

CHAPTER THREE

Contra-dictions: Nationalist Conundrums and Caste/Gender Narratives

In this chapter, I intend to read autobiographical texts by individuals—men and women—from Dalit/tribal locations in India to understand how the repetition of a narrative act defined as “autobiography” displaces its very norms in the act of repetition. In other words, I read for a rehearsal of identities as an act that simultaneously interrogates those imposed categories with claims and displacements raised from variously marginal locations. In Section 1, I examine briefly the term “gender.” I do so since gender is a category popularly understood as equal to “woman” and my intention is to demonstrate through my investigations that such an imposition is an excess, a deposit of that-which-is-more-than “man.” I examine interventions that have argued for gender as a range of technologies—social, linguistic, psychological—through which normative heterosexual “male” and “female” identities are fabricated and brought into being. I then look at the category “caste” as not a pre-discursive given, but a relational category that is continually under contestation in the struggle over knowledge of the social world. Section 2 reads the autobiographical narratives of two Dalit men—Vasant Moon and Sharankumar Limbale—by way of reading Dalit women’s autobiographies. Both men belong to the Mahar caste of Maharashtra, regarded earlier as an “untouchable” caste and bring into play sharp critiques of and questions about historical, material and ideological frames of “caste” identity. In Section 3, I pay attention to the autobiographical narratives of two women—Bama, and C. K. Janu. Bama is a Tamil Dalit Christian while Janu is a tribal from north Kerala. My aim is to look at the way these women marked as Dalit or tribal

women stage their identities to bring to the fore intimidating queries from their experiences about issues of gender and caste.

1

Problems of Engendering a Secular Self

One is not born but becomes Woman, wrote Simone de Beauvoir famously in 1949. De Beauvoir's most important contribution to 20th century feminist thought is held to be her formulation of "woman" (as a biological entity) from "femininity" (as a social construction). She demonstrated, through her analyses, that: "Woman is determined not by her hormones or by mysterious instincts, but by the manner in which her body and her relation to the world are modified through the action of others than herself" (734).¹ As is well-known, her framing was derived from existentialist philosophy, in the binary of Self/Subject and Other. Briefly, the Self/Subject is the active, knowing subject of traditional epistemology, and is by default male. De Beauvoir argues that the Other, who exists for the Self/Subject in an asymmetrical relationship, is female and feminized, occupying a secondary place in both concrete activity and subjective consciousness. The Other is not an equal complement to the Self/Subject, but rather serves as a projection of everything the Self/Subject rejects: immanence, passivity, voicelessness.

While de Beauvoir has been criticized on many counts, what is significant is that her work is seen as inaugurating certain key concepts for twentieth century feminist theories. Several theorists have later investigated a range of social and

¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Penguin, 1972 [1949]).

cultural ideological constructs as sites of oppression for women, including language, and deployed Marxism, psychoanalysis and various theoretical perspectives from the social sciences. The central idea, however, is that gendered identities are constructed through our lives and our understandings of our worlds, apart from institutions and systems that work to buttress and encourage such norms, in terms of both “male” and “female” identities and cultures. The shift, then, is from a “biological” to a “social” to a “cultural” construction, with close resonances to the nature/culture opposition. Post-1990s, feminist thought has repositioned itself to focus on “gender” from diverse perspectives such as working class, race, religion, caste, geographical locations and sexual orientations. This “Third Wave” feminism in western academics includes writers such as Judith Butler, Teresa de Lauretis, Nancy Fraser, Joan Scott and others.

I will now draw on an influential text discussed widely, Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* where she draws on Freudian psychoanalysis to problematize gender as an essential category.² I do so not to “apply” uncritically theories from elsewhere but to understand how significant shifts in a general understanding of gender have taken place. Butler observes that gender identity is not “always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts” (3); moreover, gender is not just a social construct, but an act of signification, of representation. It can be a construct one may “choose” to accept or struggle against. This leads to Butler’s proposition that there are many genders, that there are in fact plural “masculinities” and “femininities.” Gender, hence, is also a kind of performance,

² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990).

a set of internalized images, and not a set of properties governed by the body and its organ configuration. Rather, gender is a set of signs psychically imposed on the body and on one's psychic sense of identity. Gender, Butler concludes, is thus not a primary category, but an attribute, a set of secondary narrative effects. She argues:

The critical task for feminism is not to establish a point of view outside of constructed identities; that conceit is the construction of an epistemological model that would disavow its own cultural location and, hence, promote itself as a global subject, a position that deploys precisely the imperialist strategies that feminism ought to criticize. The critical task is, rather, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them. . . . The task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to *displace* the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself. (147, 148)

In her analyses of a heterosexual hegemony, Butler questions the distinction of sex-as-biology and gender-as-historical by arguing that our “gender acts” affect us in such material, corporeal ways that even our perception of corporeal sexual differences are affected by social conventions. For Butler, sex is not “a bodily given on which the construct of gender is artificially imposed, but . . . a *cultural* norm which governs the materialization of bodies” (italics added).³

³ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 2-3.

