category of women.”

The assertion of difference has also facilitated dalit feminist transnationalism. As alluded to in the conversation with Manorama detailed at the beginning of this chapter, the recognition of “difference” – difference in structural position and epistemological standpoint – from both Indian women and dalit men has also enabled affective and political bonds across nation-state borders. In this section, I examine how the conceptualization of ‘dalit women’s difference’ has served as a critique of identity-based social movements in India as well as a basis for building solidarity and alliances with communities of women outside of India.

The mainstream women’s movement in India, explained Seema, a dalit rights activist, is run by “middle class and upper caste women”; they, she added, “are only talking about the problems of women of their castes.”⁴⁶¹ “Dalits are also patriarchal and dalit women have realized this,” she continued. According to Seema, the organizations of the mainstream movement have not addressed practices such as manual scavenging or the devadasi system as *feminist* issues and have ignored the *caste*-dimensions of the violence and poverty that afflict dalit women. Moreover, the predominant theoretical orientation guiding the mainstream movement seems to dismiss the relevance of caste to the analysis of patriarchy and to feminist activism. As Seema pointed out, while gender and class are analyzed as variables affecting power and opportunity in society, “the caste perspective is not there [among feminists]...they will think that a dalit woman suffers inequality because she is a woman and is poor...Mainstream feminism will say that its class, not caste.”⁴⁶² Seema claimed that the “mainstream women’s movement doesn’t *want* to see

⁴⁶¹ This name has been changed to protect the informant’s privacy. Interview with dalit activist by author.

⁴⁶² Seema shared an anecdote that revealed this lack of awareness: While attending a seminar on women’s studies and feminism, Seema raised questions about caste and pointed out the shortcomings of the theories presented. The other women at the seminar told her that knowledge of women studies was limited and that

caste [emphasis mine],” thereby implying that the neglect of caste is not only rooted in ignorance, but also in the interest of caste privilege.

According to Ruth, for dalit feminists, caste was “the central thing,” without which patriarchy, constructions of gender, and class inequality could not be understood. Ruth recounted that she “told them [mainstream feminists], the women in India, leave alone dalit women, any women will not be liberated... unless they bring in an analysis of caste to the analysis of oppression in India.” Without examining the primacy of caste in practices of privilege and discrimination, Ruth declared, even dominant caste women’s “liberation is not full; their liberation is not possible.” “I think the general feminist movement did not understand this,” she added, “because they are not in a position to understand it.” Feminists who inhabited a position of caste privilege, failed to create an ideological platform wide enough to advocate for and represent those, who are, as Seema said, “at the bottom of the bottom.”

The description of the Indian women’s movement provided in Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah’s *Issues at Stake: Theory and Practice in the Contemporary Women’s Movement in India* illustrates the gaps and shortcomings of the mainstream feminist activism in India.⁴⁶³ The authors, two prominent activists, visited over a score of women’s organizations across the country.⁴⁶⁴ The resulting exposition includes accounts

she was “not clear on the concepts” underpinning feminism. While made to feel embarrassed and ill-prepared, Seema insisted that a documentary on caste in India, *India Untouched*, be shown in the seminar to “sensitize people who don’t think caste is there.” After the viewing, her fellow “students were stunned” and, according to Seema, they apologized for their earlier dismissal of her comments and questions.

⁴⁶³ See Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah. *The Issues at Stake: Theory and Practice in the Contemporary Women’s Movement* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1991). While this text may seem dated, I use it because (a) the fieldwork for the book occurred at the same time as Ruth Manorama’s initial work with feminist organizations and (b) the text is framed as an “archive” of the women’s movement in India and it thus provides both a history of this movement and a self-representation of its key actors and events.

⁴⁶⁴ For example, one of the authors describes her awakening to the fact she was “subtly yet silently being discriminated against,” which seems to reveal the privilege of her social position. It is also important to

of their own experiences as activists and serves as an archive of “experiences, ideas and issues” of the women’s movement.⁴⁶⁵ In their account, Gandhi and Shah assume a shared essence to the struggles women across India face and suggest that the Indian women’s movement represents the interests of all Indian women.⁴⁶⁶ They posit an undifferentiated category of “the oppressed” and dismiss the significance of difference in organizing critique and struggle, consistently ignoring the intersectionality of gender, caste, and class in their discussions of sexism.⁴⁶⁷ For example, in Gandhi and Shah’s recounting of their train travels across India, they describe their confrontations with “two types of chauvinism: the ‘shall I fill up your water bottle’ type of patronage and the cruder ‘*ye hai aaj ki ladkiyan*’ (these are the women of today) ridicule.” The authors do not recognize that the constructions of gender underlying both types of chauvinism are specific to caste. A dalit woman would not receive the “patronage” afforded to the middle-class and upper caste authors because she deviates from the ideal of femininity; only women fitting this ideal are protected and assisted by men. Similarly, while the authors highlight the “ridicule” they receive for traveling without a male companion, there is no mention that dalit women, and other lower caste women, who are often present, working, and mobile in public spaces.⁴⁶⁸

note that she writes that sense of “altruism” motivating her work on women’s issues. Compared to a principled approach to social justice, altruism seems lacking as a mode of engagement in activism.

⁴⁶⁵ Gandhi and Shah, 5.

⁴⁶⁶ Shah and Gandhi write that “the woman’s movement in India has...put forward a hope and future which every woman can claim and gain strength from so she may work out, in her own way, her struggle for a better life and society.” See Shah and Gandhi, 14.

⁴⁶⁷ For example, when writing about the women participating in the Forum Against Rape, they write, “There was no differentiation between us.” See Shah and Gandhi, 2.

⁴⁶⁸ For an analysis on the gendering of public spaces, see Shilpa Ranade, “The Way She Moves: Mapping the Everyday Production of Gender and Space” *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 17 (2007): 1519-1526.

Gandhi and Shah fail to recognize caste as a significant social structure and do not incorporate it into their analysis of gender relations and patriarchy.⁴⁶⁹ For instance, while many of the victim/survivors of rape they discuss are from SC/ST communities, Gandhi and Shah do not address how caste status can make some women more vulnerable to sexual violence than others. Although the authors concede that the “leadership of the women’s movement has remained predominantly middle-class,” they describe the movement as “multiclass”; they make no mention, however, of the caste backgrounds of either the leadership or participants in the movement.⁴⁷⁰ In their discussion of the “discriminatory practices” and “social taboos” that restrict “choice in livelihood,” Gandhi and Shah only account for the sexual division of labor and make no mention of caste, despite its continued impact on occupation. Manual scavenging or other work traditionally performed by dalit women is overlooked and caste is not analyzed as a force that structures life options and opportunities. In Gandhi and Shah’s narrative, “Indian women” emerge as a largely undifferentiated and natural category. The only reference to power relations among women is found in the explanation of the role of mothers-in-law in dowry-related violence; family structure, not a broader social structure, provides the only context for women acting as “agents” of patriarchy. Gandhi and Shah’s assumption of a shared oppression and unity among women not only undervalues differences among women, but also proves exclusionary.⁴⁷¹

⁴⁶⁹ Gandhi and Shah do, however, mention the importance of Ambedkar and Phule for offering a critique that “linked caste and women’s oppression.” See Gandhi and Shah, 20.

⁴⁷⁰ Gandhi and Shah, 22, 23.

⁴⁷¹ For example, the authors’ cite the notion of an ancient Vedic period when women “had an exalted, independent status in society.” “What went wrong,” they suggest, “was a gradual change and decline in the values of Indian society.” While they concede that “such arguments have been labeled revivalist,” they argue that they are “more in the vein of ‘Indianised’ versions of liberal thought.” The notion of a glorious ancient past followed by decline seems exclusionary and marginalizing, especially to religious minorities and lower caste populations. See Gandhi and Shah, 85.

Gandhi and Shah's account of the contemporary Indian feminist movement substantiates the feelings of exclusion and marginalization communicated to me by dalit women in their discussions of the mainstream women's movement. The NFDW was created as a corrective to the mainstream movement. The organization provided the theoretical and ideological groundwork for the articulation of difference and for the construction of "dalit women" as a separate social category. Ruth argued that the assertion of dalit women's difference was "a scholarly intervention into feminism."⁴⁷² She recounts that the NFDW "did not start because we wanted to be an NGO. We wanted to do something...it's a movement for the dalit women." The NFDW primary goal was to create a foundation for the identity of dalit women and for advocacy on their behalf; exposing and publicizing the "specific issues" and "specific human rights violations" affecting dalit women was a central part of this work. The NFDW not only challenged the dominant analysis guiding the Indian women's movement, but also worked to dislodge the upper caste and middle class women's movement as the sole voice of "Indian feminism" in international forums.

The NFDW conceptualized dalit women's difference not only in terms of a difference in social position and the differential burdens of gender, class and caste, but also as a cultural difference. For example, the claim that dalits are the "indigenous people" of India anchors the idea of difference in a past that is imagined as historically distinct from that of other groups in India.⁴⁷³ As the original inhabitants of India, the

⁴⁷² Ruth Manorama interview. Ruth also discussed how this "scholarly intervention" has benefitted other marginalized communities in India and helped them argue their interests: "Today, Muslim women are saying that 'our category is much different'...So, we have paved the way for other women's movement to emerge."

⁴⁷³ The claim of indigeneity also maps onto the growing area of indigenous people's human rights. In my conversation with Ruth, I asked if she thought there were any issues with the use the term "indigenous," given the political climate in India. In considering Islam and Christianity as "foreign" or "alien" religions,

NFDW contended, the “Brahmanic caste system is alien to our history”; dalits therefore refused to be “co-opted...by any other history or culture.”⁴⁷⁴ The NFDW argued the “dalit cultural heritage” was an “egalitarian” one that consequently provided a template for being and acting in modernity⁴⁷⁵ This heritage, it claims, was a resource for confronting contemporary threats - primarily from Hindutva and globalization - to the “sovereign, socialist, secular and democratic” foundation of the nation-state. The NFDW suggests that a return to dalit values would facilitate the development of humanistic principles and the trajectory of modernity, at least as it is imagined by the Indian Constitution.⁴⁷⁶ Furthermore, the NFDW argued that “dalit cultural heritage” enabled an urgent and necessary critique not offered by even progressive lines of reasoning. It contended that while Gandhian, Nehruvian, and Marxist ideologies were unable to analyze the effects of Hindutva and liberalization on “traditional oppressive structures,” the traditions of dalit reasoning could; these traditions also served as a corrective to these ideologies.⁴⁷⁷ The NFDW argues that there is need to “bring to the forefront the traditions of Jotirao Phule, Ayyankali, Periyar and Babasaheb Ambedkar.” The organization suggests that revering these heroes and revitalizing their worldviews would counter the impact of Hindutva and globalization on both pre-existing and relatively new structures of inequality and provide a path to a more egalitarian and humanistic modernity.

The claim of dalit women’s difference also has immediate and practical implications. It makes dalit women visible to the state and demands that the state not

the Hindu right seems to ideologically rely on the term. Ruth agreed that the term is “problematic” because of the political context, but, she added, “everyone knows that we are indigenous.” It seems significant that this argument is contrary to Ambedkar’s view of the origin of untouchability.

⁴⁷⁴ NFDW, “Fifth National Convention Declaration,” Chennai, November 27, 2002.

⁴⁷⁵ NFDW, “Ninth National Convention Declaration,” New Delhi, June 26, 2009.

⁴⁷⁶ NFDW, “Ninth National Convention Declaration.”

⁴⁷⁷ NFDW, “Fifth National Convention Declaration.”

“subsume them [dalit women] under the general category of women”; it therefore, serves as an intervention into the state’s governing practices. If dalit women constitute a separate population, governmental and non-governmental institutions would have to produce specific knowledge about their conditions. The NFDW has called for disaggregated information on the mortality, morbidity, literacy, and education of dalit women because this data would have direct implications for policies and funding for development, social services, and reservations.

The assertion of difference and the specificity of dalit women’s interests were initially criticized by prominent feminists. Ruth recalled being accused of “dividing the women’s movement” when she started working to establish the NFDW in the late 1980s. She, however, strongly rejected such characterizations:

I said we are not dividing. In fact, we live in divided *cherries* in India. We live in divided slums... Why we live in *cherries*? *Cherries* are full of filth, full of dirt. Why are we living in this, living in divided *cherries*, *busthies*. In India, the woman’s movement did not talk about this [and] did not raise these issues. Now, when we want to organize... [they] are saying that you are dividing the women. We live in a divided world. In our country, the dalits are the fourth world.

At a time when “third-world feminists” were arguing against the dominance of Western feminism and its claims of representing all women, Ruth employed the same critique to counter the assumptions of prominent Indian feminists. She called attention to the mainstream movement’s neglect of relations of power among Indian women: some Indian women were in positions of power due to their caste and class position, while other women lived in the “fourth world,” oppressed by the social forces that afforded privilege to other women. Caste divides women and alters the effects of patriarchy, resulting in women’s divergent experiences of gender subordination.

Dalit feminism, Ruth contended, emerged from the particularities of dalit women's experiences of subordination; it put the experiences of dalit women at the center of analysis and developed its critiques and prescriptions based on these experiences. Ruth explained to me that "dalit feminism talks from our own experiences and pain and...our suffering." Disparities in class, gender, and caste inequality engender a difference in "consciousness." Ruth regards this "consciousness" as a "subaltern consciousness," one that is not only non-elite, but also radically different and independent.⁴⁷⁸ She employed this distinction in consciousness not only to reinforce dalit women's difference, but also to assert that dalit women contest ideologies of caste inequality and that their worldviews and aspirations diverge from those in more dominant social positions.⁴⁷⁹ As stated by many dalit feminists, dalit women's worldviews and aspirations embody a universalist and humanist spirit which enable them to be more promising visionaries of social change. As one activist said to me,

I am from a dalit community and I am a woman. Dalit among dalits. I am at a place where I can see the society...No one can see from the upper top....I have faced all these hurdles...only a dalit woman can see society from caste, class and patriarchy perspective...Feminism is equality, equity, justice and peace for all. Dalit women are the ones who...have the ability to analyze [how society works].

