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The Politics of Caste Identity

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the relationship between Dalit activists' identities and their political mobilisation. It explores how these activists, who are frequently portrayed in the media as dirty and 'backward,' come to terms with and embrace their identities as Dalits. The word "Dalit" is used in the same emic context as it was by the activists when discussing this idea. To reiterate, the activists identify as "Dalit," a term they extend to all Scheduled Castes in India, as well as "Dalit" Christians and Muslims. Some people who may or may not have been considered members of the "Untouchable" caste in India are referred to by this word. The activists' use of the phrase gives me insight into who they regard themselves as representing, and it seems to me to be a challenge to the SC's decision to exclude Christians and Muslims. In contrast to others who just accept the "Dalit" label without question, I wish to draw attention to and evaluate its application. So that it is obvious that the claims I make here do not apply to the Dalit population at large but rather to the context of this study, I shall use the term "activist" to refer to these individuals.

Keywords: *Activist, Dalit, identity, untouchables, population, mobilization, emic, language*

INTRODUCTION

Dalits are a traditionally "Untouchable" caste in India. It was adopted from the Marathi language and means "ground,""broken," or "put to bits." According to Eleanor Zelliot, "dalitsymbolises persons who have been fractured, grounded down by those above them in a planned and active sense" [1]. There is "an implied denial of defilement, karma, and justifiable caste hierarchy" in the word "dalit," she continues. Since it connotes both oppression (both historical and modern) and the struggle against it, it carries with it a heavy political weight (based on contesting its justification). Politics of the movement revolve around the process of establishing Dalit identity.

Cultural and religious nationalism in South Asia have been labelled "identity politics," most lately in connection to the Hindu political right. The religious identity of Indian Muslims was used as the rationale for the founding of Pakistan, which had far-reaching consequences for the area [2]. In response to this idea, the Constitution of Modern India was written to ensure that all citizens of India enjoy religious freedom, legal equality, and basic human rights [3]. Several distinct forms of political mobilisation arose in the subcontinent after colonial rule and were together labelled "identity politics." Because of language-based mobilizations in the 1950s and 1960s, the states of the Indian federation were reorganised along linguistic lines [4].

Tamil Nadu's state politics have been dominated by the Dravida Munnetra Kazagham and its offshoot parties since the 1960s. Language has certainly played a role in this mobilisation, but it also includes broader concepts of racial and cultural difference [5].

Even though caste calculations had been employed in the past, the V. P. Singh government's execution of the recommendations from the Mandal report in 1990 marked the beginning of a new era of inclusive politics in India. Those from "socially and educationally Backward Classes, other than the Scheduled Castes and Tribes" (so-called OBCs) should be guaranteed 27% of "reservation of places in the central government services and public undertakings," per the report's recommendations [6]. There was heated debate in the media and violent protests from the upper castes, particularly in the northern part of India, after the decision to implement these limitations was announced. As a result of the Mandal event, tensions rose again between Scheduled Castes over the issue of reservations. It also marked the beginning of the rise to power in Northern India of new political parties that advocate for people of lower castes, such as the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) [7].

The 'new' prominence of caste in politics is seen by many in India as a symptom of political degradation, a validation

of crude and narrow identity politics, and a setback to the development of democracy. According to common perception, the 1990s were marked by the rise of casteism and its impact on political politics [8]. Caste politics are especially worrisome because "found to be even more troubling with the shifting focus of claims and demands on the side of those who affirm their caste identities: from economic advancement to social prestige and political power" [9]. However, the elite's hostility to shifts that threaten to erode their privileges may be at the heart of the demonization of these movements. This article presents the views of Rajni Kothari, who argues that the concept of "caste" can be used to further secularisation and democracy [9]. Questions of whether essentialized identities like caste may be used strategically to serve the interests of marginalised people, or whether they are damaging to the operation of democracy, are at the heart of this debate. Some people believe that politics that centre on the "different" of oppressed groups will never be able to free them from their condition. This will be a primary topic of discussion below, but no conclusions will be drawn.

Identity politics

The Dalit people were once considered to be India's "Untouchable" class. This word came originally from the Marathi language and means "ground, ""broken," or "reduced to bits." Eleanor Zelliot says the term "dalit" connotes people who have been "shattered, ground down by those above them in a planned and active manner" [1]. She continues by saying that the word "dalit" has "an implied denial of pollution, karma, and justified caSste hierarchy." Therefore, it is a politically fraught term because it connotes both oppression (both historical and modern) and resistance to that oppression (based on contesting its justification). That's why the political ideology of the movement hinges on a singular focus: the recognition of Dalits.