Identity itself, for Butler, is an illusion retroactively created by performances: “In opposition to theatrical or phenomenological models which take the gendered self to be prior to its acts, I will understand constituting acts not only as constituting the identity of the actor, but as constituting that identity as a compelling illusion, an object of *belief*.”⁴ However, given the Foucauldian premise that power works in part through discourse and it works in part to produce and destabilize subjects, Butler argues that performative speech acts are those that bring into being that which they name, drawing, in a further step, on the concepts of repetition and recitation. But the act of repetition is that which also destabilizes. Butler’s work on gender is located within the matrix of her concerns on sexuality; however, her concerns also include thinking of “woman” as a concept composed of fragments, about feminisms without a single unitary concept of woman.

Feminist discourses have worked to show that “gender” is not a natural, pre-discursively produced given but rather constructed over various apparatuses, and produced differently in different cultural and historical contexts. Given that “gender” is now widely acknowledged as a relational category, I draw in this chapter on the category of “caste” to understand the nature and construction of social tensions. A social scientist approach to caste, in the usual disciplinary sense, locates “caste” as a substance, a category that may change and yet persists through time. All too often, we would also like to think of caste as existing only in politics, more specifically in a narrow meaning of politics—election campaigns,

⁴ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York : Routledge, 1997), 271.

choosing candidates, ministry formations, board elections, etc. or confine it to an anthropological domain of “traditional” India. Though caste cannot be understood without taking into account colonial census, governmental politics, creation of vote-banks, institutional exclusions, popular stereotypes, etc., it would be more productive if caste can be understood as a representational concept actively constructed through a variety of discourse. In which case, caste would not be rhetorically added with a comma to class or gender, but rather a category deployed to analyze the political and ideological intersections which produce, maintain and foreground identities.

Vivek Dhareshwar in his essay “Caste and the Secular Self” explores the place of caste in the cultural narratives of the secular self.⁵ Caste appears to exist, he comments, either as statistical macrostructural problems of policy or as a deplorable, primitive practice that contaminates or corrupts the secular body politic. Extending arguments about nationalist historiography as an autobiography of the Indian nation-state, Dhareshwar points out that a large part of “our” intellectual discourse has in fact been an

. . . autobiography of the secular (read: upper-caste) self, its origin, its conflict with tradition, its desire to be modern. The intimate, and, doubtless, interanimating, connection between the biography of the nation-state and the autobiography of the secular self structures, in ways we have barely begun to understand, our relationship to caste. (115)

Drawing attention to the battle of “secular” with “communal,” Dhareshwar points out that such a construction froze caste as a social institution, disavowing it

⁵ Vivek Dhareshwar, “Caste and the Secular Self,” *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 25-26: 115-126.

politically and publicly; further, such a binary also enabled the elite to invent/appropriate the symbolic order of modernity to “nominate, classify and represent.”



Dhareshwar calls for a “heterobiography” of a secular self that is not “an(other) autobiography of a non-secular self,” but rather an altogether different conception of caste politics. Towards this, he suggests two related hypotheses. First, he points out, caste is mediated through language, English, that at once puts it “at one remove,” as an “experience-distant” concept. English as a sign of modernity and the vernacular languages as underwritten by a narrative of loss, betrayal or guilt makes it more difficult to conceptualize other, more significant, political and epistemological problems posed by language. The theorization of caste in English makes caste practice as something “alien to one’s subject position.” That is, caste is driven into a private domain, a domain where the vernacular is deployed. English, by way of being a meta-language vis-a-vis caste, offers a “caste free” domain, one overlapping with public/private divides; this also simultaneously allowed a private, vernacular domain to operate with reinventions, if not reiterations, of caste practices. Secondly, caste, as with gender, designates not pre-existing, substantive entities but “*relations* in the social field of power” (119; emphasis in the original). Thus, it is a matter of analyzing, “in specifiable historical contexts, the inter-sections and inter-articulation, the tensions and conflicts, of different identity formations” (119).

Furthermore, the most liberal version of the story of a secular disavowal of caste, remarks Dhareshwar, equates caste exclusively with lower-caste. So, an upper

caste woman or man would not experience caste, in their narrative, but would acknowledge its facticity as an objective given. In such a scenario, the disavowal of caste by a secular self produces a paradoxical excess of “caste identity” on the lower castes; but when the secular/democratic language of rights and equality is appropriated by these hitherto disenfranchised groups, the evils of contemporary India are attributed to “western” institutions and idioms.