The idea that those who are the most oppressed, those who have experienced life at the "bottom of the bottom," are endowed with a unique perspective on the whole was echoed by other dalit activists. Ruth suggested that dalit women's position in society enables a critique that allows for the imagining of a more complete egalitarianism. "If feminism is

⁴⁷⁸ Ruth's use of "subaltern" seems to follow Ranajit Guha's idea of "subaltern." While the colonial state was dominant, it did not have an hegemonic effect on the subaltern's consciousness. See Ranajit Guha, *Dominance Without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁴⁷⁹ Gail Omvedt documents this as well. See also, Gail Omvedt, "The Downtrodden Among the Downtrodden: An Interview With a Dalit Agricultural Laborer" *Signs* 4, no. 4 (Summer 1979):763-774.

non-hierarchical, if feminism is ecological, if feminism is non-patriarchal,” she said, “then dalit women know much better than anybody else.” Dalit women’s experiences rouse a vision and desire for social justice that may elude those more privileged. Ruth seemed to claim that dalit women are the true possessors of the humanist values of modernity and can be more effective architects of change and progress than the “forward classes” and the elite of NGOs. As Ruth succinctly stated, “those who are very comfortable...they don’t want change. People who want change anywhere in the world go through oppression.”⁴⁸⁰

The assertion of ‘difference’ by dalit feminists also provides a basis for imagined and actualized alliances across nation-state borders. Activists have found that dalit women’s difference in structural position is a social phenomenon shared by other communities of women; the attendant exclusion and marginalization – in both society at large and in social justice movements – that accompanies this difference has also been deemed similar to that experienced by other women outside of India. For example, Ruth spoke to me about the similarity in structural position between dalit women in India and black women in the U.S. and the exclusion of both groups from their home country’s women’s movements. “Black women are much poorer [than white women], living [in] the ghettos...[they have] similar lifestyles as the dalits,” she said. “The white feminists

⁴⁸⁰ Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s discussion of a feminist methodology for discerning relations of power and consequently, producing a more universal emancipatory knowledge is helpful in thinking about Ruth’s comment. Mohanty suggests that the analysis for this methodology should begin from the perspective of “the most marginalized communities of women – poor women of all colors in affluent and neocolonial nations.” She adds that “this experiential and analytic anchor in the lives of marginalized communities of women provides the most inclusive paradigm for thinking about social justice...If we pay attention to and think from the space of some of the most disenfranchised communities of women in the world, we are most likely to envision a just and democratic society capable of treating all its citizens fairly. Conversely, if we begin our analysis from, and limit it to, the space of privileged communities, our visions of justice are more likely to be exclusionary because privilege nurtures blindness to those without the same privileges. Beginning from the lives and interests of marginalized communities of women, I am able to access and make the working of power visible – to read up the ladder of privilege.” *Feminism Without Borders*, 231.

don't address racism. It is central, crucial to the issue," she added, "It is the same [in India]... We [dalit feminists] go very much along with black feminism." In a published interview, Ruth spoke more about similarities between dalit feminists and black feminists:

I was influenced by the Black women's movement in America. I was looking at why these Black women were organizing themselves differently. Why were they separate? Then, I understood the racist notions of purity and pollution that operates there. Just like our situation, the Black women don't have leadership in the mainstream women's movement. The White women were not going to solve the problems of Black women... They not only wrote about the racist inequality, but they spoke about the class struggle, they outlined the economic oppression, the absence of land and resources. There are so many connections between the Dalits and the Blacks.⁴⁸¹

I suggest that the "connections" that Ruth identified constitute what Mohanty conceptualizes as "'imagined communities' of Third World oppositional struggles."⁴⁸² Mohanty proposes this term to advance her ideal of transnational feminism. The alliances that Mohanty envisions are not based on essentialist notions of identity, biological or social, but rather, are constructed through a shared politics. As she writes, "It is not color or sex that constructs the grounds for these struggles. Rather, it is the way we think about race, class and gender."⁴⁸³ Ruth implies that dalit feminists and black feminists are, in Mohanty's terms, "imagined communities of women with divergent histories and social locations, woven together by the political threads of opposition to forms of domination that are not only pervasive but also systemic."⁴⁸⁴ While the particulars of the histories and

⁴⁸¹ "Interview with Ruth Manorama," available at <http://youngfeminists.wordpress.com>

⁴⁸² Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders*, 46. Mohanty elaborates on the meaning this construct: "'imagined' not because it is not 'real' but because it suggests potential alliances and collaborations across divisive boundaries, and 'community' because in spite of internal hierarchies within Third World contexts, it nevertheless suggests a significant deep commitment to what Benedict Anderson, in referring to the nation, calls 'horizontal comradeship.'"

⁴⁸³ Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders*, 46.

⁴⁸⁴ Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders*, 46-47.

relations that affect both groups diverge, Ruth discerned a similar configuration of structural inequality shaping the lives of both black and dalit women. She and other dalit activists also find that their understanding of social justice is shared with black feminists.⁴⁸⁵ For Ruth and other dalit feminists, cross-border solidarity with groups similarly marginalized in their home societies serves as a source of support and a resource with which to project a vision of social justice and rights, a vision that is distinct from that of the mainstream Indian women's movement.

This kind of transnationalism – one rooted in shared convictions and solidarity in struggle – can be found in earlier dalit women's associations. For example, Mahila Samta Sainik Dal (League for Women's Soldiers for Equality), a dalit feminist group active in the 1970s, saw their struggle for equality and liberation as part of the same struggle pursued oceans away by Angela Davis.⁴⁸⁶ The MSSD Manifesto declared a “fight for equality” and announced that its members have “become soldiers in this fight” to “destroy [the caste system]” and liberate women “enslaved by the social structure.”⁴⁸⁷ The Manifesto suggested a cultural basis for both gender and caste oppression. It located gender subordination in constructions of male sexuality and desire, arguing that “men have kept women deprived of freedom and apart from knowledge and have made them slaves only for sexual pleasure.”⁴⁸⁸ In the MSSD analysis, religion, and its “ideology of natural inequality,” legitimized exploitation based on both caste and gender. The

⁴⁸⁵ For example, Manjula Pradeep and the Gujarat-based NGO she heads, Navsarjan, have collaborated with Kimberle Crenshaw and the African American Policy Forum on a project on discrimination and affirmative action.

⁴⁸⁶ The MSSD is one of the organizations mentioned Gail Omvedt's account of her meetings with women's organizations during a ten month period in 1975. See Gail Omvedt, *We Will Smash This Prison: Indian Women in Struggle* (London: Zed Press, 1980). Omvedt provides a translation from Marathi into English of the MSSD's manifesto in the appendix of *We Will Smash This Prison*.

⁴⁸⁷ MSSD, “Manifesto” in *We Will Smash This Prison: Indian Women in Struggle*, Gail Omvedt (London: Zed Press, 1980), 173, 174.

⁴⁸⁸ MSSD, “Manifesto,” 175.

Manifesto urged women to renounce the model of “Rama, who made his pregnant wife leave the house” as an “ideal” and instead follow the models of the Buddha, Mahatma Phule, Savitribai Phule, and Babasaheb Ambedkar.⁴⁸⁹ Despite the specificity in constructs and ideologies subordinating women and the lower castes in India, the MSSD saw themselves in solidarity with Angela Davis and as part of the same historical struggle:

Those who rebel against slavery, the Dalits who aim for freedom, the adivasis and toilers are our brothers. We are battling for equality along with men in the liberation war for human liberation called for by Dr. Ambedkar. This is history. And so we wish every success to the workers in the American women’s liberation movement and to Angela Davis and to the women’s liberation army.⁴⁹⁰

In the MSSD manifesto “history” advances towards social equality; it is marked by the dissolution of structures of oppression and the inclusion of an ever widening group of people into an egalitarian order and freedom from structures of oppression. Dr. Ambedkar, the MSSD, and Angela Davis are visionaries and leaders in this historical struggle for radical and revolutionary change.⁴⁹¹ Despite the differences in context, they are united by their rejection of reform and their shared goal of “human liberation.” The MSSD projects a clear internationalist vision for the empowerment and emancipation of all marginalized communities. By imagining solidarity with Angela Davis and the “workers in the American women’s liberation movement,” the MSSD connected those most excluded in India to a global community and incorporated their cause into a global and historical struggle.

⁴⁸⁹ The Manifesto proclaims that the “Lord Buddha is the commander of this fight [for women’s liberation]. We are the heirs Mahatma Phule...Savitribai is our ideal mother...We honour as our ideal Babasaheb Ambedkar.” MSSD, Manifesto,” 174.

⁴⁹⁰ MSSD, Manifesto,” 176.

⁴⁹¹ The MSSD proclaims that they “think it is of the utmost necessity to change the entire social structure.” See MSSD, Manifesto,” 175.

The imagining of a struggle shared with women fighting from the margins of their home societies, namely African American feminists, recurs in the recent history of dalit feminist activism. In 2002, the Alisamma Women's Collective circulated a statement about dalit women's difference from other Indian women that evoked the history of black women's struggle in the American feminist movement.⁴⁹² The statement was directed to the mainstream Indian women's movement and was delivered on International Women's Day at the University of Hyderabad and circulated electronically soon after. It singled out "Hindu women and non-dalit women" and demanded that they "recognize [that the] Indian female community is stratified by [a] castist patriarchal system." It argued that it was "not just male domination," but also a "castist patriarchy" that was at play in India and that the caste system made the unity of Indian women an impossibility. It stated:

We ask you to rethink. We want you to acknowledge the political importance of 'difference,' i.e., heterogeneity, that exists among Indian female community. *That you are made as we are mutilated. You are put on a pedestal, whereas we are thrown into fields to work day and night. You were Satis, we are made harlots.*" [emphasis mine]⁴⁹³

In my reading, the italicized section part of the statement follows a pattern of constructing comparisons and relations found in the most publicized version of Sojourner Truth's famous speech, "Ain't I A Woman." The section of Truth's speech that can be found reverberating in the Collective's statement illustrates how the privileges that come with white womanhood are not extended to black women. Truth shows how the work of

⁴⁹² The Alisamma Women's collective was named after a woman who was killed before she could testify to witnessing the murder of her son. Her testimony was critical in a trial prosecuting a dalit massacre in which six dalit men were killed and three dalit women were raped. The name of the collective both honors her memory and also signals the importance of hearing dalit women's voices.

⁴⁹³ Alisamma Women's Collective, "Statement of Dalit Women," March 8, 2008, Hyderabad, India.

racism and sexism positions black and white women differently and precludes a singular agenda for social justice. For example, in her speech, she says

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

An intertextual reading of the Collective's statement – an intertextual reading that focuses on the structure of the argument – can reveal how the meanings attributed to a dalit feminist subjectivity are derived through an analogy to Sojourner Truth's description of the predicaments of black womanhood. The Collective's statement contains Sojourner's Truth's critique of how racism stratifies women in society. Truth shows the complexities of a feminist politics in a situation where, on one hand, white women struggled against assumptions of frailty and fought for rights in the public sphere, and on the other, black women struggled against the exploitation of their labor, never receiving the comforts that come with being considered frail.

This provides a subtext to the Collective's assertion that caste inequality thwarts a singular Indian feminist perspective. While caste-Hindu women are made socially respectable, dalit women are exploited, denied respectability, and rendered sexually available. This subtext also evokes the centrality of violence in the constitution of dalit women's subjectivity. Through an analogy to the predicaments and structural position of black women in the United States, the Alisamma Women's Collective then exposes the entanglements of caste and patriarchy in the subordination of dalit women and highlights

how racism and castism produce different forms of subordination and disparities in privileges. This then aligns the Alisamma Women's Collective with a broader community of women – a community that shares a similar form of “difference” and marginalization – and also indicts the mainstream Indian women's movement for its failure to recognize difference and critically evaluate its emancipatory project.

“Will You Be Our Sisters?”

The “prostitute” has historically been a central figure in dalit and non-brahmin movements for rights and respect.⁴⁹⁴ In this section, I discuss how dalit feminists have approached the issue of one particular form of caste-based “prostitution” – that of the devadasi system – and how it has been represented to international audiences.⁴⁹⁵ I analyze the translation of the devadasi system in contemporary human rights campaigns and argue that it is interpreted to fall within recognizable categories of women's exploitation and human rights violations. This translation aids both the international visibility of caste-based oppression and the development of transnational alliances for dalit feminists. The devadasi system appears in human rights campaigns through the dialectic of traditional oppression and modern violations: it is written about in either the language of ritual and timeless tradition or the modern-day crisis of the sexual trafficking of women. These campaigns often include survivor testimonies from former devadasis;

⁴⁹⁴ I use the English terms “prostitute” and prostitution to refer to various forms sexual labor and it's a workers for which I cannot find a clear English translation. I do not use the term sex-worker because in the discourse that I am analyzing, women are not portrayed as agentive workers, but rather as either coerced women or women prostituting their bodies for money.

⁴⁹⁵ See Asian Women's Human Rights Council, *In the Court of Women II: Asia Tribunal on Women's Human Rights in Tokyo. Proceedings of the International Public Hearing on Traffic in Women and War Crimes Against Women.*, 1994. Although the terms “devadasi” and “devadasi system” gloss many variations in the identities and practices associated with sexual labor associated with temple rites, I will use these terms since they are the ones used in dalit human rights campaigns.

the testimonies, however, seem to exceed the descriptors used to translate the practice. Former devadasis do not provide instrumentalist renderings of suffering nor are their narratives geared towards specific political projects; rather, they illustrate a world of limited opportunities for education and advancement, of rural poverty, and of loss and isolation that do not easily map onto the picture of ritual or sexual slavery drawn by activists. I will conclude my discussion by suggesting that a dalit feminist perspective on the devadasi system reveals the gaps of both dominant Indian and global feminist activism around prostitution.

Priyadarshini Vijaisri examines different forms of “sacred prostitution” during the colonial period and charts reformist interventions and changes in the perception and occurrence of the custom.⁴⁹⁶ She notes that prior to the colonial period, the term “devadasi,” though frequently used in ancient sources, was not in wide currency. Rather, multiple local terms, such as *Sule*, *Sani*, *Matangi*, *Jogatis*, and *Basavai*, were more commonly used. Each term indexed a particular caste identity and position in the temple structure but these differences were collapsed as the “sanskritized term Devadasi gained popular currency and was deployed by the intelligentsia in their conscious reformist endeavor at recasting the temple prostitute.”⁴⁹⁷ While the colonial state did not initiate legislative changes to the practice, colonial interpretations of the system shaped Hindu socio-religious reformist discourse on the practice. Cast as a custom that, in ancient times, was related to rituals of piety and performed by virgins, the devadasi system was

⁴⁹⁶ Priyadarshini Vijaisri, *Recasting the Devadasi: Patterns of Sacred Prostitution in Colonial South India* (New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers, 2004). Vijaisri uses the term “sacred prostitution” to call attention to the custom’s links with the Hindu religion.

⁴⁹⁷ Vijaisri explains that *Sule* and *Sani* women were of the twice born castes and that their sexual labor was mostly an urban phenomenon and prescribed by ritual. *Matangi* women were lower in the caste hierarchy, but did perform some temple duties. *Jogati* and *basavi* women were lowest in the caste hierarchy and their sexual labor occurred mostly in rural areas and largely on periphery of temple structure.

assumed to have undergone a “process of moral degeneration” following the rise of Muslim political dominance in India. The colonial interpretation assumed that with “foreign conquest and eventually decadent standards of morality, the religiosity of the temple disappeared and temple women became ordinary prostitutes.”⁴⁹⁸

Reformist condemnation of the devadasi system rested on this interpretation. The Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, and Ramkrishna Mission were among the groups spearheading the reformist movement and as Vijaisri shows, were driven by the goal of resuscitating Hinduism and restoring purity and morality to its customs. The devadasi was to be domesticated, purified and metamorphosed into the ‘new woman.’⁴⁹⁹ These reform efforts, however, did not explicitly incorporate the caste-based dimensions of the practice.

Jotirao Phule, however, argued to the police commissioner of the Bombay Presidency that most of the girls dedicated into the system were dalit girls and that the state should thus legally intervene to stop the practice. In non-brahman and dalit movements, as in Hindu socio-religious reform endeavors, the temple prostitute was also to be domesticated. In these movements, however, reform of the devadasi system was not part of an attempt to revitalize religious tradition, but rather, was part of the project to uplift low caste women and consequently, their communities, to proper standards of respectability. For example, in the early twentieth century, Shivaram Janaba Kamble preached against the dedication of girls and also asked members of the community to marry devadasis. His advocacy of marriage to devadasis can be seen as an attempt to both remove the social stigma attached to these women and achieve respectability in

⁴⁹⁸ Vijaisri, *Recasting the Devadasi*, 193. This form of argumentation follows the logic of many socio-religious reform movements.