Cultural and religious nationalism in South Asia, most recently in connection to the Hindu political right, have been labelled "identity politics." However, the establishment of Pakistan on the grounds that Indian Muslims were "a separate and identifiable country" due to their faith had a significant impact on the surrounding area [2]. In response to this idea, contemporary India was founded with a constitution that protects religious freedom, individual rights, and equal protection under the law for all citizens [3]. During the postcolonial era, several forms of political mobilisation on the subcontinent were coined the umbrella term "identity politics." In the 1950s and 1960s, linguistic mobilizations led to a reorganisation of the Indian federation's states along linguistic lines [4].

Since the 1960s, when the Dravida Munnetra Kazagham and its offshoot parties first gained power, Tamil Nadu state politics have been dominated by this group. Despite the central role language has played in this mobilisation, it extends to more general concepts of racial and cultural difference [5].

Although caste calculations had previously been employed in Indian politics, the recommendations of the Mandal report were implemented by the V. P. Singh government in 1990, ushering in a new age of inclusive politics. It is recommended in the report that 27% of "reservation of positions in the central government services and public undertakings" be allocated to "socially and educationally Backward Classes, other than the Scheduled Castes and Tribes" (so-called OBCs) [6]. Media coverage of the decision to implement these limits was mixed, and upper-caste protests, particularly in the north of India, turned violent. The Mandal event rekindled the debate over reservations for the Scheduled Castes, which exacerbated tensions already present within those communities. Furthermore, it marked the beginning of the rise to prominence of new political groups in Northern India that advocated for members of lower castes, such as the SP (Samajwadi Party) and the BSP [7].

The 'new' prominence of caste in politics is seen by many Indians as a symptom of political degradation, a validation of primitive and narrow identity politics, and a blow to the development of democracy. If one believes the general consensus, the most notable feature of the 1990s was the rise of casteism and its impact on political politics [8]. This politicisation of caste is especially worrisome because it is accompanied by a "changing focus of claims and demands on the side of those who affirm their caste identities: from economic advancement to social prestige and political power" [9]. The elite may be hiding their fear of changes that could undermine their power by demonising these developments. Author Rajni Kothari argues that the concept of "caste" can be utilised to further secularisation and democracy [9]. Essentialized identities, such as caste, have been at the centre of this debate because of the conflicting views they've prompted about whether or not they help or hurt the operation of democracies in the process of advancing the interests of marginalised people. This first school of thought argues that marginalised communities' "different" makes it impossible for political action to eradicate their disadvantage. The next discussions will focus heavily on this issue, but they won't aim to find a solution to it.

Caste

One's jati, or caste, is determined at birth and remains consistent throughout one's life based on one's parents' jati [10]. A jati, as the term is commonly used, is an endogamous group defined by common traits linked with a (made-up) profession and way of life. Relatedly, the term "varna" classifies Hindus into four traditional castes. The Brahmins (the priestly caste), the khaatriyas (the military or kingly caste), the vaisyas (the commercial and clerical classes), and the

sudras (the lowest caste) are shown as constituting a hierarchy, from highest to lowest (agricultural and artisan castes). The avarna9, or "imaginary castes," that exist outside of or below the standard varna hierarchy are the primary subject of this argument. Therefore, while a person's jti would make up their local social group and govern things like who they could marry into and what they should work, a person's varna would indicate how highly esteemed their jti is in terms of ritual and social standing compared to other jatis.

Manusmriti, or the "laws of Manu," was written in the 1st century BC [11] and is frequently cited by Dalit activists and academics as the origin of the notion of varna. The Manusmriti is largely regarded as the definitive exposition of the varna theory and the hierarchical division of castes according to employment and pollution degree [12]. Therefore, Varna is more of a conceptual framework than a reflection of the historical or contemporary social conditions in India. Several studies have demonstrated how colonial science and caste beliefs "froze" or fixed identities that had been more fluid prior. Nicholas Dirks [13] claims that the British are to blame for "systematising" the different ways in which Indians define themselves socially. Despite this, DCC activists continue to look to the varna plan and its "old" roots as a foundation for their concept of caste in modern India. They say that Hindu texts justify the caste system, despite its illogic and immorality, and that this is why it has endured.