Dhareshwar also argues that when the state in India sought to legitimize itself in the language and idioms of liberal democracy, it simultaneously “delegitimized social meanings embedded in different communities” (123). However, contemporary dislocations of the secular self are bringing to the fore conflictual and contestatory processes that no longer abide by frozen forms of shared or binding social meanings. In other words, the excess of caste morphed onto the body of the lower caste—the identity of “caste”—is being questioned and dismantled when a lower caste subject-agent speaks back, appropriating the language of the “unmarked” secular identity.

My attempt in this chapter is to explore readings of several Dalit/tribal autobiographical narratives that work to engender a “self”; though aware that such a selection does map “caste” onto “lower caste” texts, I nonetheless choose to read the texts for the strategies deployed from the margins to stage a “self” that raises concerns from, by implication, a different angle. My endeavour is to read the deployment of a genre of literature by women and men, across political, regional, linguistic, social and economic locations, for the restrictions imposed from without and the limitations challenged from within those locations. In the

traditional literary sense, auto/biographical narratives are thought of, one, as authentically reflecting the “real” and second, are further authorized by the sincerity of the narrator; moreover, his authority—his universality, his representativeness, and his role—as the rightful spokesman for the community is also uncritically accepted. Such a narrative strategy of self-discovery, of the subject’s evolving consciousness and the corresponding uniqueness of his life, frames an ideal, inviolable self that is the self of a liberal humanist politics. Nevertheless, auto/biography is also a conscious literary genre that employs a wide range of tropes and technical resources in order to structure a singular, secular subject who has lived out life at its several stages, in all its intimate and inconsistent textures of personality and experience. It is my contention that autobiographical texts from “other”—read lower caste/dalit/tribal—locations deploy strategies slightly at a slant to bring into being selves that interrogate their identities, whether as a conscious aim or read against the grain of the texts, and that analyses of such readings will help understand the matrices within which we continue to operate with hegemonic stereotypes of identities within which we are blind and deaf to live, even traumatic, experiences of such an identity.

2

Sharankumar Limbale: Cast “Illegitimate”

Sharankumar Limbale is a well-known Dalit activist writer, editor and critic who has worked successfully with several literary genres and who currently works as the Regional Director of the Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University, Nashik. His autobiography, *Akkarmashi* (1984), first published when the author was twenty-five, is regarded as a landmark in Marathi literature and later ran into

three editions. The English translation of the first Marathi edition was published in 2000;⁶ it has also been translated into numerous other languages such as Punjabi, Hindi, Kannada, Gujarati, Tamil and Malayalam.

The title of the autobiography refers to Limbale's illegitimate status—as the progeny of a relationship between an upper-caste Lingayat patil (village chief) with his Dalit Mahar mother, Limbale is neither an upper-caste man nor accepted as a Mahar by his mother's community. Sharankumar Limbale was raised by his mother's mother, Santamai. She in turn had been discarded by her husband for a second wife and lived with Mahmood Dastagir Jamadar, called Dada, and they raised Sharan living at the village bus-stand, sleeping under the benches there and cooking in an open space behind the bus-stand. Limbale's journey from this space in the village of Hannur in Solapur, Maharashtra, to his reputed and respected position as a Dalit scholar has been, to reduce an implausible crossing to a comfortable cliché, a long and tortured one. He embraced Buddhism due to, the narrative informs us, the depth of division he experienced caused by the conflicts between Hindus and Muslims.

The narrative begins with a childhood memory of a school picnic: the high-caste girls and boys—about a hundred or so—ate a variety of fried and tasty food whose “spicy smell filled the air,” and gave the leftovers to the low-caste children. Excited like “hungry vultures,” the Mahar boys stuffed themselves greedily on crumbs of different kinds of food that they had never tasted before; the narrative

⁶ Sharankumar Limbale, *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi*, trans. by Santosh Bhoomkar with an Introduction by G. N. Devy (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).

notes that their stomachs were “. . . as greedy as a beggar’s sack” (3). The next day at school, the teacher asked the students to write an essay on the picnic. Since students of the seventh and the third form sat in the same hall, and both had gone for the picnic, the teacher asked both sets of students to write the essay. As others wrote swiftly, Sharan sat “worrying” over the task. The teacher, thinking Sharan to be apparently doing nothing, is annoyed and shouts at him abusively. The narrative recalls the child’s dilemma:

I picked up my slate and pencil, spat on the slate, smeared it and wiped the slate with my shirt which was already dirty having been used like this so many times before. I didn’t know how or what to write. I kept thinking of how we had squatted in a circle under a tree in the forest, eating. I remembered the hands of high-caste boys and girls offering us their leftovers, the withered tree in whose shade we sat, the bundle of leftovers . . . and the teacher calling me a son of a bitch and a beef-eater. How should I start writing the essay my teacher had asked for? (4)

The school is a space of many dilemmas. So, while Sharan wouldn’t do even the smallest chore at his house, the teacher asked him to smear the floor and walls with cow-dung paste every Saturday since he considered Sharan an “expert” at the job (4). If the school was held at an upper-caste house due to rains or some such inconvenience, Sharan would be slapped and insulted by even the servants of such a house and then reluctantly be allowed to sit at the entrance along with the footwear. He had to go to school in his “shorts,” which were basically patched rags, and when those too wore out, the child wrapped a towel around his waist. The rest of the boys would tease him, throw stones, and chase the frightened Sharan like “charging bulls” (6).