⁴⁹⁹ See Vijaisri, *Recasting the Devadasi*, 135-141.

accordance with upper caste standards.⁵⁰⁰ The Victorian ideology of social purity, evident in Hindu socio-religious reform discourse, can be discerned here as well. As mentioned in the last chapter, Ambedkar refused to allow Murlis, a community of devadasis, to convert to Buddhism. He admonished the Murlis for their shameful work, viewed them as a stain on the respectability of the community, and demanded that they give up their only source of livelihood. From the 1920s and 1930s onwards, the devadasis were seen as a shameful impediment to the empowerment of the community; as Vijaisri writes, the devadasi was cast as a “deviant female whose very survival was lethal for the pride and vitality of the community.”⁵⁰¹

In contemporary human rights campaigns, the devadasi system appears as a traditional oppression that results in modern human rights violations. In statements circulated internationally by dalit activists, local terms such as *jogini* are glossed as the devadasi *system*, suggesting that it is a closed, static, and clearly structured cultural mechanism that subordinates women. The practice is represented as the “infamous... temple prostitution system” in which “little prepubescent girls are dedicated to the goddess” and then “raped by temple priests and then any man who wishes to do so.”⁵⁰² An aura of timeless tradition and mysterious ritual exudes from this description. Ruth has argued at an international conference that the devadasi system is a “cult which is sanctioned by the Hindu religion.”⁵⁰³ Another statement circulated internationally

⁵⁰⁰ For a historical study of Kamble’s marriage movement, See, Meenaksi Moon “We Made History Too: Women in the Early Untouchable Liberation Movement,” in *Caste and Gender: Issues in Contemporary Indian Feminism* ed. Anupama Rao (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003).

⁵⁰¹ Vijaisri, *Recasting the Devadasi*, 178. Although, most acts abolishing the practice framed it as a degeneration and corruption of a once holy and religious practice, the princely state of Kolhapur enacted an order in 1920 that used non-Brahman and dalit critiques of the practice as rationale for the ban: this act argued that the custom was a tool to disempower the lower castes and enforce Brahmanical supremacy.

⁵⁰² NCDHR, “In Search of Justice” in *3000 Years...How Much Longer?*

⁵⁰³ *Asia Tribunal on Women’s Human Rights*, 16.

states that the practice takes place “secretly” and sexually exploits dalit women under the “guise of religious custom.”⁵⁰⁴ The practice is also often referred to as “ritualized prostitution in temples.” The key terms and their associations describing the devadasi system frame the practice for global audiences in a manner reminiscent of first-world feminist critiques of “barbaric” cultural practices such as female circumcision/infibulation and foot-binding. For example, terms such as “secretly,” “cult,” and “guise” link to ideas of irrational and perverse customs driven by a primitive cultural logic. The meanings ascribed to the devadasi system in international campaigns draw from the genres of representation that have historically been successful in gaining attention from the West, especially from feminists in the West.

In addition to the condemnation of the devadasi system as a barbaric tradition used to uphold pre-modern relations of power and entitlement, human rights campaigns also draw from the discourse around the modern problem of the sexual trafficking of women. In these discussions, “temple prostitution” links up with commercial prostitution. “The Devadasi system,” the NFDW argued at 2001 World Conference Against Racism, “forces 5000 to 15,000 girls to be secretly auctioned every year in the commercial sex market into a distinct form of ritually sanctioned prostitution that is centuries old.” The girls are also “eventually auctioned secretly into urban brothels for prostitution.” The use of the verb “auction” conjures associations with both the transatlantic slave trade and other forms of human trafficking. Interestingly, Anti-Slavery International, a London-based international NGO that traces its history to the late

⁵⁰⁴ See NFDW, “Dalit Women in Struggle,” and NFDW’s “NGO Declaration on Gender and Racism,” Durban, South Africa, Aug.28 – Sept. 7, 2001. It is also interesting to note that this discourse has entered UN discussions on caste and caste and gender. For example, see CERD’s Concluding Observations . The committee states that it is “concerned about...devadasi, whereby mostly Dalit girls are dedicated to temple deities and forced into ritualized prostitution.”

eighteenth and nineteenth century Anti-Slavery Society which campaigned for the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, campaigns today for the eradication of the devadasi system, which it describes as “ritualized slavery.” Moreover, activists have explicitly stated that the devadasi system is a form of “trafficking in women” and constitutes “forced prostitution.”⁵⁰⁵ Borrowing from the international discourse on anti-trafficking, this conceptualization of the devadasi system also employs a crude concept of agency which erases the impact of structural inequality on the choices and opportunities for survival available to dalit women. As Jo Doezema argues, the denial of agency to the “third-world prostitute” is critical to first-world feminist anti-trafficking campaigns; the “‘third world’ sex worker is presented as backward, innocent and above all helpless – in need of rescue.”⁵⁰⁶ First-world recognition and funding is critical for dalit activists; the translation of the devadasi system as a form of sexual trafficking helps gain international visibility for the situation of dalit women in India.

The translation of the devadasi system into terms that are recognizable to global audiences has also enabled solidarity with a larger, global community of activists and survivors of violence and has brought support to women who have endured the exploitation and exclusion of devadasi work. A critical analytical intervention in the translation of “devadasi” by Ruth Manorama has facilitated this solidarity and support. Manorama had argued that the devadasi system could not be seen as equivalent to prostitution and that the devadasi system could only be properly analyzed as part of a

⁵⁰⁵ See, “Delhi Declaration” and *Asia Tribunal on Women’s Human Rights*.

⁵⁰⁶ Doezema, “Ouch!” 31, 30. Doezema argues that the figure of a defenseless third-world prostitute is utilized to for “women’s inclusion in international human rights: the kidnapped, raped, ill ‘third world prostitute’ stands as a powerful symbol for the exclusion of women from ‘universal’ human rights due to their sexual subordination.” [See also Jo Doezema, “Forced to Choose: Beyond the Voluntary v. Forced Prostitution Dichotomy” in *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance, and Redefinition*, eds. Kamala Kempadoo and Jo Doezema (New York: Routledge, 1998); Jo Doezema, “Ouch! Western Feminists’ ‘Wounded Attachment’ to the ‘Third World Prostitute’” *Feminist Review* 67 (Spring 2001):16-38.

social hierarchy where sexual exploitation is a mechanism of caste inequality. Manorama deemed the devadasi system functionally equivalent to the rape of dalit women by upper caste men: both were a manifestation of caste-based subordination that “results in the violent appropriation of and sexual control over Dalit women by men of the dominant castes” and both maintained “the patriarchal caste complex,” in part by rendering the dalit male powerless to protect the sexual respectability of dalit women.⁵⁰⁷

By calling attention to how caste is inscribed in sexual relations, whether paid or unpaid, Manorama showed how the devadasi system is both a product of caste hierarchy and a cultural mechanism for its perpetuation. Therefore, the sexual labor provided by devadasis, Manorama argued, is not comparable to prostitution. As she stated, there is a clear “nexus between being an untouchable and prostitution” and this precludes an analysis of prostitution that ignores caste.⁵⁰⁸ Mainstream feminist organizations in India have neglected this dimension and therefore, as Manorama claimed, they cannot competently advocate for dalit women. Manorama recounted a study she conducted of a rehabilitation program run by Catholic nuns for devadasis in rural areas of Karnataka. While Manorama found that the “sisters” were both empowering the devadasis and making their lives “a little better,” other feminists condemned the rehabilitation program on “moralistic grounds.” As Manorama recalled, “the upper caste women said, ‘all these sisters are converting them, changing their lives.’” These women took issue not only with the religious background of the individuals running the rehabilitation scheme, but also the

⁵⁰⁷ See NFDW, “NGO Declaration on Gender and Racism,” 2001. Vijaisri, *Recasting the Devadasi*, 306. Vijaisri argues that upper caste men’s sexual access to dalit women not only “reproduces notions of dominance and subordination,” but also “renders possible the creation of the ideal of the pure, chaste and suppressed erotic identity of the caste Hindu women, which in turn, facilitates the defining of caste Hindu female sexuality in terms of honour.” See Vijaisri, *Recasting the Devadasi*, 15-16.

⁵⁰⁸ Ruth Manorama, “The Devadasi System of India,” in *In the Court of Women II: Asia Tribunal on Women’s Human Rights in Tokyo. Proceedings of the International Public Hearing on Traffic in Women and War Crimes Against Women.*, 1994.

ideology underlying the project. They called for viewing the devadasi's labor as legitimate work, asking, as Manorama recounted, ““What is wrong with selling their bodies? If we are able to sell our minds, why shouldn't they be able to sell their bodies?””

Manorama explained her response: “So I said ‘everybody, everyone can sell their body very easily. Why we don't sell our bodies? Why they have to sell their bodies?’” By highlighting the internal stratifications among women, Manorama underscored the significance of caste-based power relations to any assessment of prostitution in India. While the dominant discussion of prostitution framed it as either legitimate work or a form of violence, Manorama illustrated the need to incorporate other social categories into the assessment of prostitution: who does the prostituting, she argued, was as critical in the evaluation as any theoretical perspective on women's bodies and their work. According to Manorama, the devadasi system must be analytically separated from other forms of sex work. She argued that women working in prostitution can “make money”; they can “make two rupees or...thirty lakhs... [depending on] class background, where you are put in, what kind of skin you have, what kind of features you have.” Devadasis, however, are mandated to provide sexual services and are not paid. According to Manorama, “even though they sell their bodies every day, they are not even given a penny because the village landlords, village upper caste people think that these women are meant only for us. They have to do a free service.”

Manorama argued that although the devadasi system is legitimized through “religious symbols and paradigms,” it can only be understood in terms of both the subordination of women in society and a system of social hierarchy that encourages the

sexual appropriation of dalit women by upper caste men. The power and entitlement of the upper castes over others in society is inscribed in the functioning of the system. This form of sex work does not fall within the understandings of prostitution offered in the mainstream women's movement. Manorama's conceptualization of it as "free sexual labor," however, has enabled the use of different categories of analysis to make sense of the practice. The emphasis on a caste-inflected difference transforms the sex work of the devadasi system into an obligatory "free service" that was located within a social hierarchy where sexual exploitation is a mechanism of social inequality. Manorama used this conceptualization of the devadasi system to forge an equivalence between the sexual labor performed by devadasis and that by comfort women, women from occupied territories that were forced to provide sexual services to the Japanese military during World War II:

devadasis provide free sexual labor. I equated this with free military sexual labor in the case of Korean women, Korean women for the Japanese... Comfort women... I took one of the devadasi women to a tribunal conducted in Japan in 1994... Tribunal was on sexual slavery. Women being enslaved by Japanese men. The Korean, Filipino, wherever the Japanese military went. Comfort women. I then saw [that devadasis are like] comfort women in the name of religion for the upper caste.

The tribunal that Manorama refers to is the Asia Tribunal on Women's Human Rights held in Tokyo in March, 1994. Sponsored by the Asian Women's Human Rights Council, the tribunal focused on "traffic in women, military sexual slavery and other war crimes on Asian women," and sought to both provide "new spaces for women to speak, to challenge, and to be heard"; it aimed to publicize "crimes against women which have been, for so long a time, relegated to the personal realm and refused a place in the

political domain.”⁵⁰⁹ The tribunal included testimonies from survivors/victims of these “crimes” as well as statements from activists, lawyers and scholars. Kim Bok-Dong and Victoria Canlas Lopez, former “comfort women” from Korea and the Philippines, and Babamma Basappa, a former devadasi from Manvi, Karnataka, testified about their experiences at the tribunal. Kim Bok-Dong and Victoria Canlas Lopez were both imprisoned and forced to provide sexual services for the Japanese military in the early 1940s. Babamma Basappa, who accompanied Ruth to Tokyo, became a devadasi while she was still a child. Her father died when she was seven years old and her mother dedicated her into the system soon after. Babamma provided sexual services for men of her community until she joined a rehabilitative program for devadasis run by Catholic nuns. The three women, Kim Bok-Dong, Victoria Canlas Lopez, and Babamma Basappa, provided testimony on the physical and emotional traumas incurred as sexual service providers. Despite differences in age, context and geographical location, the grouping of the three women suggested an implicit parallel between dalit women and colonized women.

The tribunal brought together the two issues of trafficking in women and war crimes against women under one conceptual frame, one which highlighted the loss of bodily integrity and agency in both experiences. The tribunal served as a space from which activists from fifteen countries along with the former devadasi and comfort women could broadcast their vision of feminism and human rights. The participants at the tribunal announced that this vision was from a distinctly “South perspective,” one that put

⁵⁰⁹ See *Asia Tribunal on Women’s Human Rights*.

the experiences of marginalized women at the center of analysis and activism.⁵¹⁰ As stated by one of the activists at the conference, “it is from the edges that the women are speaking, knowing that from the margins of power, we see the world differently. We need to find a new terrain, walking with other people on the edges– the indigenous, the dalits, the disabled and the dispossessed.”⁵¹¹ This “new terrain” is supported through the transnational alliances created by the gathering of women in Tokyo.⁵¹² The alliances traversed “edges” and margins and generated, as the activist stated, a “new political imagination” and “new historical possibilities.” The Tokyo Tribunal can thus be viewed as laying a foundation for a global feminist project that is constructed through alliances based on shared forms of violence and inequality.

By identifying the devadasi system as “free sexual labor” and a form of sexual “slavery,” Manorama was able to get the caste-based practice on the agenda at the Tokyo Tribunal.⁵¹³ This not only increased the international visibility of the practice, but also created a new space for activism around issues affecting dalit women. At the Tribunal, Ruth circulated a petition on behalf of forty-one devadasis which asked for “solidarity” in the “struggle against the trafficking and prostitution of young girls and women in the name of religion.”⁵¹⁴ As the spokesperson for devadasis back in India, Manorama asked the audience of activists and survivors gathered at the tribunal, “will you be our sisters?”

⁵¹⁰ See “Specific Objectives of the Tokyo Tribunal Project,” in *In the Court of Women II: Asia Tribunal on Women’s Human Rights in Tokyo. Proceedings of the International Public Hearing on Traffic in Women and War Crimes Against Women.*, 1994, 5.

⁵¹¹ Corinne Kumar D’Souza, “Welcome Address” in *In the Court of Women II: Asia Tribunal on Women’s Human Rights in Tokyo. Proceedings of the International Public Hearing on Traffic in Women and War Crimes Against Women.*, 1994, 81.

⁵¹² Corinne Kumar D’Souza, “Welcome Address,” 81.

⁵¹³ See V.R. Krishna Iyer, “Sex Trafficking in Asian Women” *In the Court of Women II: Asia Tribunal on Women’s Human Rights in Tokyo. Proceedings of the International Public Hearing on Traffic in Women and War Crimes Against Women.*, 1994., 36-41.

⁵¹⁴ Ruth Manorama, “The Devadasi System of India.”

Left without representation and advocacy by the mainstream Indian women's movement, Manorama looked abroad for 'sisterhood' and solidarity. Here, sisterhood is not based on a shared essence or identity, but rather on a shared structural position, shared human rights violations, and a shared political vision.

One of the stated goals of the tribunal was "to generate support from the national and international public for the victims and survivors"; towards this end, the Tribunal provided a space for Babamma, Kim Bok-Dong and Victoria Canlas Lopez, to speak about their experiences and aspirations.⁵¹⁵ As many scholars have pointed out, survivor testimonies also play a role in authenticating the claims of activists at events such as the Tokyo Tribunal. Meg McLagan argues that survivor testimonies have become an essential part of human rights practice; testimony "has become a transnational cultural form, one that plays a crucial role in almost every human rights campaign."⁵¹⁶ Expressed "through the idiom of suffering," testimony establishes "claims for recognition and redress on the basis of one's humanity."⁵¹⁷

Babamma told her life story, replete with accounts of the adversity, pain, and suffering she had endured. Her story, however, was contextualized by Ruth's statement and that of other activists/experts. This contextualization helped fit Babamma's narration of suffering into the frame of the conference. It seemed that in order for Babamma's narrative to authenticate and confirm the arguments of activists/experts, it had to be translated from the category of experience into the category of testimony. This seems to have been done not only through the mediation provided by context, but also through the

⁵¹⁵ *In the Court of Women*, 5.

⁵¹⁶ Meg McLagan, "Introduction: Making Human Rights Claims Public," *American Anthropologist*, 108, no. 1 (1995):191-220, 193.

⁵¹⁷ Meg Meg McLagan, "Introduction," 193.

use of descriptors such as “ritual” and “forced prostitution.” These terms activate meanings which map onto pre-established arenas of human rights violations and global feminist interventions and thus mediate the comprehension of survivor/victims’ narratives.