Many people believe that the Brahmins created and perpetuate caste as a means to maintain their power and prestige. Since the colonial era, people have viewed caste as an institution that upholds economic exploitation and social segregation due to its historical role in maintaining unequal social connections. However, new research suggests that caste is helping to mobilise India's poor and under-represented majority and is thereby "deepening" democracy in the country [14]. Many in the political establishment view the rise of caste as a symptom of the deterioration of Indian politics and governance, but Dalit and other 'low-caste' political actors argue that the only way to combat their perpetual exclusion from the political scene is to mobilise based on the reason for their exclusion: their caste belongings. The irony of this situation was effectively put up by Rajni Kothari.

Both traditional class analysis, which groups Dalits together with workers and peasants, and the sectarian idea, which ranks Dalits at the bottom of 'Hindu' society, are seen by modern activists and commentators as inadequate frameworks for understanding Dalit issues [15]. In order to classify the people who filled out the 1931 census, J. H. Hutton, the commissioner, employed the criterion that "the defining trait of the outside castes was that contact with them demanded purification on the part of high-caste Hindus," as stated by John Webster [15]. One's caste status is the deciding factor in whether or not they are classified as a Dalit under this notion. Who is considered to be a Dalit is determined solely by social status or religious affiliation. As a result of their caste, Dalits face prejudice and a host of other disadvantages that cannot be overcome even if their economic situation improves or they change their religion [15]. In this way, "Dalithood" is determined by "Untouchability," which is characterised by various forms of prejudice, marginalisation, and exploitation depending on jti membership.

It now seems that the modern ‘Dalit state' is more nebulous than was previously believed. It's difficult to provide a comprehensive definition, therefore most people instead provide a list of its characteristics. Throughout Hindu history, the Dalits have been oppressed in a variety of contexts and to varied degrees. Dalits have historically been excluded from temples and schools, and their bast (hamlet, habitation) is typically placed outside of the village centre. Dalits are barred from having any physical contact with, or simply glancing at, members of other castes out of a concern about ritual contamination. No one is allowed to feed them or give them water in the common areas.

The acceptance of roles and occupations that are considered ritually impure has also come to characterise the Dalit dilemma. Jobs that are "associated in some form with death or with human body waste" include leatherworking, party drumming, trash and dead animal removal, and public area cleaning (e.g., streets, latrines, and sewers) [16]. And more than any other caste, the Dalit community depends on its members' manual labour. Among disadvantaged and discriminated against groups based on culture, social status, or religion, the Dalits stand out as exceptional.

Academics disagree on whether "the Dalit movement" should be seen as a unified phenomenon [17] or a series of separate grassroots movements [18]. Hardtmann [17] claims that this subculture stands in "counterpublic" opposition to India's conventional public sphere. She adds that multiple Dalit discourses "may be viewed as different movement viewpoints, all articulated and presented inside the same alternative counterpublic" [17]. However, Sudha Pai [18] argues that the term "Dalit movement" has been used to describe many primate Dalit collectivities in similar situations, with similar histories of oppression, simultaneously seeking to overcome similar deprivations within a common social system, but with different visions of their own and society's future. This view is shared by Karin Kapadia [19], who believes that "there is no "the dalit movement" either in Tamil Nadu or elsewhere in India - instead, there are a variety of fragmented and (unfortunately) sometimes antagonistic dalit movements, uniquely lacking in political coherence."

Personally, I think the authors' competing worldviews are to blame for this disagreement. Hardtmann found that the

activists she studied shared a common belief in a heterogeneous but united movement, which is in line with the goals of those working for the movement's national consolidation. From certain regions of Tamil Nadu [19] and Uttar Pradesh, the gaps between these distinct organisations and groups stand out as more significant [18]. Because the DCC is a national organisation, activists' viewpoints are more in line with Hardtmann's; however, rather than assess the nature of the movement, I will propose that the motivation to create a national movement gives impetus to generalise and stereotype, as evidenced in the Committee's language.

Theoretical framework

This article examines the processes that contribute to societal stratification. While I intend to delve extensively into the meanings formed within a modern politicised portrayal of caste, I will not be attempting to provide an exhaustive examination of caste as a social system. This essay looks at the background of politically active Dalit activists in New Delhi. Advocating for a shift away from the prevalent caste narrative is thus "part of a larger critique of universalizing theories, metanarratives, and totalizing typologies" [20]. Postmodern criticisms of anthropology have focused on two practises: the "tendency to provide hypercoherent accounts of intrinsically messy societies, cultures, and events" and the "practise of structuring actors as coherent unitary subjects and agents with coherent unitary objectives and desires" [21]. Such criticisms may be useful in avoiding a muddled discussion of caste in India, but they shouldn't stop researchers from trying to draw parallels and synthesise different perspectives. This article attempts to address these problems by recognising that caste identities and perspectives on societal change are constructed at the individual level, albeit within a diverse but ultimately constrained range of "available social, public, and cultural narratives" [22].