The systemic and systematic deprivation at every moment and turn is the relentless theme of the narrative. Hunger is a principal, if not the over-arching theme of this autobiography:

A woman becomes a whore and a man a thief. The stomach makes you clean shit, it even makes you eat shit. (8)

The constant and consistent theme of hunger is repeated, for

Starvation was written in our lot from the moment of our birth. Most of the time all my sisters went to sleep without eating anything . . . there was nothing to eat. (21)

This is brutally underscored by the grim poverty of their lives. His grandmother would gather dung to make dried cakes that could be sold as fuel to earn some money; in the harvest season, when cattle grazed in the fields they sometimes passed out undigested jowar in their dung. Sharan's grandmother would wash out such grains, dry them, grind to them make flour and then cook bhakris out of them that she would eat herself. She would make bhakris from what little "good" flour she procured through her begging for the children. When once Sharan fought for a piece of the dung-flour bhakri, he could not swallow it for it felt like "actually eating dung." The bhakri stank of dung, but,

Santamai [Sharan's grandmother] ate those bhakris as a matter of course, her blackened teeth turning those bhakris into pulp. . . . I was confused because Santamai showed no sign of nausea after eating such bhakris. She gave no sign of being assaulted by the stink of dung. She just pushed it into her mouth, and it went down her stomach, whereas the dung heaved up in mine. (11)

Later, describing the desperate wait at the bus-stand for each bus to come so that his porter grandfather could earn a few annas, the narrative says they waited, expectantly, hungrily, “as a prostitute waits for her customers” (41).

Their miseries are compounded in cruel ways by the casteism they undergo: for example, there is an almost mandatory use separate vessels for tea and water for the untouchables in the village tea shop. The upper-castes do have certain social and economical relations with the untouchables, but these are peculiarly skewed:

The street connecting the village to the Maharwada was full of drunkards. Drunkards accepted liquor from the house of a Mahar but not water. They had affairs with Mahar women but wouldn't accept the food they cooked.

(35)

The sexual abuse of Dalit women by upper-caste landlords, the retaliatory rape of Dalit women if a Dalit boy so much as stared at an upper-caste woman are all part of their everyday reality. Limbale's mother and sisters bathed “openly” in the house; the bald tones of the narrative lashes out with brute anguish, as it notes “I was doomed to see my mother and my sisters naked” (72). Sharan's mother Masamai was divorced on orders of the caste council by her Mahar husband Ithal Kamble. A landless farm worker, Ithal Kamble toiled day and night in the fields and in the house of the landlord so much so, announces the narrative, that the water that sang in the farm-channels carried in it a “restless drop of his sweat” (35). When the landlord forced himself on the Mahar farm labourer's wife, she was thrown out by the husband. Her two sons, a four-year-old and a baby, were taken away from her. Thereafter, though she carried wood and eked out a living,

she was “lured” by the landlord Hanmanta Limbale a while later, set up in a rented house and became pregnant. Sharan was born. The upper-caste father refused to acknowledge the son as his progeny, and a while later, Sharan and his mother went to live with his grandmother. Given her struggle to survive—since she was beautiful, she had to suffer for it, the narrative points out grimly—she had seven children born to her thereafter, each of a different father. The narrative bites out:

People who enjoy high-caste privileges, authority sanctioned by religion, and inherit property, have exploited the Dalits of this land. The Patils in every village have made whores of the wives of Dalits farm labourers. A poor Dalit girl on attaining puberty has invariably been a victim of their lust. There is a whole breed born to adulterous Patils. . . . The whole village considers such a house as the house of the Patil’s whore. Even the children born to her from her husband are considered the children of a Patil. (38)

The first Marathi edition of Limbale’s autobiography was published when he was only twenty-five years old. Two years after its publication, Limbale wrote in an article entitled “Chronicle of a Fatherless Being” that the autobiography is “. . . the story of my life, an expression of my mother’s agony and an autobiography of a community.”⁷ And that is the second dominant theme of the narrative: that he is illegitimate half-caste, an outcaste even among the Mahars. A sarcastic teacher would call him “the Patil of Baslegaon”; nonetheless, he “owe[s]” his father’s name in the school records to this headmaster (45). The protagonist’s father is an upper caste Lingayat, his mother is a Dalit Mahar and his “grandfather,” the man

⁷ Cited in “Introduction” by G. N. Devy, xxiv.

whose labour and affection nurtured him is a Muslim: so, ponders the narrative, “Who *am* I?” (39) Though the “grandfather” and he were of different religions, yet the young protagonist felt they were “of the same flesh and blood” because Dada’s affection “did not smell of his religion” (58). Sharankumar Limbale, the narrative proclaims, had no “inherited identity” at all (59).