Although scholars have found that testimonies in human rights campaigns often offer instrumentalist renderings of violence and suffering, I found that Babamma’s testimony actually exceeded the terms framing it. Babamma’s story imparted more than what activists/experts ascribed to it; her testimony provided a surplus of meaning which spilled beyond the parameters used to contextualize and produce meaning from her experiences. For example, in Babamma’s testimony, work as a devadasi is not part of closed cultural system, but rather is very much affected by external factors such as poverty and opportunities for advancement. Babamma illustrated how poverty, more than “ritual,” was the predominant causal factor in her entrance into the devadasi system. Babamma was her parents’ only child and after her father died, her mother dedicated her because she did not want her to marry and join another family. Here, poverty and the more general structure of gender relations in India where a girl’s marriage is deemed a loss of labor and financial burden to her family provide a critical context for understanding Babamma’s work as a devadasi. As Babamma explained to the tribunal, “The devadasi system is forced on poor girls who have to accept it precisely because of poverty....Some educated girls do not follow the devadasi practice instead they prefer to work in the fields and the mills.” Although poverty and limited opportunities for education are central foci of dalit feminist activities, locally and nationally, they are

largely omitted in the context for the devadasi system in international human rights campaigns and replaced by “ritual,” “trafficking,” and/or “forced prostitution.”

Babamma’s testimony in Tokyo included a description of how the devadasi system functioned and an account of critical experiences and events in her life. Her account significantly departs from the description of the devadasi system as forced prostitution directed by upper caste men in temples. Babamma explained that life as a devadasi is initiated with a “ceremonial puja,” after which upper caste men negotiate payments with the parents of the girl. Once it is decided “whether payment would be in full or installment,” the men “would start having regular sexual intercourse with the girls.” Babamma worked as both a laborer and a devadasi. Describing the violence and anguish she experienced, she stated that

At night we have to share our bodies with the men who work with us as coolies during the day. We are treated like animals and sometimes beaten up. We are like wives imprisoned within four walls. Even if the men see the children born out of our relationship with them, they don’t show any care or love for them. Our children do not have the right to use their father’s name.

The analogy to the “wives” in terms of the denial of mobility is striking in Babamma’s testimony. Babamma also explained that “the men who had relations with us did not always keep their promises.” Babamma had three children – two girls and one boy – with a “Muslim driver” who gave her money regularly. When his wife found out about their relationship, however, the payments ceased. The driver soon after died in a car accident, leaving Babamma without any support.

After the death of the driver, Babamma began having sexual relations with her maternal uncle who, as she describes, “was a drunkard.” Babamma’s discussion of her uncle and the events related to him provide the climax in her testimony. When Babamma

received a bank loan to buy cattle, her uncle made claims to half of the money. One evening, he came to her house with a friend and demanded the money, but then suddenly collapsed and died. Babamma and her mother were blamed for his death and arrested and detained by the police. “We were beaten up by the police,” Babamma said, “who have no respect for devadasis.” A catholic priest and nun who had been working with devadasis in Manvi posted bail for Babamma and her mother. Although an autopsy later found that Babamma was not to blame for her uncle’s death and that he had died of a heart attack, the incident was emotionally, socially, physically, and financially damaging: “After the incident, no man ever came to my house. We were completely isolated. I used to cry a lot after the incident which also resulted in a lot of psychological problems for me. I was sent to a doctor for treatment and then to a convent in Poona.”

The story about her uncle and his death is the central episode in Babamma’s testimony. Although Babamma’s status as a devadasi is at play in the sexual exploitation she experiences and the harassment she received from the police, her narrative does not bear close resemblance to activists/experts’ representations of the devadasi system as “ritual” or “trafficking”/“forced prostitution.”

Babamma’s crisis finds resolution through the intervention of the Catholic nuns working in Manvi. They help send Babamma to Poona and then, move her to a convent in Andhra Pradesh where her children can go to school. After hearing that her mother was ill, Babamma returned to Manvi, where she found work as a helper in the convent and enrolled her children in boarding school.

After narrating this life story, Babamma discusses her own change in perspective and empowerment:

I now realize what a devadasi is. It is a heinous crime that robs a woman of her dignity as a human being. A woman's group organized by the sisters had given me an orientation [on women's rights] and advised me to give up being a devadasi. Other devadasis say that if they can earn 300 rupees (US \$10) a month in a factory or anywhere, they would give up being a devadasi. Government, however, has not provided any help in rehabilitating these women. I ceased being a devadasi after I was made awareness [of what the practice was doing to me as a woman]....My dream is to help other devadasis change their lives so they may have a better future. Corrupt religious practices have made them victims.

The reference to "corrupt religious practices" overlaps with some activists' representations and may also show the influence of activist discourse on Babamma's narrative. Babamma, however, seems to focus on the structural constraints on women's agency. She calls attention to the lack of government rehabilitation schemes and the inability of the government to offer women other ways to provide for themselves. Her discussion illustrates a world of few options for basic survival.

In this chapter, I have tried to show how transnational alliances have offered dalit feminists a sense of solidarity and support and have also enabled activists to transcend the ideological limitations of mainstream social justice movements in India. Faced with inadequate representation by both the dalit movement and the mainstream women's movement in India, dalit feminist activists have turned abroad for partnership in protest and advocacy as well as for sources of inspiration and hope. In these efforts, activists have strategically used the identity of dalit women to show how identity-based movements are inherently exclusive. Transnationalism makes these critiques more powerful and exposes the social injustice that recurs in social justice movements.

As an intellectual practice, transnationalism in this context has depended on the construction of analogies – on the discernment of similarity in both structural location and subjectivity – and on the imagining of a shared struggle and political vision. These analogies have offered a means out of exclusion and isolation by fostering the imagining of empathy and solidarity. These analogies also have pedagogical force. Analogies to African American women, South African women, or former comfort women make the injustice suffered by dalit women legible to a global audience. These analogies are not only instructive for the international human rights community, but perhaps also for dalit women in India.

Chapter 7

Ambedkar on the Women's Question

In all of my interviews with dalit activists, including dalit feminists, B.R. Ambedkar was consistently held up as the visionary responsible for illuminating the path to equality and liberation in political modernity. As one dalit feminist said, “Dr. Ambedkar has shown the way [for the liberation for dalit women].” Another activist said that “Ambedkar is kind of a demigod”; he “is a superhero for me.” B.R. Ambedkar, born an untouchable from the Mahar community, dedicated his life to the political and social struggle against untouchability and caste.⁵¹⁸ Today he is esteemed by both men and women, feminist and anti-caste activists across India. While the feminist historian working on Ambedkar faces an intellectual responsibility to assess Ambedkar's thoughts on women and gender relations through his own words, he or she must also contend with popular imaginings of Ambedkar as well as the continued marginalization of dalits in India. Despite the attitudes espoused by the dalit feminists above, in my reading of Ambedkar's writings and speeches, I have discerned an ambivalence towards dalit women. Furthermore, his prescriptions for dalit women seem surprisingly consistent with those of the dominant Hindu socio-religious reform movements of the time.⁵¹⁹ While

⁵¹⁸ The Mahars are the largest Scheduled Caste community in Maharashtra.

⁵¹⁹ Throughout this chapter, I use the term “Hindu socio-religious reform movements.” I am using this term to refer to a category of responses to colonialism that, although multiple and diverse in their orientations, share some basic elements in their approach to socio-religious reform, especially in regards to gender. These elements include a reformulation of the ideal woman – her education and domestic life as well as the criteria for her respectability – and a new and more rigid delineation of what constitutes Hindu tradition. These movements range in time from the early/mid nineteenth century (i.e., the Bhramo Samaj and Dharm Sabha in Bengal) to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The latter include Arya Samaj, influential both in North India and Ambedkar's home state of Maharashtra, the activities of Bal

Ambedkar denounces the most conspicuous and infamous patriarchal practices of the colonial era, namely sati, child marriage, and enforced widowhood, his critique of patriarchy is restricted to upper caste customs and is tangential to his critique of Brahmanism and caste.

In this chapter, I offer a gendered reading of Ambedkar's social and political thought, in part to explore the intellectual history inherited by contemporary dalit feminists. The sources I interpret, from an anthropology seminar paper presented at Columbia University in 1916 to the formulation of oaths for conversion to Buddhism in 1956, span a period of forty years.⁵²⁰ Inconsistencies in thought surely surface in this corpus of writings and speeches. Nonetheless, what emerges consistently is that Ambedkar's critique of patriarchy is both limited and strategic and his prescriptions for dalit women remain within the paradigm of nationalist-reformist ideals of respectability. I discern a tension between Ambedkar's critique of social hierarchy and his desire for a strong and respectable dalit community, a tension which seemed to be resolved through the marginalization of dalit women. With Indian independence and the promulgation of the Indian Constitution, however, a subtle but meaningful change in thought about gender relations can be discerned in Ambedkar's writings. This change can be linked to the establishment of democracy and a legal and political framework that reflected Ambedkar's commitment to the universalist ideals of equality and liberty. As opposed to Ambedkar's discussions of gender relations before 1950, his thoughts on the issue after

Gangadhar Tilak, and the views of gender and nation emerging from the Swadeshi movement. The outline of the ideal woman coming out of these movements was not specific to Hindu socio-religious reform movements. For example, see Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁵²⁰ I do not presume to have done an exhaustive study of Ambedkar's writings and speeches. This chapter will offer a limited survey of his writings and will only point to some of the gendered aspects of Ambedkar's thought.

1950 can be categorized as feminist in that they represent the ideals of a particular kind of political modernity, one rooted in respect for the individual as social agent and equality before the law.

Historiography

Since the publication of the first biography of Ambedkar in 1954, Dhananjay Kheer's *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, Ambedkar's life and thought has been a focus of study for historians, political scientists, scholars of religion, and others.⁵²¹

Researchers, however, have only recently begun to analyze Ambedkar's ideas on gender.⁵²² Nearly all accounts of Ambedkar's work begin by recounting his early experiences of caste-based discrimination. D.C. Ahir narrates the humiliating experiences Ambedkar endured from his early days in primary school, where he was forced to sit outside the classroom and denied water, to his days working as a lawyer, when he was harassed by his colleagues and prohibited from drinking common water.⁵²³ Ambedkar's time abroad in New York and London has been described as a crucial experience that imparted a critical perspective on conditions in India. As Ambedkar himself recalled, "my five years of study in Europe and America had completely wiped out of my mind any consciousness that I was an untouchable and that an untouchable wherever he went in

⁵²¹ Dhananjay Kheer, *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission* (Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1954).

⁵²² Two essays in Anupama Rao, ed. *Caste and Gender* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003), "Dr. Ambedkar and the Empowerment of Women," by Eleanor Zelliot and "The Hindu Code Bill for the Liberation of Women," by Pratima Pardeshi, explicitly discuss Ambedkar's views on women, but there is still a dearth of scholarship on this theme. Recent work such as Christophe Jaffrelot, *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analyzing and Fighting Caste* (London: Hurst and Company, 2005) makes little mention of Ambedkar's view on gender. Valerian Rodrigues, ed. *Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar* (New Delhi: Oxford University press, 2002), a collection of Ambedkar's writings that covers the wide range of his thought, neglects the theme of women and gender altogether.

⁵²³ See D.C. Ahir, "Dr. Ambedkar's Pilgrimage to Buddhism" in *Dr. Ambedkar, Buddhism and Social Change*, eds. A.K. Narian and D.C. Ahir (Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1994).

India was a problem to himself and others.”⁵²⁴ While these experiences are recounted as formative moments in the development of Ambedkar’s cultural and political critique of caste, most accounts of his life do not discuss his relations with his family. At most, one finds brief mention of Ambedkar’s long friendship with Fanny Fitzgerald, a British woman he first met during his stay in London; Ambedkar’s second marriage to Sharda Kabir, a brahmin nurse, has begun to surface in biographical sketches.⁵²⁵ The influence of the significant dalit women in his life, such as his mother, who suffered an early death after giving birth to fourteen children, of whom only seven survived, his paternal aunt, or his first wife, Ramabai, however, has yet to be considered.⁵²⁶

Gail Omvedt and Eleanor Zelliott have provided remarkable historical studies of the nineteenth century non-Brahman movements that influenced Ambedkar’s anti-caste and social reform work.⁵²⁷ These works demonstrate how the critique of Brahmanism formulated by Jotirao Phule and the Satyashodak Samaj provided an influential template for struggles against caste. Phule, along with his contemporaries and associate Tarabai Shinde, put forth powerful critiques of Brahmanism as patriarchy and advocated for the welfare of all women, those of upper and lower castes. Interestingly, while Ambedkar’s understanding of the intersection of caste and gender inequality seems to be influenced

⁵²⁴ Quoted in Nanak Chand Rattu, *Reminiscences and Remembrances of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar* (New Delhi: Falcon Books, 1995), 12.

⁵²⁵ Gail Omvedt, *Ambedkar: Toward an Enlightened India* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2004), 11.

⁵²⁶ While I do not offer this kind of analysis in this chapter, I imagine that a study of Ambedkar that is methodologically similar to Ashis Nandy’s analysis of Rammohun Roy’s relationship with his mother would be a fruitful endeavor. See Ashis Nandy, “Sati: A Nineteenth Century Tale of Women, Violence, and Protest” in *At the Edge of Psychology: Essays on Politics and Culture* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980) 1-31.

⁵²⁷ See Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: The Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1994); Gail Omvedt, *Dalit Visions: The Anti-Caste Movement and the Construction of an Indian Identity* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1995); Eleanor Zelliott, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1992).

by Phule, his ideas on women are less radical and contain patriarchal elements that Phule himself challenged during his life.⁵²⁸

In the historiography on Ambedkar's efforts to eradicate untouchability and caste, scholars often focus on Ambedkar's divergence from M. K. Gandhi in the means and ends of social change.⁵²⁹ While Gandhi believed in the annihilation of untouchability, he saw virtue in the caste system as an ideal type – in the Weberian sense – of social organization. He also conceptualized untouchability as a problem for the Hindu community that could only be resolved through the repentance of upper-caste Hindus.⁵³⁰ Ambedkar, however, viewed the empowerment of dalits as a crucial element in creating social change and called for the immediate removal of caste-based encumbrances to their livelihood and dignity. Towards this end, he organized a series of protests around specific practices of untouchability. For example, the object of the 1927 Mahad Satyagraha was to secure dalits' access to public water. Omvedt sees it as "the foundation for the liberation struggle of Maharashtra Dalits," which also transformed into a "cultural challenge" to Hindu society.⁵³¹ Protesters burned copies of the Manusmriti, which attracted the ire of the Hindu press, and demanded their rights to access public

⁵²⁸ For example, while Ambedkar was ambivalent about government funding of education for untouchable girls, Phule, despite strong criticism from both family and community, established a school for untouchables girls in 1848.

⁵²⁹ See, for example, Jaffrelot; Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁵³⁰ See, for example, "Caste and Untouchability," in *The Penguin Gandhi Reader*, ed. Radrangshu Mukherjee (New York: The Penguin Group, 1993), 205-233. It is interesting to note that Gandhi's stance on untouchability as an internal problem is reproduced by the Government of India decades later in its statements to the UN's Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD).

⁵³¹ Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, 152; Omvedt, *Enlightened India*, 158. It is interesting to note that, given the large body of work focusing on the disputes between Ambedkar and Gandhi, Ambedkar's use of the term "satyagraha" for his demonstration at Mahad is given relatively little attention. Ambedkar also displayed a picture of Gandhi during the protest.

space and resources.⁵³² From 1930-1935, Ambedkar organized the Nasik Satyagraha for entry rights the Kalaram temple. Ambedkar also worked to abolish the traditional responsibilities of the Mahar caste and organized a march of 25,000 Kunbi and Mahar peasant tenants against their Brahmin landlords in 1938. In her evaluation of these movements, Omvedt argues that Ambedkar targeted issues of civil rights and thus diverged from the “focus on personal virtue,” such as hygiene and vegetarianism, in Gandhi’s Harijan Sevak Sangh [Society for the Service of Harijans].⁵³³ A “focus on personal virtue,” however, can be discerned in Ambedkar’s prescriptions for dalit women. While Ambedkar advocated for their participation in politics and public demonstrations, he was equally concerned with their habits, dress, and appearance.