Caste and Hinduism

Numerous groups, all of whom assert that they are advancing "the Dalit cause," have taken to wearing images of "Babasaheb" Ambedkar as a badge of honour. Sculptures of Ambedkar in his trademark three-piece suit, holding the Constitution aloft in one hand and a pen in the other, have become common in cities and towns across North India as a result of the BSP's strategy of occupying public space through erecting statues of the man [23]. Concepts and ideas based on Ambedkar's writings on caste and on Hinduism have been created by Dalit activists, political parties, and organisations across the country. In his writings, Ambedkar contends that anyone who rejects caste must also reject all Hindu practises and ideas. It's no surprise that DCC members quote his book The Annihilation of Caste more than any of his others [24].

When Ambedkar addressed the annual assembly of the Jat-Pat-TodakMandal, a social reform organisation, in 1936, he caused a stir with his criticisms of Hinduism. His inability to tone down his rhetoric ultimately led to his ouster as president [25]. Ambedkar said in his lecture that Hinduism's caste system and the associated practise of "untouchability" were inevitable outcomes of the religion.

Perhaps the effects of caste are negative. There is a risk that people will act inhumanely against one another because of the pressures of their social standing. The Hindus do not follow Caste because they are cruel or ignorant, nevertheless. They closely adhere to Caste because of their religious beliefs. There is widespread acceptance of the use of Caste systems. In my opinion, their faith is to fault for teaching people to value Caste. If so, the fault lies not with those who follow the Caste religion, but with the Shastras that instruct them in it [24].

Ambedkar's contention that caste is integral to Hinduism was more than just an intellectual exercise, despite the fact that he places the genesis of caste in the stras, which are regarded by many as the most authoritative of the Hindu teachings. Instead, it grew out of his frustration with the ineffectiveness of Hindu reformists to make structural changes inside Hinduism. In the early 1920s, Ambedkar took part in an effort to "sanskritize" the "Untouchables" by forcing them to engage in religious ceremonies reserved for members of the upper castes. In order to rise in the local caste system, "a low" Hindu caste will often adopt the practises, beliefs, and rites of a "high" and often "twice-born" caste. This process was given the name "sanskritization" in 1952 by sociologist M. N. Srinivas [26].

Ambedkar led the so-called temple admission movement from 1927 to 1935, which sought for the "Untouchables" to be forcibly admitted to Hindu temples [1]. After years of trying to convert people to Hinduism without success, he finally gave up and "renounced all claims to Hinduism and to switch to another faith" in 1935. [1]. By convincing his followers to leave Hinduism, he helped put an end to the caste system that had oppressed them for so long. In a speech to the Mahar Conference in 1935 that has become known as his "Conversion Speech," Ambedkar famously declared,

Because we happen to call ourselves Hindus, we have to put up with this kind of treatment. If we weren't Christians, no one would dare treat us this way. Pick a religion that welcomes people of all shapes, sizes, colours, and orientations. We'll be correcting our oversight right now. That I was born with the "Untouchable" title is a cruel irony. Despite the fact that this is not my fault, I do not intend to give up my Hindu faith and live out the rest of my life as a non-Hindu [1].

Ambedkar realised this after studying Hinduism as a social system and considering his own political experiences, which led him to the conclusion that the Dalits did not belong in Hinduism. For the rest of his career, he alternated between giving more weight to cultural-religious tactics for Dalit liberation and giving more weight to political techniques for that same end. Yet, throughout this time, he asked himself, "If not Hinduism, then what?" and neither his internal deliberations nor the political issues facing the community provided a satisfactory solution. The Dalit community may look to Buddhism as their sole option now, but "Ambedkar experimented with Islam, Sikhism, and Christianity in an attempt to combine a personal need for self-respect [...] with an astute political man oeuvre that would offer Untouchables more political influence" after 1936. According to [1]. Zelliot [1] argues, on page 193, that "his threatened conversion to notably Islam, seems to have been more in the character of a weapon to force acceptance of the Untouchable criteria from the Hindus than a genuine interest," although the evidence supports otherwise. Some claim that both Islam and Christianity are "embarrassed by their non-Indian links"; Islam because of its association with the state religion of India's main international competitor, Pakistan; and Christianity because of its association with an alien foreign culture and imperial servitude. Buddhists, on the other hand, "rejected Hinduism and Brahmanism while remaining closer to Hindu Indian traditions than either of the other two faiths permitted" [27].