The issue of his “impure” blood creates problems for Sharan’s marriage too—the bride needed to be a “hybrid” in order to ensure a proper match, for, a “bastard must always be matched with another bastard” (98). Eventually, a peon in the Zilla Parishad who had promised his daughter in marriage to Sharan “under the influence of liquor” insisted on the match and Sharan agreed, though he had never seen the girl Kusum. Sharan’s sister Nirmi is to marry Kusum’s brother, Hari. Sharan and his sister decorated, recalls the narrative, the community hall, smeared it with dung, fixed buntings on lines of string, put up icons of Buddha, Phule and Ambedkar (99). There was a tussle over the rituals—Sharan wanted a Buddhist wedding and Kaka, the patil of Hanoor and the current live-in of Sharan’s mother—had a Hindu priest chanting. Eventually, after the garlands were exchanged and the wedding solemnized, Sharan’s in-laws refused to send his wife with him. Later, the narrative remembers, when he went to visit his wife at her parents’ house, they drove Sharan out. Angered, the narrative adds in a touch of black humour, Sharan would wake them up at odd hours and ask his mother-in-law for money to go to a prostitute “to annoy her” (100). Kusum herself, we are told, was unconcerned about the pure versus impure blood of Sharan; finally, there was a showdown and the couple managed to walk out Kusum parents’ house to set up their own house.

During the late 1980s, when Marathwada was a “disturbed” region and Dalit localities were set on fire even during the daytime, Sharankumar Limbale got a job as a telephone operator. But everywhere he went, he was taken to an upper-caste Lingayat by caste because of his name. The “ferment” and the “intense hatred” of the two sides made Sharan fear for his life; the narrative informs us that he it thought it “safer” to be “secretive” about his caste. So, he began to live in a Lingayat locality, hid his photographs and books of Ambedkar in a trunk, and greeted people with a “Namaskar” instead of the earlier “Jai Bhim” (103-104). He also lied about the names of his in-laws, and was “ashamed” when Santamai came to visit with Dada, especially when they came with gifts of choice pieces of beef, Sharan’s particular favourites. He was, notes the narratives, hiding their caste like a “leper hides patches of rash” (105).

But the pain of being half-caste was not just because of the upper-castes and the Mahars in his village; afraid of not being accepted by comrades in the Dalit movement, he hid from them too the fact that he is a half-caste Mahar. On the occasion of Ambedkar’s birth anniversary, one faction of Mahars was against the other because “those people” are of “impure” blood (106). And Sharan was troubled, reflects the narrative, for, “What would happen if the volunteers of this vast Dalit movement came to know that I was impure? Would they too avoid and ostracize me?” (106). Transferred to Latur after sometime, a big town with “huge buildings, houses and bungalows,” Sharan was unable to find a house to rent. Though, rues the narrative, he too “used clean clothes, bathed every day and washed . . . with soap and brushed . . . with toothpaste” his caste made him

unclean and untouchable. He was a Dalit who had “become Brahmin by attitude”; nonetheless, he could only live in Bhimnagar, a Dalit locality, or in a Muslim locality.

Eventually, Sharan rented a house in Bhimnagar where Mahars lived under tin roofs and which was also the graveyard of the Marwari community. The place constantly reeked of burning flesh and his daughter was ill most of the time. The houses here did not have bathrooms or toilets and women bathed “openly and urinated everywhere in the open” (107). Sharan found it awkward to walk through the locality, reminiscences the narrative, for morning and evening women would “shit openly by the roadside” and he felt “embarrassed to walk between rows of shitting women squatting on both sides of the road” (107).

In another instance, when he visited a childhood Dalit friend’s house, now doing well with a job in a bank, the friend’s mother—a woman who used to wear rags because she had no other clothes and who gathered dung, who has now learnt to wear a proper sari after she was transformed into a sahib’s mother—was also “uncomfortable” talking to the outcaste Limbale. As the narrative concludes, it muses on the rituals and customs that determine an individual’s life, according to his or her communitarian identity. Sharan’s grandfather, Dada, is a Muslim; would someone bury his corpse, perform the appropriate rituals? His mother and grandmother are Mahars; would people turn up for the rituals on their deaths? Amongst all these values of right and wrong, he wonders that if his birth is “illegitimate,” then what were the values or customs that belonged to him (113). The caste of a Hindu Indian, the narrative frequently repeats, determines

everything about his life: the clothes he will wear, the person he will marry, the food he will eat. Limbale's narrative describes the life of a man who suffers not only through the caste system but also through the pain of not even being allowed into the caste system: he is a half-caste, an outcaste, below everyone else.