Scholarship on Ambedkar’s political work has focused on his dispute with Gandhi.⁵³⁴ Ambedkar’s role as spokesperson for the Depressed Classes and his emergence into politics followed his successful mobilization of a group of educated Mahar men and upper caste reformers.⁵³⁵ In 1920, he held the first Depressed Class

⁵³² The Manusmriti (Laws of Manu) is an ancient religious text that provides rules and codes for social conduct. It sets up a deeply hierarchal social structure and establishes the limits within which each social caste should live.

⁵³³ Gail Omvedt, *Towards an Enlightened India*, 50. “Harijans,” meaning children of God, is the appellation Gandhi used for untouchables starting in 1933. This term is seen as paternalistic and patronizing by many, who prefer the identification of “dalit.” Anupama Rao provides an excellent analysis of the significance of the term “dalit”: the term “defines the historical structures and practices of dispossession that experientially mark someone as Dalit and simultaneously identifies the Dalit as someone seeking to escape those same structures. In other words, the name indexes an analysis of caste inequality and the terms of resistance that can augur its annihilation.” See Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2009), 16.

⁵³⁴ Ramchandra Guha departs from most studies of Gandhi and Ambedkar and tries to “see their contributions as complimentary,” arguing that both Gandhi and Ambedkar can be considered heroes for the history of the nation and the emancipation of the dalits. Guha, *An Anthropologist Among Marxists*, 100. Guha’s provides a thoughtful analysis of the overlaps between Gandhi and Ambedkar’s thought. It seems that further work can be done on this topic. For example, comparisons can be made of Gandhi and Ambedkar’s ideas on honor, shame, self-respect and rights; religion as an ethical basis for all politics; and even their use of language.

⁵³⁵ “Depressed classes” is a colonial administrative category for groups identified as untouchable communities. The Government of India Act, 1935 replaced “depressed classes” with the official category

Conference and in 1926 he was nominated to the Legislative Council, where he sponsored a bill for access to a water tank in Mahad and supported for a bill for women's maternity leave. Ambedkar's efforts to secure separate electorates for the Depressed Classes and subsequent conflict with Gandhi, however, have been at the center of scholarship on Ambedkar's political work during the colonial period. For Ambedkar, separate electorates were a key step in the development of the Depressed Classes into a formidable political force. Gandhi was resolutely opposed to this demand and after the colonial government granted separate electorates, he went on a fast till death to protest the decision, arguing that it would divide and devastate the Hindu community. Ambedkar was compelled to compromise. The Poona Pact, which overturned the Communal Award and replaced separate electorates with reserved seats in the general electorate, was a disappointment for Ambedkar and resulted in his lasting distrust of Gandhi.⁵³⁶

In 1936, after the obstacles encountered during the Nasik Satyagraha and the disappointments of the Poona Pact, Ambedkar announced that while he may have been "born a Hindu," he would "not die a Hindu." Confrontations with caste Hindus and the

of "scheduled castes." The Indian Constitution also uses the term "scheduled castes." The term "untouchable" is attributed to Sir Herbert Risley, colonial administrator and ethnographer.

⁵³⁶ The clash with Gandhi has, in part, Jaffrelot argues, given Ambedkar a reputation of siding with the British and thus being anti-nation. See Jaffrelot, *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability*, 2. The representation of Ambedkar as anti-nation is found in Arun Shourie's recent work. See Arun Shourie, *Worshipping False Gods: Ambedkar and the Facts which have been Erased* (New Delhi: ASA Publications, 1997). Shourie, a journalist and author known for his right-leaning and politically incendiary work, questions Ambedkar's role in drafting the Indian Constitution and argues that Ambedkar sympathized with the British and hindered the efforts of upper caste reformers. Both Jaffrelot and Ramchandra Guha offer scathing critiques of Shourie's work and argue that while Ambedkar did oppose Congress, characterizing it as both capitalist and upper caste, his nationalist and anti-colonial credentials cannot be questioned. See Jaffrelot, *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability* and Ramchandra Guha, *An Anthropologist Among Marxists and Other Essays* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001). Nicholas Dirks argues that "the privileging of Gandhi as an emblem of nonpartisan feeling has, as its inverse, the demonization of Ambedkar as a purveyor of sectarian politics." See Dirks, 220. It seems the scholarship on Ambedkar has had to face the burden of this indictment and establish Ambedkar's nationalist and anti-colonial position.

persistence of Brahmanic ideology and power led him to the realization that Hinduism itself had to be abandoned in order to restore dignity and rights to the Depressed Classes as well as to generate nationalist solidarity. As Valarian Rodrigues writes, “one of Ambedkar’s most important arguments against Hinduism was that caste and untouchability did not let Hindus act as a community.”⁵³⁷ In 1956, just a few months before his death, Ambedkar officially renounced Hinduism and converted to Buddhism. Gauri Viswanathan argues that his conversion should not be read as a reaction to political obstacles, but rather as an attempt to formulate “alternative conceptions of nation and community” and “restore dalits an agency that untouchability had eroded.”⁵³⁸ Ambedkar searched for a religion that embraced the ideals of equality, liberty, and fraternity. He critiqued aspects of Buddhism that contradicted these ethical commitments and according to Omvedt, gave Buddhism a “liberation theology interpretation”⁵³⁹ This interpretation of Buddhism also embodies a feminist ethic.

While historians and political scientists of India have analyzed Ambedkar’s ideas of caste, Jaffrelot argues that the “founding figures” of Indian anthropology, such as M.N. Srinivas and Louis Dumont have largely neglected Ambedkar’s understandings of the origin, regulation, and maintenance of caste. Ambedkar’s analysis of the practice and ideology of caste emerges in various sources, including his histories of India. His histories, Omvedt notes, demonstrate that caste has a historical social origin and thus also can have an end. Moreover, these histories impart the critical idea that “the action of the

⁵³⁷ Rodrigues, “Introduction,” 25.

⁵³⁸ Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) 215, 232.

⁵³⁹ Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, 248.

oppressed and exploited could be effective” in accomplishing this end.⁵⁴⁰ As Rodrigues writes, Ambedkar employs the “resources that history and culture offered for an emancipatory project but argues that they became effective only through the matrix of the present.”⁵⁴¹

In addition to Ambedkar’s cultural challenge to Hindu society, his work on the Constitution and the Hindu Code Bill speak to his ultimate objective of the radical restructuring of social relations in India. Anupama Rao argues that “the political language of rights and representation that had come to dominate dalit struggles at this point rendered the language of law and constitutionalism an important site for advocating changes within the structures of caste and gender.”⁵⁴² Scholars have argued that Ambedkar’s legal work reveals his feminist commitments.⁵⁴³ Ambedkar was dedicated to the equality of all citizens and struggled, albeit unsuccessfully, to provide women with equal rights in matters of divorce and inheritance. Ambedkar’s legal work illustrates his commitment to universalist ideals and democracy in both government and social relations.

While anthropological and historical work has examined the intersection of caste and gender social systems, these works focus mainly on the constraints of caste

⁵⁴⁰ Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, 22. See B.R. Ambedkar, *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables?* (New Delhi: Amrit Books, 1948); B.R. Ambedkar, *Who Were the Shudras: How They Came to be the Fourth Varna in the Indo-Aryan Society* (Bombay: Tackder and Co, 1946); B.R. Ambedkar, “Revolution and Counter Revolution in Ancient India,” in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 4*, ed. Vasant Moon (Mumbai: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1987).

⁵⁴¹ Rodrigues, 2.

⁵⁴² Anupama Rao, “Introduction: Caste, Gender and Indian Feminism” in *Caste and Gender*, ed. Anupama Rao (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003) 23-24.

⁵⁴³ See T. Bharathi, “Ambedkar and the Uplift of Women,” in *Ambedkar and Social Justice*, Vol. II (New Delhi: Director Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1992.); Pardeshi; and Nazeer H. Khan, “Ambedkar on Gender Inequality: Myth and Reality” in *Ambedkar on Federalism, Ethnicity and Gender Justice*, ed. Nazeer H. Khan (New Delhi: Deep and Deep Publications, 2001).

regulation on upper caste women and largely neglect the conditions facing lower caste women.⁵⁴⁴ M.N. Srinivas suggests that the cultures of the lower castes embodied a matriarchal principle that afforded women more liberty and only with processes of “sanskritization” did lower caste women become victim to patriarchal oppression.⁵⁴⁵ Scholarship on the non-Brahman movement in Maharashtra, most notably by Rosalind O’Hanlon, Uma Chakravarti, and Gail Omvedt, analyzes the incorporation of gender and caste critiques into Jotirao Phule, Tarabai Shinde, and Pandita Ramabai’s writings and work; these accounts, however, also focus on the plight of upper caste women.⁵⁴⁶ Andre Beteille, in a comparison of race and caste through gender, demonstrates that both systems of race and caste are marked by sexual violence towards women positioned on the lowest social strata by men on the highest as well as a preoccupation with the “purity” of women on the upper echelons of the social hierarchy.⁵⁴⁷ The essays in *Caste and Gender*, a collection of essays on issues related to dalit women published by the feminist press Kali for Women, has continued to challenge the analytic separation of caste and gender inequality. These essays contest both feminist and anti-caste social understandings

⁵⁴⁴ See, for example, Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi, *Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste and Class in India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1986). Even in more recent works, such as Dirk’s *Castes of Mind*, statements on the intersection of caste and gender inequality refer only to customs facing upper caste women. See Dirks, 17, 232.

⁵⁴⁵ See M.N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1995). For a critique of the concept of “sanskritization” as embedded in upper-caste ideology, see Kamala Visweswaran, *Un/common Cultures: Racism and the Rearticulation of Cultural Difference* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). Visweswaran argues that when “seen through the eyes of a Dalit sociologist...M.N. Srinivas’s time-worn theory of ‘Sanskritization’ is but another naturalization of a system of caste oppression that reproduces upper-caste values for Dalits and other marginalized people to emulate.” See Visweswaran, 131.

⁵⁴⁶ See Rosalind O’Hanlon, *Caste Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth Century Western India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Uma Chakravarti, “Reconceptualising Gender: Phule, Brahmanism and Brahmanical Patriarchy,” in *Gender and Nation* (Gurgaon: Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Newray Inc., 2001); Gail Omvedt, *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: the Non-Brahmin Movement in Western India: 1873-1930*. Bombay: Scientific Socialists Education Trust, 1976.

⁵⁴⁷ Andre Beteille, “Race, Caste, and Gender,” *Man*, 25:3 (Sept. 1990) 489- 504.

for marginalizing dalit women and have mounted a powerful critique of mainstream Indian feminism. Rao, Pardeshi, Moon and Pawar, and Zelliott's essays in this volume suggest that Ambedkar's encouragement of dalit women's political participation and advocacy for women's legal rights reveals his opposition to patriarchal ideologies and practices.⁵⁴⁸ In the discussion that follows, I challenge this view. I examine how Ambedkar contests the patriarchal privilege of male caste-Hindu leaders such as Gandhi and how he strategically deploys patriarchal conceptions of women to advance his social and political goals. I argue that Ambedkar's critique of patriarchy is instrumentally applied to his larger project of the critique of caste and Hinduism and that Ambedkar prescribes patriarchal norms of domesticity and respectability for dalit women.

An Instrumentalist Critique of Patriarchy

Ambedkar's challenge to patriarchal relations is limited to those social relations that either hinder the development of an autonomous dalit political community or reinforce his critique of caste and untouchability. I use "patriarchy" to mean not only male power over women but also to encompass a wide range of relations among men that emerge around the authority of older men. Patriarchal privilege underlies not only the marginalization of women by men, but also the authority that older men command over younger men. In this section, I analyze how Ambedkar confronts patriarchal authority in

⁵⁴⁸ See Rao; Pardeshi, Zelliott; Meenaski Moon and Urmila Pawar "We Made History Too: Women in the Early Untouchable Liberation Movement in *Caste and Gender*, ed. Anupama Rao (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003). Gabrielle Dietrich, however, provides a less enthusiastic perspective. She states that "unfortunately, Ambedkar, though aware of women's position in general, has not integrated his analysis of caste with an analysis of patriarchy. He confines himself to general observation." See Gabrielle Dietrich, "Dalit Movements and Women's Movements" in *Caste and Gender*, ed. Anupama Rao (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003).

his attempt to become spokesperson for the Depressed Classes. I then discuss his critique of patriarchy and argue that it is limited and tangential to his critique of caste.

Ambedkar confronts and challenges patriarchal relations in his discussions with Gandhi and specifically, in his attempt to wrestle the authority to represent the Depressed Classes from Gandhi. In a speech at the Minorities Committee on November 13, 1931, Gandhi, after reasoning that separate electorates for the Depressed Classes was the most “unkindest cut of all,” argues that if there were an election, he rather than Ambedkar would receive the majority of Depressed Class votes.⁵⁴⁹ Gandhi had by this time already assumed the appellation “Bapu” and his repeated references to the “child-like faith” in him by the masses of India further identify him as a father figure. “I claim myself, in my own person,” he asserted, “to represent the vast majority of Untouchables.” He dismissed Ambedkar’s claim to represent the Depressed Classes, insulting him as someone whose “bitter experiences” have distorted his judgment and reason. “It is not a proper claim,” Gandhi stated, “which is registered by Dr. Ambedkar when he seeks to speak to for the whole of the Untouchables of India.”⁵⁵⁰

In speeches and letters to Ambedkar, Gandhi repeatedly highlighted his years of experience contemplating and working on dalit issues. In one letter to Ambedkar, Gandhi wrote, “I understand that you have got some grievances against me and the Congress. I may tell you that I have been thinking over the problem of Untouchables ever since my school days – when you were not even born.”⁵⁵¹ Here, Gandhi seemed to be evoking the

⁵⁴⁹ “Extract from Mr. Gandhi’s Speech at the Minority Committee, November 13, 1931,” *Correspondence with Gandhi – Papers regarding fast*, British Library, India Office Record.

⁵⁵⁰ “Extract from Mr. Gandhi’s Speech at the Minority Committee, November 13, 1931,” *Correspondence with Gandhi – Papers regarding fast*, British Library, India Office Record.

⁵⁵¹ Ambedkar, “Dr. Ambedkar – Mahatma Gandhi Meetings, August 14th 1931” in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part 1*, e. Hari Narake, N.G. Kambedle, et al. (Mumbai: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Publication Committee, Government of Maharashtra, 2003) 52.

reverence and submission older men mandate from younger men in a patriarchal system. He utilized his seniority to establish his authority over Ambedkar and consequently, his authority on issues affecting the Depressed Classes. Ambedkar, however, had identified and challenged the premise of Gandhi's authority. "It is true, Mahatmaji," Ambedkar conceded, "that you started to think about the problem of Untouchables before I was born. All older and elderly persons always like to emphasize the point of age."⁵⁵² Ambedkar then proceeded to question Congress' commitment to the abolition of Untouchability and asserted that Untouchables "believe in self-help and self-respect. We are not prepared to have faith in great leaders or Mahatmas." With this, Ambedkar argued for the agency and capacity of dalits to change their conditions and simultaneously invalidated the patriarchal foundations of Gandhi's authority. Gandhi later claimed that Ambedkar's plan for achieving equality for Untouchables "arrest[s] the marvelous work of the Hindu reformers."⁵⁵³ Ambedkar, he noted, failed to recognize "how dependent they ['the Depressed Classes'] are on them ['the so-called caste Hindus']."⁵⁵⁴ To gain recognition as the spokesperson of the Depressed Classes by both the colonial state and Indians, Ambedkar had to invalidate Gandhi's authority to represent the interests of the Untouchables. Ambedkar did this in part by countering Gandhi's patriarchal privilege and paternalistic approach with a declaration of the importance of experience to the ability to represent. The experience of untouchability, Ambedkar suggested, qualified and empowered him to represent the Depressed Classes of India. He urged dalits to reject Gandhi's paternalistic reform efforts and called upon

⁵⁵² Ambedkar, "Dr. Ambedkar – Mahatma Gandhi Meetings, August 14th 1931"

⁵⁵³ "Gandhi's letter to P.M. Ramsay McDonald, September, 1932," *Correspondance with Gandhi – Papers Regarding Fast*, in British Library, India Office Records.