Ambedkarite Buddhism

On 14 October 1956, twenty-one years after his 'Conversion Speech,' Ambedkar and many of his followers converted to Buddhism at Nagpur in the then-Bombay Presidency [28]. Nearly three million people became Buddhists as a result of Ambedkar's influence; this included 75% of his own jti, the Mahars, as well as other smaller groups outside of modern-day Maharashtra [1]. The lawyer and statesman in Nagpur that day led the gathering in chanting the conventional Buddhist vows in Pali, and then he read a twenty-two point Marathi "statement of faith" [28] he had written for the occasion.

By endorsing some behaviours while condemning others, Ambedkar supposedly established a new code "with which the Buddhists might identify and distinguish themselves from Hindus," as suggested by Johannes Beltz [28]. Since Ambedkar had a low opinion of the Mahabodhi society, India's preeminent Buddhist organisation at the time, he did not expect his followers to join an existing tradition [29]. What, exactly, did Ambedkar change about Buddhism that wasn't already there, other from the overt rejection of Hindu dogma and practise? Attracted to its "equalitarian, universalist, and rationalist" doctrine, Ambedkar sought to "introduce Buddhism to the world of social activity and social change" [29]. He would not even use the term "Buddhism," preferring instead the term "dhamma," which he defined as "a principle of morality and social justice" [28]. The dhamma, as described by Ambedkar, is "a form of social contract controlling the ties between humans in their private and public life" [28].

Although the Pali canon served as the backbone for Ambedkar's revision of Buddhism, he also inserted new material, some of which was written with the intention of providing "Buddhist answers to Marxist questions" [29]. Ambedkar famously disagreed with the idea that your actions have consequences in a previous life. It has been proposed that there are two causes for this by Omvedt [29]. To begin with, it is impossible to provide scientific evidence for the metaphysical premise underlying the connection between karma and reincarnation. The second benefit of this association is that it can be utilised to defend the caste system by convincing believers to "accept their social lot" [29]. This is an example of how 'Ambedkar approached Buddhism not with the heart of faith but with the scalpel of a practical reformer, and seemed to assume that he could pick what he wanted and leave the rest,' despite the primacy of the idea of karma in the other Buddhist schools [29].

To counter criticism of his choice to abandon Hinduism in 1936, Ambedkar wrote Away from the Hindus, in which he argued that religion serves primarily societal objectives and functions. To sum up, religion's primary function was not to act as a mediator between man and God, but rather to govern the interactions among individuals. This was in contrast to the bhakt (devotional) Hinduism he had been exposed to growing up; his father had strong ties to the devotional mystical Varkari sect and later converted to Kabrpanth [25]. Since the Middle Ages onward, bhakt sects and movements have served as a haven for the "Untouchables," offering "at least the illusion of new religious societies in which the power of priests held no sway and all committed followers were viewed as spiritually equal, regardless of caste" [30]. Equal treatment before God was not, however, sufficient for Ambedkar. According to him, a religion's credibility may be established or disproved by its moral standards. Therefore, he chose Buddhism not out of a profound sense of spiritual kinship, but rather for what it could empower his group to accomplish. Because he thought Buddhism would free Dalits from their untouchability, it was the religion he embraced.

According to Eleanor Zelliot [1], the Buddhist conversion was motivated by the belief in Buddhism's potential as a moral force. One possible interpretation of Ambedkar's rejection of Hinduism is that it was connected to his efforts to found a new moral society apart from the Hindu tradition of varramadharma. According to this interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita, a person's dharma (religious and social duties) and, by extension, their idea of what is right and suitable behaviour, varies based on their varna (estate; caste) and their rama (life circumstances) (stage of life). When all else is

equal, a Brahmin's dharma (correct behaviour) will differ from that of a kshatriya or dra, and a brahmacary's (a pupil of the Brahmins) dharma (correct action) will vary from that of a grihastha (a commoner) (householder). The primary idea of this philosophy, which is also found in the Gt, is "Better one's own duty badly completed than that of another excellently done" [29]. Despite the above being a reduced classical articulation of the varramadharma, this principle was essential to the nationalist ideas of many of Ambedkar's contemporaries:

Gandhi looked to Hindu social reformers like Dayananda Saraswati and Vivekananda for guidance in defining an ideal originary caste system. These thinkers coined the Sanskrit term varnashramadharma to describe a "ideal order of things" (revolving around caste, stage of life, and the performance of duty) devoid of hierarchy and power. Ambedkar was reportedly against this continuation because he saw it as yet another meaningless show of concern for social betterment [13]. On the other hand, his ideal society would be predicated on the universal values of liberty, equality, and brotherhood. The words "We must make our political democracy a social democracy as well" came from his final address to the Constituent Assembly. In order for political democracy to survive, social democracy must serve as its foundation. Just what does it mean when people talk about social democracy? In other words, it's a way of life that embraces the values of freedom, equality, and brotherhood. [31]. Ambedkar's Buddhist revival, also known as "Buddhist Modernism" or "Protestant Buddhism," was influenced by rationalism of the period, the non-Brahman movement, and the Hindu renaissance. The attachment of the modern Buddhists to the external world. They advocated for making Buddhism a political platform. Their understanding of early Buddhism was mostly gleaned through Western accounts and translations into English. Modernists argue that Buddhism is not a religion but rather a scientific philosophy that rejects superstition and a pantheon of deities. The Western Buddhist interpretations of this concept first introduced it [28].

In addition, Ambedkar's assertion that the Dalits had always been Buddhists provided legitimacy to the conversion. He claimed that the civil war between Buddhism and Brahmanism in the past was to blame for their current status as "untouchables" who are denied access to resources [29]. This means that for contemporary Dalits in India, adopting Buddhism is less about "conversion" to a new religion and more about "freedom" and "returning to their original identity." Reference: [29]. Although the Dalits had the greatest need for this historical explanation and the revival of the moral community, Ambedkar wanted the new Buddhist society to be welcoming to members of all castes.

Zelliot [1] has studied Ambedkarite Buddhists and emphasised the "profoundly satisfying psychological meaning of the conversion," which she defines as "a sense of pride in Buddhism, in love and respect for Ambedkar, and in a freedom from the sense of being a polluting person. ""The convert himself feels a [...] new independence and self-respect" [1]. Similar to what I found in my research on female converts in Maharashtra, Laura Jenkins [32] argues that conversion has resulted in a shift in "attitudes and choices," as exemplified by the increased access to education for Dalits. As Dalit Buddhists examine and evaluate their history in order to create a better future, they gain a sense of self-empowerment via this process of critical reflection and analysis.

A "process of self-purification of those practises which "justified" the untouchability of the Untouchable" is evident in Ambedkar's writings, as described by Zelliot [1]. Through his newspapers, he exhorted his followers to "dress nicely; don't drink; don't beg; get educated and send your children to school; be self-respecting" He also encouraged people to stop engaging in socially unacceptable behaviours such as ritually contaminating work and eating carrion [1].

According to Zelliot [1], even if Ambedkar did not emphasise the need for Untouchables to become "an intrinsic part of Hinduism," he insisted that they should look and act like the highest of caste Hindus. Even though Ambedkar didn't care much about ritual rights, and even less so when he ended the temple-entry campaign in 1935, "those who followed him expected that participation in organised Hindu rituals would be a consequence of their actions and self-improvement" [1]. According to Zelliot [1], 'Ambedkar's 'westernisation' may also be called 'brahmanization' in a broad cultural sense, and thus satisfied some ideal purpose current among his people. I don't think the DCC activists' notion of Dalit reform is a sanskritization, but rather a modernization of the concept. To be sure, they undergo a personal metamorphosis and work to create a new moral community, but they do so by critiquing the morality of upper caste Hindus rather than blindly mimicking it as in the sanskritization process. Instead, I contend that the DCC activists subscribe to a particular idiom of modernity in which reform, anti-ritual, and anti-superstition are seen as synonymous with becoming contemporary, which is conceived of as rational and "progressive.".

CONCLUSION

The dynamic of competitive politics in contemporary India is constantly reimagining what it means to be caste. New political formations have emerged in India as a result of the 'deepening' of democracy, each reflecting newly politicised groups with unique demands stated in creative ways [8]. That the spread of democracy, industrialization, and economic liberalisation would lead to a shift from "traditional" primal identities to the belief that citizens' rights and obligations are best decided through the ballot box has been dashed. In India, rights claims have been and will continue to be formulated along caste and communal lines.

This essay examines the politicisation of the concept of "Dalithood" to better understand this process. Although the activists depicted here were born Dalits, they do not identify as Dalits in the traditional sense of the term, which refers to those who have been disadvantaged in some way. The activists are participating in what I have called a "politics of difference," which works to alter the social standing of the group as a whole. This political philosophy rests on a clear dichotomy between "us" and "them," with "them" being the "upper castes" or "non-Dalits" who oppress "us," the Dalits. According to my analysis, "the Dalit" are always on the receiving end of status and power relations because of the interplay between a story of community growth and this story of "Dalithood."