Sharankumar Limbale's autobiographical narrative over and over again talks of his identity as a human being enmeshed and woven into the circumstances and the location of his birth, the experiences of his life. The "aim" or "destination" of this journey is not to delineate an individual life of achievement; it is more importantly a text about the unmoved, unalleviated life of poverty and hunger of a caste that continues to survive in unmitigated circumstances in villages and in urban slums. But in its continual, constant re-citation of "caste" in its lived inhuman ugliness, Sharankumar Limbale systematically attacks systemic understandings of the genre of an identity, and thereby the genre he is deploying to raise his queries.

Vasant Moon: *Vasti* and Nation

A generation older, Vasant Moon published his *Growing Up Untouchable in India* in Marathi in 1995.⁸ Moon (1932-2002) was a civil servant, an eminent Dalit intellectual, a historian of the Ambedkar movement and well-known as the editor of the twenty volumes of Ambedkar's writings and speeches in English. Significantly titled *Vasti* or neighbourhood in Marathi, Moon's story, claimed to be the first Dalit autobiography in English, is about a neighbourhood and a

⁸ Vasant Moon, *Growing Up Untouchable in India: A Dalit Autobiography* (Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 2002).

community at a bottom rung of society.⁹ Moon, from the Mahar community like Ambedkar, comes from the Vidarbha region of eastern Maharashtra that is different even from the other “untouchable” castes in Maharashtra; the Mahars here are relatively better off, economically, and constitute about twenty percent of the population in many eastern cities, including Nagpur (the nerve-center of several upper-caste Hindu right-wing organizations).

Moon’s autobiography begins, significantly, with a detailed chapter on the geography of his neighbourhood, his *vasti*. He grew up in an urban “slum” called Maharpura of Sitabardi and recounts the origins of the settlement, as recounted by the elders of the area, and the growth of each lane, its every nook and cranny.

Moon links the evolution of the area to the economics of the area—the agricultural shifts, the textile mills, the socio-economic mobility of each of the several sub-castes. Some details of his family crop up only in the second chapter, as he remembers his mother’s father and some events of his early school days; but these figure as information only secondary to the main point. The more important details are about the Mahar leaders of the time in that early phase of Ambedkar’s influence among the Dalits, the men who organized the community and worked amongst the people. Moon’s autobiography details not so much the national Dalit leaders or events of the time, but the local, community workers.

The minutiae of Moon’s life—the overwhelming poverty, the haphazard and sometimes hopeless manner of his education as he lacked clothes and books, the

⁹ The claim to be the first Dalit autobiography in English, however, may be factually inaccurate since *Viramma: Life of an Untouchable* was published in 1997.

hunger that he and his younger sister suffered as his mother searched for work—offer a cataclysmic departure from the textual unfolding in the more mainstream autobiographies. Moon's autobiography is not a success story of achievement and overcoming of odds alone, though it is that too; Moon, with his hunger and poverty, emphasized again and again that he was merely one among a literal army of such women and men who worked tirelessly with a vision and an ideal. Suffering deprivations at various levels, Moon's protagonists were the grassroots workers who laid the foundations of the twentieth century Dalit movements in Maharashtra, and for the rest of India. Moon gives accounts of the nation's nationalist struggles for independence from the perspective of Ambedkarites—it is not an “objective” account but an involved participation about fighting Congress workers and leaders at every stage of the movements. Thus, Moon's “autobiography” draws on generical conventions constantly, consistently, to raise issues about reified categories such as Congress workers in nationalist paradigms, Dalits, or Ambedkar in official histories to raise imposing claims on behalf of his people as a foot-soldier of his people's struggles.

I will pick on two instances where the narrative illustrates certain key nationalist moments and offers an altogether different perspective: Moon gives a ground level view of events in 1942 and 1946, when the Quit India movement was announced by the Congress leaders and when the Cabinet Mission Plan was being negotiated amongst the British, Congress and Muslim League for Independence respectively.

In 1942, as is well-known, the Indian National Congress gave the “Quit India” call for immediate and complete independence. Given the hegemonic sway of the Congress and its leaders, Gandhi in particular, Ambedkar’s demand for a clarification on the share of the depressed classes in independent India was made out to be a traitorous demand. On the one hand, points out the narrative, the Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (both identified with upper-caste Hindu right-wing elements) were supporting the British government in their European fight against fascism and exhorting Hindus to join the army. On the other hand, Jinnah and his colleagues were demanding a separate nation. Yet, derides the narrative, no one termed these parties or leaders as “traitors” (102). But Ambedkar’s policy caused him to be identified as a “traitor” in the “nationalist” newspapers of the time.