⁵⁵⁴ "Letter to Sir Samuel Hoare, Yerada Central Prison, March 11, 1932," *Correspondence with Gandhi – Papers Regarding Fast*, in British Library, India Office Records.

them to employ their agency in the pursuit of their betterment and in the annihilation of caste.

Ambedkar's challenge to patriarchal relations extended beyond the arena of elite male politics and can also be found in his analysis of sati, child marriage, and enforced widowhood, three of the most fervently debated practices in nineteenth and early twentieth century Hindu socio-religious reform movements. These practices, however, were largely confined to the upper-caste. Ambedkar's critique of patriarchy ignored patriarchal relations in lower caste communities and instead only targeted the practices and ideologies that affect the lives of upper caste women. Ambedkar argued that the practices of sati, child marriage, and enforced widowhood were created to maintain the caste system. Caste was perpetuated through endogamy and endogamy required, he explained, "equality in numbers of men and women" in the community population.⁵⁵⁵ "Surplus" women, he wrote, "become a problem because they can marry out and thus threaten the caste"; the caste system must, therefore, have some mechanisms for the regulation of female population, or at least female sexuality.⁵⁵⁶ Ambedkar astutely noted that while sati and enforced widowhood solved the problem of "surplus" women, the problem of "surplus" men could not be solved by either killing them or forcing them into celibacy. Ambedkar argued that the spiritual and economic well-being of the caste precluded this and that "surplus" men were afforded protection through the operation of patriarchy:⁵⁵⁷

⁵⁵⁵ B. R. Ambedkar, "Caste in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development" in K.L. Chanchrek, ed, associate editors Saroj Prasad, Rajesh Kumar, *Social Justice and Political Safeguards for Depressed Classes: Dr. B.R. Ambedkar* (New Delhi: Shree Publishing House, 1991), 7.

⁵⁵⁶ Ambedkar, "Caste in India," 7.

⁵⁵⁷ Ambedkar notes that "it is in the interest of the caste to keep him as Grahastha (one who raises a family)" but provides no analysis of the importance of women's domestic labor for the caste. This

man as compared with woman has had the upper hand... With this traditional superiority of man over woman his wishes have always been consulted. Woman, on the other hand, had been an easy prey to all kinds of iniquitous injunctions, religious, social or economic. But man as the maker of these injunctions is most often above them.⁵⁵⁸

The position of men within the caste allowed them to remarry, but the structure of the caste system required that the bride come from “the ranks of those not yet marriageable in order to tie him down to the group.” Child marriage thus resolved the problem of “surplus” men.

Ambedkar theorized that sati, enforced widowhood, and child marriage were the “means” of caste regulation and in order to make these seemingly cruel practices acceptable, a wide range of “ideals” centering on a wife’s devotion to her husband – the ideology of *pativrata* – had to be created. As he wrote, “the very fact that these customs were so highly eulogized proves that they needed eulogy for their prevalence”; a belief in *pativrata* enabled practices which “must have been so abominable and shocking to the moral sense of the unsophisticated that they needed a great deal of sweetening.”⁵⁵⁹

Pativrata, in Ambedkar’s analysis, was thus also a central ideology of the caste system. The colonial state in India had targeted cultural practices that related to women. In particular, sati, enforced widowhood, and child marriage were deemed evidence of the backwardness of Hindu society. The civilizing mission, a crucial legitimating ideology for colonial rule, was built upon the view of Indian women as degraded, disempowered, and ignorant. This simultaneously condemned Indian society and positioned the colonial

omission is particularly glaring since enforced widowhood; Anupama Rao argues, enables the exploitation of a woman’s domestic labor and thus also adds to the material wellbeing of the caste.

⁵⁵⁸ Ambedkar “Caste in India,” 8.

⁵⁵⁹ Ambedkar “Caste in India,” 11.

government as the bestower of “civilization” and modernity.⁵⁶⁰ For Indian socio-religious reformers, the revamping of tradition and the modernization of women became linked with the regeneration of community and the fitness of the nation.⁵⁶¹ Sati, enforced widowhood, and child marriage were equally a concern for them and became the focus of both legislative intervention and Hindu socio-religious reform.

Ambedkar’s analysis of *pativrata* as a derivative of caste ideology rendered the caste system responsible for generating the customs that signified Hindu society’s inferiority. His analysis was able to explain three of the most derided and notorious Hindu practices during colonialism as practices that functioned for the regulation and perpetuation of the caste system. Ambedkar’s critique of these customs seems largely strategic: by linking caste with the practices that were associated in both the colonial and reformist imagination with the backwardness of Indian civilization, Ambedkar was able to identify the caste system as both the (historical) point of origin of India’s civilizational decline and the most significant obstacle to India’s modernization. Ambedkar did not offer a comprehensive analysis of how caste and patriarchy intersected in the lives of dalits; nor did he make gender inequality a concern in and of itself. For Ambedkar, the relationship of gender inequality to caste was functional; the caste system was the primary unit for analysis and patriarchy was subsumed within it. As Gabrielle Dietrich argues, “while he [Ambedkar] sees a connection between social evils like sati, child

⁵⁶⁰ This paradigm of colonial relations is most succinctly stated by Gayatri Spivak in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”: “White man saving brown women from brown men.” See Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988), 271-313.

⁵⁶¹ Janaki Nair account of colonial legislation on customs related to women is See Janaki Nair, *Women and Law in Colonial India: A Social History* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1996). See also Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

marriage, ban on widow remarriage, caste and untouchability, his occupation is clearly with untouchability and caste.”⁵⁶²

Ambedkar’s analysis of sati, child marriage, and enforced widowhood challenged and critiqued the dominant socio-religious reform movements of the time. In the *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar distinguished between social reform “in the sense of the reform of the Hindu Family and social reform in the sense of the reorganization and reconstruction of the Hindu Society.”⁵⁶³ While the former related to “widow remarriage, child marriage etc.,” the latter “relates to the abolition of the Caste system.” The social reform movements in India, he argued, only targeted the former. Ambedkar’s work demonstrated the connection between the two arenas of reform and showed that comprehensive social reform could occur without the abolition of caste.⁵⁶⁴ Nicholas Dirks argues that nineteenth century reform movements, with their focus on “Brahmanic practices,” simultaneously “worked to assert the primary importance of Brahmin customs for the definition of the Hindu Community.”⁵⁶⁵ Ambedkar seemed aware of this and its influence on the lower castes. In “Caste in India,” Ambedkar wrote that “the status of caste in the Hindu society varies directly with the extent of the observances of the customs of sati, enforced widowhood and girl marriage.”⁵⁶⁶ At a time when, as Zelliott notes, “other castes were ‘sanskritizing’ and adopting such older Brahmanical practices

⁵⁶² Dietrich, 74.

⁵⁶³ Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste with a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi* (Nagpur: Samata Prakashan, 2004), 27.

⁵⁶⁴ Scholars have shown the interrelations between these two categories of reform, between gender codes within the home and the caste structure of the wider society. For examples, Uma Chakravarti examines how Jotirao Phule, Pandita Ramabai and Tarabai Shinde discussed “the intimate connection between caste and gender codes” evidenced in issues of enforced widowhood. See Uma Chakravarti “Reconceptualising Gender,” 273. In his assessment of 19th century social reform, Nickolas Dirks argues that “in some way caste was an extension of the ‘woman’s question,’ given the extent to which caste values – in particular upper caste values – were implicated in the issues that were targeted by social reformers concerning the treatment of women, such as sati, widow remarriage, and the age of consent.” See Dirks, 232.

⁵⁶⁵ Dirks, 256.

⁵⁶⁶ Ambedkar, “Caste in India,” 18.

as child marriage and prohibition of widow remarriage,” Ambedkar vehemently opposed the mimicry of upper caste customs.⁵⁶⁷ While a critique of patriarchy, albeit focused on the upper caste, can be discerned in this, Ambedkar’s opposition to these practices emerges from his critique of the caste system and his opposition to the creation of a majoritarian community based on Brahmanic practices.

In *The Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar identified intermarriage – the “fusion of blood” – as that which “can alone create the feeling of being kith and kin” which would “serve as the solvent of caste.”⁵⁶⁸ Scholars have viewed this advocacy of intermarriage as also a critique of the patriarchal control – via caste ideology – of women’s sexuality.⁵⁶⁹ While Ambedkar was arguing for the liberalization of traditional sexual economies, his primary concern was not the restrictions on women’s sexuality. Ambedkar seems to have two primary reasons for intermarriage: to disable the caste system and to rectify the inequality between lower caste men and upper caste men in their access to women. He wrote that Manu mandated “each class to marry within his class” and was “particularly careful not to allow intermarriage to do harm to his principle of inequality among the masses”; intermarriage was allowed only when a man married “a woman from any class below him.”⁵⁷⁰ A lower caste man could not marry a woman from a higher caste and, as Ambedkar pointed out, a Shudra could be charged with adultery and put to death for marrying a higher caste woman.⁵⁷¹ The rules of caste gave upper caste men unregulated

⁵⁶⁷ Zelliot, “Dr. Ambedkar and the Empowerment of Women,” 206.

⁵⁶⁸ *Annihilation of Caste*, 59, 60.

⁵⁶⁹ See, for example, Sharmila Rege, “A Dalit Woman’s Standpoint,” in *Caste and Gender*, ed. Anupama Rao (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003) 94-95.

⁵⁷⁰ B.R Ambedkar, in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 3*, ed. Vasant Moon (Mumbai: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1987) 25.

⁵⁷¹ B.R. Ambedkar, “The Woman and the Counter Revolution” in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 3*, ed. Vasant Moon (Mumbai: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1987) 310.

sexual access to lower caste women, while limiting a lower caste man's sexual access to a much smaller pool of women. Ambedkar's writings on intermarriage thus did not endorse women's choice in marriage or support giving women control over their sexuality; rather, Ambedkar's objective seemed to be equality among men by giving lower caste men the same sexual privileges as upper caste men.

A Strategic Patriarchy

Ambedkar's contestation of patriarchal ideologies and practices did not extend to the situation of dalit women and was limited to those practices that maintained inequality among men. Furthermore, Ambedkar's prescriptions for dalit women betray a view of gender relations that contradicts the principles of self-assertion, liberty, and empowerment found in his ideological approach to other social issues. Ambedkar was, however, an advocate for women's literacy and political participation. He professed at the All-India Depressed Class Women's Conference: "I am a great believer in Women's organization. I know what they can do to improve the condition of society if they are convinced... Ever since I began to work among the Depressed Classes, I made it a point to carry women along with men."⁵⁷² Ambedkar had organized conferences for women and encouraged their empowerment as reformers. Despite this, a patriarchal and paternalistic approach to gender issues pervades Ambedkar's discussion of dalit women. While Ambedkar challenged upper caste patriarchy, he reproduces early twentieth-century ideals for the upper caste woman in his prescriptions for dalit women.

⁵⁷² B.R. Ambedkar, "Address to Second Session of the All-India Depressed Classes Women's Conference, July 20, 1942, Nagpur," in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part 3*, eds. Hare Narake, Dr. M. L. Kasare, et al. (Mumbai: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Materials Publication Committee, Government of Maharashtra, 2003) 282.

Furthermore, Ambedkar suggested that the assertions and empowerment of dalit women could potentially threaten the strength of the dalit community.

A correlation between the empowerment of women and the emasculation of men can be discerned not only in Ambedkar's thoughts on dalit women, but also in his critiques of Hinduism. In his discussion of Hindu goddesses, he claimed that whereas Vedic goddesses "were worshipped only because they were the wives of Gods," Puranic goddesses are worshipped "in their own right" because they "went to the battlefield and performed great heroic deeds."⁵⁷³ This, he maintained, made the Gods "a set of miserable cowards." In this rendering, the strength of the goddesses emasculated the gods and diluted their power. As Ambedkar argued, "it seems that the Gods could not defend themselves against the Asuras and had to beg of their wives to come to the rescue...How can such cowardly Gods have any prowess?"⁵⁷⁴ The "doctrine of Sakti," Ambedkar continued, is an "absurdity." Ambedkar not only dismisses the liberating possibilities of a principle of female power, but also suggested that the perversion of strong goddesses and emasculated gods had deluded and weakened their worshippers.

The disparagement of women's empowerment can also be found in Ambedkar's assessment of the educational needs of the dalit community. In a speech delivered in 1956, Ambedkar recalled that after noticing the large sum of money the colonial government invested in Hindu and Muslim education at Banaras Hindu University and Aligarh University, he asked the Viceroy to support education for the Depressed Classes. "The Europeans," he recollected, "were very sympathetic. They accepted my proposal.

⁵⁷³ B.R. Ambedkar, "Riddles in Hinduism: An Exposition to Enlighten the Masses," in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 4*, ed. Vasant Moon (Mumbai: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1987) 99.

⁵⁷⁴ B.R. Ambedkar, "Riddles in Hinduism: An Exposition to Enlighten the Masses," 107.

The problem was on which item the money should be spent.”⁵⁷⁵ The government had allocated funds for the education, including boarding, of Depressed Class girls. Ambedkar regarded this allocation as contrary to his goals: “If our girls are provided education and made educated, where at home, is the material to cook various types of dishes? What is the end result of their education? The government spent the money on their heads and withheld the amount of education.” Ambedkar approached the Viceroy again and explained that he had envisioned funding on education to produce men like himself, men whose “learning is so great” that they could “sit on the pinnacle of the palace.” Ambedkar claimed that from such a position, “one can make overall surveillance” and if the Depressed classes were “to be protected, then sharp eyed men are to be created.” The Viceroy agreed and “sixteen men were sent to England for higher education.” Ambedkar added, however, that “just as some earthen pots are half-baked and some baked, of those sixteen, some are half-baked and some are baked.” The funds lost on the “half-baked” men were brushed aside as “a different matter,” but funds lost to the education of girls were controversial enough to be included in his speech. Ambedkar suggested that women’s education would disrupt their performance of domestic labor and would interfere with their roles as caregivers. He envisioned a community led by men and women’s roles were limited to those as wives and mothers; empowerment that would detract from these primary roles was deemed a potential harm to the community.

Ambedkar suggested that a significant way women could assist in the construction of a politically and socially formidable dalit community was by conforming to dominant standards of domesticity and respectability. He remained vigilant against

⁵⁷⁵ B.R. Ambedkar, “Speech on Occasion of Conversion, October 15, 1956,” in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part 3*, eds. Hare Narake, Dr. M. L. Kasare, et al. (Mumbai: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Materials Publication Committee, Government of Maharashtra, 2003), 538.

women subverting his vision of dalit empowerment and in speeches to or about Depressed Class women, he utilized the language of community rather than that of the individual. Women's behavior and gender relations within the community indexed the respectability of the community as a whole. Thus, while he endorsed certain types of reform, he also marginalized and ostracized sectors of the dalit community.