The activists, when discussing their own 'Dalithood,' talk about how getting an education has been a fight against exclusion and discrimination due to poverty and the preconceptions of 'higher castes. For them, the Dalit condition is epitomised by outmoded customs such as manual scavenging, enforced physical distance, and the withholding of water and food. The Dalits are a marginalised social group because they face these disadvantages more frequently than the general population. Because of these things, they are "different," and it is this difference that serves as the foundation for Dalit solidarity and cohesion. I propose that the potency of imagery like those of the' manual scavenger' to convey a sensation of utter human denigration explains why prejudice is given more attention than economic inequality. An extensive corpus of legislation protecting Dalits from discrimination is already in place, and they use this effectively as a tool to solve these challenges, so there is an emphasis on practicality as well. Since activists, despite their education and socioeconomic advantages, nevertheless face discriminatory practises, they may view them as more objectionable. What I find most fascinating, however, is how personal stories of discrimination and exclusion are used to establish activists as the 'real' representatives of the Dalits, giving them the authority to' speak for' the group.

Being economically disadvantaged is associated in activist speech with having a backward worldview. A lack of the "proper" progressive attitudes is implicit in this concept of "backwardness," alongside material deprivation and an absence of formal education. Some activists say that they come from "backward" households, but while they acknowledge that poverty and the resulting "backwardness" were obstacles to their education and "moving forward," they lay significantly more emphasis on their experiences of prejudice. Therefore, getting an education is perceived as a group endeavour, and problems are often framed as a contest between socioeconomic classes; a "social race for advancement" that often results in a sense of shared responsibility [33]. In other cases, such as when students try to rationalise their instructors' discrimination against them by arguing that it was necessary to protect those of "higher caste" from the "low caste" pupils' harsh competition, their interpretation may be a strategy to cope with embarrassing memories.

In recounting how they went from "unaware" to "empowered," most activists highlight specific people who helped them along the road. Many people say that another Dalit helped them start the process of "becoming conscious." Someone in an uncommon position, such as a professor or a politically-savvy person, would frequently be the one to expose them to a new story about "being Dalit," giving them a new lens through which to view themselves and their place in the world. The fact that Dalits still don't anticipate being treated according to their rights despite the existence of a progressive body of legislation to that aim is emphasised by their focus on the roles performed by remarkable individuals. Those who assisted them had only done what was expected of them, and had so partially corrected the inappropriate actions of "non-Dalit" educators and others. In keeping with the community structure described above, individuals' aid was typically viewed in this way: if someone had aided them, it was because they were also Dalit. Even after subsequent investigation revealed that some of these "helpers" belonged to different castes, the stories of the activists matched this public narrative. This, I contend, is evidence of the persuasiveness of this discursive interpretation framework.

Stories about Ambedkar's life and ideas were frequently used as a symbol of community awareness in these procedures, which were always based on gaining fresh information. The activist had also been given new words to use in describing her feelings of exclusion and discrimination. Some people regarded this shift in perspective as the start of a personal reinvention, a process of "moving forward" or "developing" from a "backward" place of "ignorance" and "incapacity to communicate."

I found that the activist's "us" and "them" construction was characterised by a fuzzy idea of the "other." DCC activists merely distinguished themselves from the "upper castes,""non-Dalits," or "Hindus," but educated Chamars Ciotti observed saw the social race as a battle between the varnas, "viewed as blocks and essentialized by fundamental qualities." Ambedkar's writings are consistent with his polarised outlook on Indian culture. Integrative views of Indian culture, most forcefully articulated in Dumont's Homo Hierarchicus, and efforts to include the 'Untouchables' in Hindu society are at contrast with the contemporary emphasis on 'different,' in my opinion [34]. That's why "difference" is a combative viewpoint that provides clear "oppressor" and "oppressed" labels to rally around.

As portrayed by the DCC activists, "the Dalit identity" is mostly undefined in terms of substance. By this, I do not

mean that they have a poor opinion of themselves, but rather that they insist that their collective social position and their issues and problems are "completely different" from those faced by individuals belonging to other caste groups, and that this "difference" relates primarily to the breadth and intensity of suffering. Even more so than other groups, politically active Dalits are adamant that they are not Hindus when it comes to defining their community [17]. Beyond a shared history of hardship and rejection of stereotypes, however, what cultural assets help to ground "the Dalit identity?" According to an article by Badri Narayan [35], the Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh is known for reviving and popularising indigenous heroes from myth and history. Establishing strong positive claims of identity, he believes that "the underlying condition for the identity, self-respect, and social existence of the disadvantaged people" is "imagination and memory, which may be formed out of myth and history" [36].