In 1946, when the discussions over the Cabinet Mission Plan were to be held, Ambedkar proclaimed satyagrahas in front of all legislative assemblies in India to raise the issue of separate electorates for untouchables in independent India. These were also to protest against the 1932 Poona Pact, when Ambedkar was blackmailed into backing off from his demand for separate electorates for the depressed classes by Gandhi going on a hunger strike. Moon’s narrative details the satyagraha held in Nagpur, its organization, the principal protagonists and the valiant fight that was put up. Describing the peaceful, systematic and organized manner of their agitation, the narrative recounts that the satyagrahis made “lines of four” and came before the assembly in “small groups” at noon on 3 September 1946 (102). As they marched, they were arrested and the then home minister, known for his “crafty politics,” directed the police to drive the arrested satyagrahis

in vans to far off places and release them. These satyagrahis then had to walk back the distance of eight to ten miles and could reach back their homes only by “walking” until the “early hours of the morning” (103). Such things happened “daily.” Even so, the number of people joining in this satyagraha “grew day by day.” Many people from “our community,” notes the narrative, left jobs to go to jail; “thousands of women” took their children along to join in the satyagraha. Nationalist accounts, leave alone school textbooks, do not document these struggles by the peoples of the subcontinent, the future citizens of independent, sovereign nations.

On the final day of the session, remembers the narrative, the satyagrahis were unexpectedly put in prison where they were kept like “animals” with three to four hundred people inside facilities for a hundred. The critical point to remember here, the narrative points out, is that the man in charge was not British but an upper-caste Hindu minister. When the prisoners began to suffer from “bloody stools and vomiting,” being fed half-cooked rice and watery dal in smelly oil, they conducted a “food satyagraha” inside the jail from 19 to 26 September 1946. The jail authorities responded with a lathi charge, wounding many men and women (103). Almost all “educated” Indians today will know something about Jallianwala Bagh or Mahatma Gandhi’s hunger strikes over the years or his peace marches during communal clashes in the run-up to 1947; not many of us, however, can claim familiarity with lower caste contestations of a nationalist erasure of histories.

Equally arresting is the narrative memory of hearing the news of Gandhi’s assassination: “almost unconsciously,” everyone immediately, “sank into

depression.” Though aware that Gandhi too was a great man, “despondency” spread more on account of a dread that the assassin might be a Dalit. And if that turned out to be the case, reminiscences the narrative, they dreaded the future: “. . . how will we face it?” (106) As it so happened, to a collective sigh of relief, the assassin turned out to be a Maharashtrian Brahmin.

The most striking aspect of Moon’s text is that it is not so much about the evolution of an individual as the history of a community and a movement, moving from strength to strength as well as fighting hindrances. The minute details are a documentation of the foot-soldiers of the Ambedkarite movement, its beginnings, its struggles, its triumphs and its setbacks. Moon’s text is the putting together of an “archival history” about the “little” movements—the strikes, agitations, leaders, workers, the tensions amongst all of these events and actors.¹⁰ The ordering of this archive, nonetheless, assembles an array of contestations of the identity as citizens of a sovereign nation; Moon’s archive concomitantly raises pertinent, piercing interrogations of such institutionalizations of identity.

Ambedkar: Brahmin, Parsi Muslim Fragments of a Caste

Moon of course, as well as Limbale, would be familiar with Ambedkar’s autobiographical fragments. Hence, it might be useful to take a quick glance at the autobiographical fragments written by Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956), affectionately called Babasaheb later in his life.¹¹ Interestingly, though

¹⁰ While Moon is conscious of the face-offs, he offers very little by way of a “critical history.” That however is not the major thrust of my argument here, since I focus on the ways of locating and delineating a “self” in a Dalit man’s autobiography.

¹¹ Ambedkar, a prominent public figure during India’s freedom struggle and an eminent parliamentarian after 1947, was an “untouchable” Mahar from Maharashtra. He studied in

biographies have been written on this major personality of the nation and Ambedkar's own writings—including speeches and letters—have been edited into 17 volumes in English, there appears to be no “autobiography” that Ambedkar penned himself. What has survived—a manuscript printed as a pamphlet (in 1990) that was later included in volume 12 of his *Writings and Speeches* (under the title, “Waiting for a Visa”) and then published as a slim book—are “notes” described by Ravikumar in his “Introduction” as having the “characteristics of autobiographical writing” (1).¹²