“Self-respect,” Ambedkar declared, “is a most vital factor in life.”⁵⁷⁶ Two distinct concepts can be discerned in this concept: One aspect relates to personal dignity, a self-assertion of equality as a counterpoint to feelings of inferiority. The other relates to honor, or the embodiment of qualities that confer a sense of equality and respect through their social signification. Ambedkar's conceptualized self-respect as a transformative affect that could generate a new social and political identity. The concept of self-respect, however, also seemed to include a coercive directive to women to assume the practices deemed respectable by more socially and politically powerful communities.

For example, although Ambedkar opposed the adoption of upper-caste customs such as sati and enforced widowhood, he instructed dalit women to imitate the self-presentation of upper-caste women. Ambedkar viewed the silver jewelry and short saris commonly adorned by Mahar women as marks of their subjugation and advised them to dress like their upper-caste counterparts. Pratima Pardeshi argues that this does not convey Ambedkar's endorsement of the “brahmanisation of dalit women,” but rather indicates that “Dr. Ambedkar saw the question of the dalit woman's identity of self-respect as crucial to social reform and to the revolutionary struggle.”⁵⁷⁷ Pardeshi

⁵⁷⁶ B. R. Ambedkar, “Presidential Address to Ratnagiri District Bahishkrit Parishad,” in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part 3*, ed. Hare Narake, Dr. M. L. Kasare, et al. (Mumbai: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Materials Publication Committee, Government of Maharashtra, 2003), 10.

⁵⁷⁷ Pardeshi, 352-353.

suggests that the rejection of dress codes enforced by caste was pivotal to the empowerment of the community. However, while Ambedkar maintained dalit women's equality with upper-caste women and encouraged dalit women, through their dress, to defy caste inequality, "self-respect" was earned by embodying an upper-caste habitus. Self-respect and social change thus also depended on recasting dalit women's identities to fit upper caste notions of respectability.

Ambedkar marginalized dalit women whose activities challenged his vision of a self-respecting and respectable community. For example, he found the work of prostitutes in Bombay so shameful that he refused to integrate them into his movement.⁵⁷⁸ In an act that revealed his privileging of honor above rights, Ambedkar demanded that the prostitutes abandon their "disgraceful life."⁵⁷⁹ In a meeting in 1936, he declared that "the Mahar women of Kamathipura are a shame to the community." "Unless you are prepared to change your ways," he instructed, "we shall have no use for you. There are only two ways open to you: either you remain where you are and continue to be depressed and shunned, or you give up your disgraceful profession and come with us." In Gail Omvedt's recounting of this incident, she notes that the prostitutes had hoped that Ambedkar would use his stature to protect them from police harassment. Ambedkar's refusal conveys his willingness to disregard for the safety of these dalit women in order to strengthen the reputation of the community. Ambedkar – despite his commitment to

⁵⁷⁸ The prostitutes in Kamathipura were mostly of the *jogini* and *devadasi* communities. The practice of dedicating women into this type of work was seen as "ritual prostitution" by the colonial state. Throughout the nineteenth century, dalit and non-brahman movements focused on the reform of these practices and called for the men to marry women in the practice as part of the salvaging of the women's and community's self-respect. See Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question*, 62-67. I discuss contemporary activism around the *devadasi* custom in the previous chapter.

⁵⁷⁹ Ambedkar, "Speech at Damodr Thakersey Hall, Bombay, June 16, 1936," in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part 3*, eds. Hare Narake, Dr. M. L. Kasare, et al. (Mumbai: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Materials Publication Committee, Government of Maharashtra, 2003) 150.

equality, individualism, liberty, and fraternity – privileged the honor of the community over the rights to equality and fraternity of some of its members. He ignored the structural and material conditions facing these women as well as their potential exploitation by the police. Omvedt points out that Ambedkar received criticism from other “caste reformers...for ignoring the severe economic constraints that drove women to this profession.”⁵⁸⁰ She argues that Ambedkar’s position indicates his advocacy of “self-respect over economic constraints”; by asserting the prostitutes “ability to choose and act,” Ambedkar, “refused to see the women simply as victims.”⁵⁸¹ Ambedkar, however, did not take into consideration material limitations on their agency. He also represented the prostitutes as a source of “shame” and a blight on the honor of the community. Furthermore, Ambedkar repeatedly used the figure of the prostitute in a derogatory sense in metaphors and analogies in his writings and speeches.⁵⁸² The prostitute symbolized a woman who lacked virtue and self-respect and possessed an “immoral character.” Given the large number of dalit prostitutes in Bombay, his choice of language suggests not only their marginalization in Ambedkar’s movement, but also the degree to which Ambedkar distances himself from them in public representations of the community.

Interestingly, dalit women, unlike upper caste women, were rarely represented as victims in Ambedkar’s accounts; more often than not, they were cast as the objects of reform. When they were represented as victims, it was usually to bring attention to the

⁵⁸⁰ Omvedt, *Enlightened India*, 64.

⁵⁸¹ Omvedt, *Enlightened India*, 64.

⁵⁸² For example, see B.R. Ambedkar, “Speech at a Public Meeting in Mazgaon, Bombay, Feb. 1933” in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part 3*, eds. Hare Narake, Dr. M. L. Kasare, et al. (Mumbai: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Materials Publication Committee, Government of Maharashtra, 2003) 87, or in an interview with a journalist recalled in “Speech on Occasion of Conversion” 535.

social and political marginalization of dalits in India. For example, Ambedkar discussed the release of a man who raped a fourteen year old dalit girl. Noting the lack of “fair play and justice” in the parole of her attacker, Ambedkar commented on the impotence of the community in *Times of India*: “We [the dalits] are destined to be a minority. We can only criticize. We can never hope to control.”⁵⁸³

In his speech to the Bombay prostitutes, Ambedkar directed them to “marry and settle down to normal domestic life as women of other classes do.”⁵⁸⁴ Marriage would restore both the prostitutes and the community’s honor. In his speech to the Second Session of the All-India Depressed Classes Women’s Conference in 1942, Ambedkar reiterated his advocacy of patriarchal gender norms. He spoke to the conference attendees as mothers – as the custodians of the community – and instructs them on how to perform their domestic life:

Learn to be clean; keep free from all vices. Give education to your children. Instill ambition in them. Inculcate on their minds that they are destined to be great. Remove from them all inferiority complex. Don’t be in a hurry to marry: marriage is a liability. You should not impose it on your children unless financially they are able to meet the liabilities arising from marriage. Those who will marry will bear in mind that to have too many children is a crime. That Parental duty lies in giving each child a better start than its parents had. Above all, let each girl who marries stand up to her husband, claim to be her husband’s friend and equal and refuse to be his slave. I am sure if you follow this advice you will bring honour and glory to yourselves and to the Depressed Classes.⁵⁸⁵

In this and other statements, Ambedkar espoused the model of domesticity and respectability associated with the ‘new woman.’ The ‘new woman,’ the model of proper

⁵⁸³ B.R. Ambedkar, “Letter to the Editor of Times of India, March 19, 1938,” in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part 1*, eds. Hare Narake, Dr. M. L. Kasare, et al. (Mumbai: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Materials Publication Committee, Government of Maharashtra, 2003), 256.

⁵⁸⁴ Ambedkar, “Speech at Damodr Thakersey Hall, Bombay, June 16, 1936,” in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part 3*, eds. Hare Narake, Dr. M. L. Kasare, et al. (Mumbai: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Materials Publication Committee, Government of Maharashtra, 2003), 150.

⁵⁸⁵ B.R. Ambedkar, “Address to Second Session of the All-India Depressed Class Women’s Conference,” 282.

femininity formulated by late nineteenth-century nationalist and socio-religious reform movements, was educated, financially prudent, modest, and hygienic; she indexed both the respectability and modernity of the community.⁵⁸⁶ The companionate model of marital relations, a Victorian ideal which positioned the wife as both the partner and helpmate of her husband, formed the paradigm for the new woman's relations with her husband. The “new woman,” as Partha Chatterjee writes, “was subjected to a new patriarchy”⁵⁸⁷ It is this ‘new’ vision of gender relations, a paradigm of both modernity and respectability created by elite sectors in colonial society, that Ambedkar prescribed for dalit women.

Chatterjee argues that the new woman is identified not only through her difference from the westernized woman but also from the lower class and lower caste woman. “Maidservants, washer women, barbers, peddlers, procuresses, prostitutes” were among the figures popularly represented as these women. “It was precisely this degenerate condition of women,” Chatterjee adds, “that nationalism claimed it would reform, and it was through these contrasts that the new woman of nationalist ideology was accorded a status of cultural superiority to the Westernized woman...as well as to the

⁵⁸⁶ This is the description of the social reform and nationalist movement's reformulation of women's gender roles discussed by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, “Recasting Women: An Introduction,” in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, eds. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990); Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, “Introduction,” in *Women Writing in India, 600 BC to the Present, Vol. I*, eds. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (New York: The Feminist press at the CUNY, 1991); and Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). Recent scholarship, however, has highlighted the ways in which this argument is largely Bengal-specific. For example, the scholarship of Sanjay Joshi, Anshu Malhotra and Charu Gupta shows that in North India the formulation of the “new woman” was accompanied with a renewed concern over women's sexuality, as evidenced in the “moral panic” over figures such as the widow and prostitute. See Sanjay Joshi, *Fractured Modernity: Making of a Middle Class in Colonial North India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001); Anshu Malhotra, *Gender, Caste and Religious Identities* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Charu Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

⁵⁸⁷ Chatterjee, 127.

common woman of the lower classes.”⁵⁸⁸ The denigration of lower class and caste women in nationalist ideology seems to have become particularly problematic for Ambedkar in his attempt to construct a respectable and honorable social and political community. Ambedkar seems to have accepted the nationalist rendering of the ‘modern’ woman and urged the Depressed Classes to assume the gender roles and relations of the new, ‘modern’ patriarchy. He did not challenge the nationalist and reformist paradigms of respectability and domesticity; rather, he demanded that dalit women embody them. For Ambedkar, a dalit community socially and politically equal to the upper caste sectors of society would require the lower caste woman to refashion herself as the ‘new woman.’

A New Template for a Humanistic Universalism

Ambedkar’s discussions of gender after Indian independence reveal a shift in focus from respectability to rights. While his earlier discussions contain instrumental critiques of upper-caste patriarchy and paternalistic directives for the domestic reform of dalit women lives, Ambedkar’s work on the Constitution of India and the Hindu Code Bill exemplified his commitment to women’s legal and political equality as citizens of India. Ambedkar’s respect for the individual and commitment to the principles of equality, liberty, and fraternity are evident in the laws he drafted. As Pratima Pardeshi writes, Ambedkar undid Manu’s “caste-based and patriarchal law” and provided India with a new template for social relations.⁵⁸⁹ This template was based on “fraternity,”

⁵⁸⁸ Chatterjee, 127. Tharu and Lalita show deeper historical roots to this kind of comparison: They write that “increasingly over the nineteenth century, the respectability of women from the emerging middle classes was being defined in counterpoint to the ‘crude and licentious’ behavior of lower caste women.” See Tharu and Lalita, 8.

⁵⁸⁹ Pardeshi, 494

which, Ambedkar argued, “is only another name for democracy.”⁵⁹⁰ Ambedkar, however, feared that the legal principle of equality would not be sufficient to combat the deeply ingrained sexism and castism in Indian society. He feared, as Gauri Viswanathan argues, that “secular differentiation” in India could be “consistent with rather than an alternative to a social philosophy based on hierarchy.”⁵⁹¹ Ambedkar reasoned that this alternative would have to come in the form of community identity and would have to counter the limitations of liberal democracy in generating social change.⁵⁹² He found this alternative in the renunciation of Hinduism and conversion to Buddhism.

Ambedkar’s frustrations with the liberal democratic state peaked when the Hindu Code Bill could not be passed as he had envisioned. After years of championing the Bill and participating in its debate, Ambedkar resigned from Nehru’s Cabinet on September 25, 1951, noting that he had only stayed on in Nehru’s government despite his differences with the administration in the hopes of getting the Bill passed. Ambedkar argued that the Bill was intended to give “the widow, the daughter, the widow of the pre-deceased son...the same rank as the son in the matter of inheritance. In addition to that, the daughter also is given a share of her father’s property; her share is prescribed as half of that of his son.”⁵⁹³ In this way, the Bill countered the ideology of son preference that undergird gender inequity in Hindu culture. Moreover, by affording widows and

⁵⁹⁰ *Annihilation of Caste*, 57.

⁵⁹¹ Viswanathan, 215.

⁵⁹² In an All-India Radio broadcast on October 3, 1945, Ambedkar asserts that his “social philosophy may be said to be enshrined in three words: Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity.” He does not trace the genealogy of these terms to the French Revolution, but rather, cites Buddhism as his influence. “My philosophy,” he continues, “has roots in religion and not in political science. I have derived them from the teachings of my master, the Buddha.” See B.R. Ambedkar, “All-India Radio Broadcast, October 3, 1945” in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part 3*, eds. Hare Narake, Dr. M.L. Kasare, et al. (Mumbai: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Materials Publication Committee, Government of Maharashtra, 2003). Also, given that dalits are considered outside of what constitutes a social being, Ambedkar’s focus on fraternity seems to be a way of restoring what the caste system strips of the individual.

⁵⁹³ Ambedkar, “Hindu Code Bill,” in Rodrigues, 496.

daughters equal status in inheritance, Ambedkar encouraged the financial independence of women and placed an obstacle to the exploitation of their labor, especially the widow's labor. He conceded that although the "large majority of our countrymen do not accept" the bill, it passed the "test of one's conscience"; in order to remove the "obstruction of Law in the social advancement of women," he argued, the Bill would have to become law.⁵⁹⁴

In his resignation letter, Ambedkar wrote that the Hindu Code Bill "was the greatest social reform measure ever undertaken by the Legislature of this country," but that Nehru "although sincere, had not the earnestness and determination required to get the Hindu Code Bill through."⁵⁹⁵ Ambedkar's resignation letter also expressed extreme disappointment and frustration with the administration's neglect of issues affecting the Scheduled Castes. He concluded that "to leave inequality between class and class, between sex and sex which is the soul of Hindu society untouched and to go on passing legislation relating to economic problems is to make a farce of our Constitution and to build a palace on a heap of dung."⁵⁹⁶

Disenchanted with the efficacy of the liberal democratic 'secular' state to overturn Hindu social relations, Ambedkar turned to Buddhism to provide the foundation for the community and ethics that could replace the inequality and differentiation in Indian society. Conversion to Buddhism was an explicit critique of the inequality and segmentation that characterized Hindu society and provided, as Omvedt argues, an

⁵⁹⁴ B.R. Ambedkar, "Hindu Code Bill Referred to Select Committee," in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 14, Part 1*, ed. Vasant Moon. (Mumbai: Department of Education, Government of Maharashtra, 1995) 42.

⁵⁹⁵ B.R. Ambedkar, "Statement in Parliament in Explanation of his Resignation from the Cabinet, New Delhi, 10th October, 1951," in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 14, Part 2*, ed. Vasant Moon. (Mumbai: Department of Education, Government of Maharashtra, 1995) 1325, 1324.

⁵⁹⁶ Ambedkar, "Statement in Parliament in Explanation of his Resignation from the Cabinet, New Delhi, 10th October, 1951," 1325.

opportunity to “redefine and reconstitute...relations with the whole of Indian society, with its various groups, its historical and cultural traditions.”⁵⁹⁷ The social vision Ambedkar found in Buddhism was one of egalitarianism, rights, and social camaraderie and in this way can broadly be characterized as feminist. While many of the oaths required for conversion, such as vegetarianism, marital fidelity, and teetotalism, embodied the practices of upper-caste Hindu reformist respectability, these practices no longer conferred a notion of ritual purity, but rather related to a social ethic based on community.⁵⁹⁸ For example, as Pardeshi notes, the prohibition against alcohol was intended to help hinder marital violence against women.⁵⁹⁹ Ambedkar reformulated Buddhism to supplement “a modern liberal philosophy”; his Buddhism was a “religion with a social mission” that “answered the needs of India’s depressed millions.”⁶⁰⁰ The transcendental components of religion were understated in favor of the ideological, which provided the principles for the restructuring of social relations.