Thus, "Dalithood" is about more than just a common set of values or a commitment to a cause; it also has to do with one's birth order. They exploit caste solidarity and emphasise caste issues in their efforts to unite and mobilise the Dalit community, which perpetuates caste as a main social unit despite their rejection of the negative connotations associated with their social group membership. "Castes cannot alter intrinsically as long as they are fundamentally established on identities that derive their sustenance from a rhetoric of natural disparities," writes Dipankar Gupta [37]. A significant historical explanation for the current Dalit movement's fixation on exclusivity and "different" is the extensive co-optation of Dalit political leaders by mainstream political parties and reform organisations.

Caste in political mobilisation

Finally, what may these thoughts teach us about caste's function in modern forms of political mobilisation in India? The connection between caste and "class," here viewed as educational attainment and "progress," is one angle that has been studied. The stereotypes of "advanced" and "backward" people are manifestations of this concept of "class." I have argued that the activists' ideological pronouncements reveal an underlying "us" and "them" dichotomy, and I have described how these categories go against to that dichotomy.

Whether or not "Untouchables" historically accepted their own inferiority [38], these communities are making a stronger case for their civil and political rights in the present day [39]. Additionally, this implies that caste has taken on a new significance. As per Sudha Pai [18],

To me, this is a somewhat deceptive argument. Instead, I contend that attempts to unite individuals around caste identities face persistent new problems since differentiations based on 'caste' and 'class' produce cross-cutting allegiances. An example of this is the "oft questioned question of whether caste is giving way to class," which, as Dipankar Gupta [10] argues, is the result of conceptual fogginess. There's no reason to assume that, if caste exists, class does not as well, and vice versa; also, neither one's prevalence necessitates the decline of the other. In the end, [...] caste and class are not continuous. Despite growing and intensifying disputes across the hierarchy of the "caste system," Rajni Kothari [9] says, "there is as yet no evident and categorical "new alignment of forces," no true phenomena of solidarity among the lower castes." The comparison with social status is typically inaccurate.

Efforts to form large caste-coalitions, which bring together individual jtis into larger caste organisations, have been sparked by electoral politics' emphasis on numbers [40]. One such organisation is the 'Dalits,' and another is the effort to create widespread solidarity among the bahujan ('plebeian'). It's not just the Dalit or so-called "lower" castes that try to do this, though; the Yadavas [41] and other OBC and upper caste groups do the same.

Some have been able to forge political alliances with neighbouringjtis, catapulting these formerly obscure groups into the limelight. Both the Rudolph [27] and the most recent development of this idea by Hardtmann [17] suggest that modern efforts to consolidate castes into larger groups with the aim of gaining political power have frequently built on ancient caste federations, or sabhs. Even though caste in contemporary India has provided a basis for political mobilisation, with parties representing aggregate caste groups that statistically correspond broadly to the poorer sections of society, the similarities grasped by the equation that "caste" is becoming "class" cannot justify the differences it conceals.

It is not poverty or class strife that drives Dalit mobilisation. "The Dalit identity," as it is presented by the political activists in this research, is largely a social construction. The political ramifications of this claim are clear, but it does not inevitably promote cooperation across social classes. Instead, it's a closed-off identity built on the concept of "Dalithood. "Another feature of Dalit assertion highlighted in this theory is that it is largely a middle-class phenomenon, and the equating of caste with class may tend to obscure this point. Middle-class, college-educated Dalits are the most prominent leaders in the 'new' civil society-based Dalit movement. As I've shown, the activists place great emphasis on their connection to regular, "backward," Dalits, but they're also keen to distance themselves from the pejorative associations with this label. Their'middle class' status is sometimes temporary and fragile, and they are often personally acquainted with the pain of social exclusion and discrimination, thus the term 'creamy layer' to characterise these activists seems

inappropriate.

The results of this research suggest that not all caste groups use the same processes when attempting to organise around newly politicised identities. These are ultimately determined by how the community is positioned in terms of status and power. When viewed through the lens of a Dalit activist, these lines are still mainly regarded to follow the principles of the 'conventional' caste system. My goal was to demonstrate how an identity based on feeling marginalised and "down at the bottom" has its own jargon and defence mechanisms. As this essay demonstrates, caste politicisation is a social process that profoundly shapes individuals' choices, goals, and sense of identity.

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