Ambedkar’s histories of ancient India recounted a past for the nation that diverged from that imagined by both the socio-religious reform movements and other nationalist leaders. The age of Buddhism, which constituted the golden age of Indian civilization in Ambedkar’s narrative, provided the historical antecedent for the repudiation of Hindu beliefs and its corresponding social relations. Ambedkar, like other reformers, employed

⁵⁹⁷ Omvedt, *Dalit and the Democratic Revolution*, 134.

⁵⁹⁸ See B.R. Ambedkar, “Conversion Oaths,” in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part 3*, eds. Hare Narake, Dr. M. L. Kasare, et al. (Mumbai: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Materials Publication Committee, Government of Maharashtra, 2003), 527-532.

⁵⁹⁹ Pardeshi, 357.

⁶⁰⁰ M.S. Gore, *The Social Context of Ideology: Ambedkar’s Social and Political Thought* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1993) 258. For example, Ambedkar contends that the “Four Noble Truths,” which he terms the “Four Aryan Truths,” were not part of the original doctrine of the Buddha. As he writes in the Buddha and his Dhamma, “if life is sorrow, death is sorrow and rebirth is sorrow, then there is an end of everything. Neither religion nor religion can help a man to achieve happiness...The four Aryan truths are a stumbling block...The four Aryan truths deny hope to man.” See B.R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and his Dhamma* (Bombay: Siddharth College Publication, 1957), x.

a “trope of decline” and drew parallels between the civilizational status of each period and the status of women.⁶⁰¹ However, while Ambedkar’s histories remained within the nationalist and reformist genre in terms of structure and metaphors, his narrative imparted a very different representation of the past and consequently, different aspirations for the future.

Uma Chakravarti discusses the prominence of idealizations of a supposed ancient Aryan Age as the golden age of India in the socio-religious reformist and nationalist imagination. The civilizational merits of this golden age was indexed by the figure of “the Aryan woman,” who “came to occupy the center of the stage in the recounting of ‘the wonder that was India’” and personified “an amalgamation of Brahmanical and Kshatriya values.”⁶⁰² Ambedkar’s vision of the past departed from this representation and illustrated the Aryan Age as an oppressive and morally-bankrupt time. The Aryan Age was marked by gambling, intoxication, and perverse sexual and gender relations. Ambedkar used the examples of Draupadi and Sita and to argue against the celebration of Aryan women as models for contemporary today. “We wonder why Draupadi never had been given a chance to gamble away her five husbands,” he wrote, “or Sita an opportunity to send her calumniators and doubters on the pyre onto the woods.”⁶⁰³

In Ambedkar’s histories of ancient India, Buddhism incited a social revolution that both denounced the caste system and its bars on intermarriage and inter-dining and liberated women and advanced their status in society. Buddhism gave women “the right

⁶⁰¹ Joshi, 81.

⁶⁰² Uma Chakravarti, “Whatever happened to the Vedic Dasi: Orientalism, Nationalism and a Script for the Past” in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, eds. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 29.

⁶⁰³ Ambedkar, “The Position of Women in Hinduism or Buddhism,” Vol. 17, Part 2, 495.

to knowledge and the right to realize their spiritual potentialities along with man.”⁶⁰⁴

Ambedkar claimed that “the Buddha did not place any premium on virginity as such. He kept his way open to all classes of women – married, unmarried, widows, and even prostitutes.”⁶⁰⁵ The inclusion of “prostitutes” is noteworthy considering Ambedkar’s rejection of them earlier in his life. Perhaps recognizing the limitations of his earlier judgments on respectability, Ambedkar extolled the Buddha’s inclusive and egalitarian project. “Under the Buddhist regime,” Ambedkar argued, women enjoyed equality with men in all matters, including property and marriage; she “became a free person.”⁶⁰⁶

Following the Aryan Age and the era of Buddha’s revolution, the third period in Ambedkar’s history of India was ushered in with the revolution of Pushyamitra. Buddhism was overthrown and in a counter-revolution and Brahmanism was re-established as the prevailing social system. Manu provided the legal institutionalization of Brahmanism. Caste, in its most severe forms was legitimated, and practices like endogamy, sati, child marriage and enforced widowhood were enacted to regulate caste. Manu, Ambedkar argued, was responsible for the downfall of the Indian woman; he “wanted to deprive women of the freedom they had under the Buddhistic regime.”⁶⁰⁷

Ambedkar explained that women were not permitted to divorce and were denied access

⁶⁰⁴ Ambedkar argues that “Buddhism was a revolution. It was as great as the French Revolution.” It began as a religious movement, but resulted in both the social and political restructuring of Indian society.

⁶⁰⁵ Ambedkar, “The Rise and Fall of the ‘Hindu Woman’: Who was Responsible for it?,” *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part 2*, eds. Hare Narake, Dr. M. L. Kasare, et al. (Mumbai: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Materials Publication Committee, Government of Maharashtra, 2003), 121.

⁶⁰⁶ Ambedkar, “Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India,” 310. Ambedkar also notes that the status of women in Buddhist countries is higher than that in India. He argues that this is in part because “the Buddhist wife does not look up to her husband as a god, she is not expected to eat after her husband has finished his meal or immolate herself after her husband’s death as an alternative to life of utter dejection.” See Ambedkar “The Rise and Fall of the ‘Hindu Woman’: Who was Responsible for it?,” 496.

⁶⁰⁷ Ambedkar, “Rise and Fall,” 125.

to learning and property; marital violence was sanctioned and “a wife reduced to the level of a slave.”⁶⁰⁸

Ambedkar’s movement for conversion to Buddhism was thus an appeal to return to the social relations that marked the Buddhist regime in India. Buddhism provided an ethical framework that, in conjunction with the legal guarantees of the Constitution, could transform Indian society. Conversion would allow women to escape the patriarchy created by both Hinduism and the Indian state’s legislation and enter a more egalitarian social system. For Ambedkar, it was the Buddhist woman, an educated, empowered and independent woman, not the Aryan woman, who embodied the ideal for modern social relations.

Ambedkar concluded his discussion on the status of women in the different periods of Indian history by noting that those in the past prescribed roles for women based on the needs of their day and that critiquing them would not help achieve the empowerment of women today. Perhaps this also applies to a gendered reading of Ambedkar’s writings and speeches. Ambedkar’s social and political thought remains a testament to his ideological independence and his commitment to the empowerment of all individuals. His radical critiques of both the principle of hierarchy and majoritarianism maintain their salience today. Many of his views on women and gender relations, however, stand in contradiction with the values espoused in his work. They reveal a blindness to women’s subjectivities and the structural and material constraints affecting their lives. His views on women, however, also point to the predicament of a colonized

⁶⁰⁸ Ambedkar, “Rise and Fall,” 124.

and minority group attempting to forge a strong and respectable social and political community. Not only was Ambedkar constrained by the politics of the colonial state and the play of “communities” for power, he was also not impervious to the prevailing discourses on gender that linked particular modes of respectability with modernity. Ambedkar also had to contend with the denigration of the dalit community by the majority of other Indians; his conflicting and at points, patriarchal views on gender indicate the elusiveness of a truly feminist politics in a context in which the men of a community are rendered socially and politically impotent. While the very notion of untouchability – a notion premised on the logic of defilement and the psychology of aversion – may have presented an additional burden that shaped his views on gender relations, it is clear that Ambedkar’s endorsement of norms of domesticity and respectability for dalit women contradicted his ideology of rights, self-help, and self-respect. Ambedkar’s endorsement of patriarchal relations for dalits during colonialism represents a limit to his universalist ideology; his legislative work and movement for conversion to Buddhism, however, may reveal his hope for the establishment of a feminist universalism in post-independent India.

Today Ambedkar remains a hero for all dalits, both men and women. Despite the contradictions in his ideas on women and gender, it could be argued that the very idea of Ambedkar functions to deliver a message of the universal right to dignity and social and political equality. For this, it seems that feminists as well pay tribute to Ambedkar as a champion of gender equality. The contradictions in his message, however, are still part of the intellectual tradition inherited by the dalit movement. Dalit feminists, as discussed in the last chapter, contend with the patriarchal tendencies in the dalit movement and find

one, if partial, resolution to these contradictions by reaching abroad for solidarity with women who are in a similar structural position in their societies. It seems that transnational alliances and the internationalization of the caste, class, and gender structured discrimination and violence have enabled dalit feminists to both transcend Ambedkar's notions of social justice while retaining him as a powerful symbol.

Conclusion

Scholarship and popular opinions on Ambedkar seem to fall into two camps: either Ambedkar is unreflectively extolled as a defender of equality and social justice in modern India or he is denigrated as disloyal to the nation, an outsider who colluded with the British and contributed little to the nation. This division precludes nuanced critiques that engage with his work and legacy from multiple perspectives – critiques that carry the potential to elucidate the shortcomings of Ambedkar’s liberation philosophy for dalits. In the previous chapter, I strived to open up one such critique. By elaborating on the sexist and exclusionary aspects of Ambedkar’s work and philosophy, I suggest that a feminist critique of Ambedkar could elucidate some of the tensions and contradictions present in contemporary dalit activism. In a context where statues of Ambedkar are frequently desecrated and dalits across India continue to face the threat of violence for asserting their right to dignity, this elucidation, however, is fraught; any critique of Ambedkar then runs the risk of manipulation by factions against the political empowerment of dalits. This may explain why dalit feminists seem to venerate Ambedkar as a champion of women’s rights and empowerment, even as they rework his political philosophy and prescriptions for dalit women.

This dissertation – although focused on transnational dalit activism – includes such a lengthy discussion of Ambedkar not only because his theories of and strategies for liberation have provided a foundation and guide for contemporary activists, but also because his search for a resolution to caste inequality has certain uncanny parallels with

transnational dalit activists. For both Ambedkar and the dalit activists discussed in this dissertation, disillusionment with the workings of the state propelled a search for new resources for dalit liberation. Both felt that the state had failed to live up to the promises of the Constitution. Ambedkar then turned to Buddhism for a new cultural identity for dalits and for a code of ethics to supplement the laws and policies of the newly independent Indian state. The transnational turn in dalit activism similarly sought new resources to shed identities defined by caste and the state and to create a new notion of dalit identity. Transnationalism, like Buddhism, provided membership in another form of community and it is this community that held the possibility of emancipation from caste.

Historical consciousness of Buddhism as an ancestral religion – a consciousness imparted from histories of ancient India authored by Ambedkar – supported conversion and in this way, for Ambedkar, the past was intertwined with a vision of a caste-less future. Transnational dalit activism presents a similar blurring of temporalities: the emancipatory project of dalit activism seems premised on the calibration of an aspirational politics with a politics oriented towards the past. Human rights by definition in liberal theory are intrinsic, transcendent, and hence, outside of time. To appeal to rights is thus to harness their atemporal and transcendent power to restore that which should be immanent. In transnational dalit activism, however, rights are not immanent, but rather emerge from social relations, and crucially, from social relations that run across time. Dalit activism, supplements an appeal to human rights with a historical argument for rights. This historical argument is in time, emerges from social relationships, past and present, and is grounded in a right to justice. While activism for rights is always already future-oriented, activism for justice is by necessity retrospective in nature; the former

works on the present to bring about change for a better future, while the latter is configured as a compensatory action for a past wrong. Although justice is conventionally approached in utilitarian terms – i.e., acts for the greater social good – or in terms of fairness, reciprocity, and mutual advantage, justice as it emerges in the work of dalit activists can be better categorized as historical. Here, justice is not an abstract principle, but rather an action against past injustice. Just as Ambedkar’s genealogy of untouchability and histories of ancient India provided a template for action in the present and aspirations for the future, memory and historical consciousness similarly give form to contemporary dalit activism.

For dalit activists, duties towards the dead seem to have an important function in setting the agenda for social justice. This perhaps helps explain why the Indian Constitution – a document created under Ambedkar’s leadership – emerges as a more liberating doctrine than the discourse of human rights. The Indian Constitution allows for the recognition of the past and its legacy in the present for the calibration of rights and duties. Liberal rights, however, are neither directed towards the “atoning of injustice” nor the pursuit of justice. The theory of human rights also does not leave room for the recognition of histories of exploitation, degradation, and injustice. Dalit memory and historical consciousness preclude a strictly future-oriented or aspirational politics for dalit activism; the past is deemed an imposition on the present and thus demands resolution.

Transnational dalit activism, however, utilizes the political logic of universal human rights in creative ways and here, also significantly departs from Ambedkar’s anti-caste movement. Transnational activism seeks support from groups and institutions outside of the nation-state. It internationalizes issues of caste to forge alliances with

other social justice movements and to generate international pressure on the Indian state to act in the interests of dalits. By articulating the problems of dalits in India in the language of human rights, dalit activists counter the assumed national or regional specificity of caste inequality and render this inequality *just like* that of the racism and exploitation of the Jim Crow South or South African Apartheid; the deracination of indigenous groups in the Americas; or the calculated genocide of the Holocaust. These analogies have both political and pedagogical significance and offer a conceptualization of human rights as a citationary practice. In this way, dalit identity is also constructed through the citation of other groups – groups outside of India that are perceived as having comparable histories of oppression and as sharing comparable structural positions in their home societies. “Caste” in these arguments becomes a generalizable category. It is not a phenomenon specific to India or Hinduism, but rather, is described as a form of discrimination based on descent that is found across the world. Caste is a global phenomenon and a global problem in transnational dalit activism.

Several of the activists discussed in this dissertation spent time abroad before they became involved in transnational activism. Both Martin Macwan and Ruth Manorama, for example, cited time abroad, in which they learned about other minority communities and met activists working on their behalf, as formative experiences. These experiences influenced their analysis of the problems of dalits at home and generated new ideas about their potential solutions. While firmly rooted in the local experiences and histories of the dalits they represent and advocate for, both activists and the organizations they have founded – the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights, Navsarjan Trust, and the National Federation for Dalit Women – have also forged ties with groups outside of

India. By perceiving parallels in historical experiences and structural positions in society, they and other dalit activists have worked against the “isolation” of dalits, a predicament that disturbed Ambedkar decades earlier.

Transnational dalit activism, as exemplified by the work of Macwan and Manorama, thus challenges commonly held assumptions about the circulation of knowledge. Here, knowledge does not follow routes between the global North and South, or center and periphery. Rather, knowledge travels between and among marginalized groups of people and transnationalism takes the form of South-South linkages. The study of transnational dalit activism offers an opening for writing new histories and genealogies of ideas of equality, justice, and rights for it reveals how knowledge about these ideals is developed through dialogue between marginalized groups. As Manjula Pradeep, current director of Navsarjan, commented as she explained the transnational orientation of dalit activism to me, dalits are “shar[ing] our problems and issues and strategies” and “get[ting] exposed” to the conditions faced by marginalized groups in other countries. “We have to exchange across countries,” she insisted; doing this “gets us away from this isolation and... [from] segregating ourselves and ghettoizing ourselves.” Instead of viewing oneself as “an untouchable,” Manjula said, “looking at a broader level and saying that whoever is discriminated, whether based on caste, gender, religion, ethnicity, is part of this larger global movement” is both inspiring and empowering for dalits. “So, that’s what we’re trying to inculcate,” she said; “we’re trying to bring more and more people together.” She added that social justice movements such as the civil rights movement in the U.S. and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa had provided

models that helped support commitments to protest and optimism in the possibilities for change.

Transnational dalit activism thus offers a glimpse into the historical consciousness and aspirations that motivate the political life of a group doubly and triply marginalized in a postcolonial country as they struggle for dignity, safety, and well-being. It projects new possibilities and models of global activism. The political imaginings generated through this have also, as Pradeep stated, motivated and sustained struggles for social justice in the present.

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