These six fragmentary “illustrations” as Ambedkar termed them deal with events and persons the author encountered over a period of time. The objective, according to the author, is to give an “idea” about how “untouchables” are treated by caste Hindus. So, at the very outset, the “illustrations” are meant to lay bare the experiences not of an individual but of a community of people. In “I Was A Boy When It Happened,” Ambedkar recalls a formative incident in 1901, when he was a child, and traveled with his older brother and two nephews who were not much older or younger than him respectively.¹³ Traveling alone by train, making the rest of the journey by horse-cart (tonga), Bhimrao and his brothers faced a traumatic time. None could initially make out from their “dress or talk” that they

Bombay, New York (Columbia University) and London (University of London) for the degrees of B. A. , M. A. , Ph. D., D. D. S. , Bar-At-Law and worked among the “untouchable” castes, making representations to the British government for “Depressed Class” rights. Apart from his satyagrahas for water-rights in Mahad and temple entry campaigns, Ambedkar is famous for battles with Mahatma Gandhi over political rights for the untouchables. Law Minister in independent India's first Union Cabinet, Ambedkar's identity rests as much as on being the Father of the Constitution of India as on being the most influential and significant Dalit leader, founding father of a civil rights movement for greater social, economic and most importantly, political rights for Dalits. A central symbol of inspiration, pride and achievement for the Ambedkar movement and for the Dalits, Ambedkar's statues and portraits are found through the length and breadth of India.

¹² B. R. Ambedkar, *Autobiographical Notes* (Pondicherry: Navayana, 2003).

¹³ B. R. Ambedkar, “I Was A Boy When It Happened” in his *Autobiographical Notes*, 5-12.

were “children of the untouchables”; in fact, the stationmaster was initially “touched” by the plight of the children alone at the railway station, “quite sure” that they were Brahmin children. But when the young Bhimrao “blurted out” they were Mahars, an untouchable community, the stationmaster’s face “underwent a sudden change.” While the man’s entire demeanour was “overpowered,” as if by a “strange feeling of repulsion,” the cart-men too refused to carry these untouchable children as passengers for fear of pollution (7).

Finally, one man agreed that the three children could drive the cart while he walked along, with double fare as payment. After being led astray through the night, they halted for a meal. The man disappeared to a nearby village for his food; the boys were carrying food but no drinking water and the cart-man suggested the small pools of water nearby would serve the boys’ needs. But when the boys went to wash, the “water” turned out to be “thick with mud and urine and excreta” of cattle; it was not suitable for human use (8). The boys were therefore forced to go hungry and thirsty; when the man returned after a long while, he drove them to a toll-collector’s hut and advised the boys to pretend to be “Mohammedans” if they wanted to get water to drink (8). Bhimrao proceeds to speak in Urdu since he knew it “very well,” but was unable to be convincing enough in his impersonation. The boys then lay down, taking turns to keep watch as a precautionary measure: the frightened boys kept vigil by twos, “burning” with hunger because even though they had food they could not eat since they could get no water, and they could “get no water because . . . [they] were untouchables” (10). Though Bhimrao had known that he was an untouchable earlier—he had to sit in a corner at school, carry his own sack-cloth to sit on, drink water only when

the school peon was around to open the tap, wash their own clothes and cut their own hair even though they could afford to pay a washerman or a barber—the “shock” of this incident made his young mind think as never before. It made him think, says the narrative, about untouchability that had been “with” him earlier as a “matter of course,” as it probably was with “many touchables as well as the untouchables” (12).

The narrative paints a striking, arresting, picture of the callousness and bestiality of treatment meted out to a group of young, frightened, hungry, thirsty and lonely boys traveling alone. The incident is framed as an inaugural moment in Ambedkar’s future, his ideological orientation in his career in a public life; what is striking however is that the principal protagonist is not an individual but an abysmally underprivileged community. The life of the story is the life of inhumane degradation woven into the daily life of the untouchable people, not the achievements that would come to Bhimrao in his future public life.

In another fragment titled “Scoundrel! You Have Polluted The Parsi Inn,” Ambedkar narrates his experiences in Baroda State in 1917/18, where he went to offer his services after his return from Columbia University in USA with a degree in law.¹⁴ The narrative recalls that the previous five years in Europe and America had “completely wiped out” any “consciousness” that he was an untouchable, which in turn could be a “problem to himself and to others” (13). Unable to find a place to stay, Ambedkar persuaded the caretaker of a Parsi Inn to take him in as a

¹⁴ B. R. Ambedkar, “Scoundrel! You Have Polluted The Parsi Inn” in his *Autobiographical Notes*, 13-19.

paying guest. Armed with the knowledge that Zoroastrianism “does not recognize untouchability,” he told the caretaker he was a “Hindu” and convinced the man to enter his name as a Parsi name in the inn’s register so that it would serve both their purposes. The inn on the first floor had a small bedroom with a small adjoining bathroom and a big hall piled with rubbish, planks, benches, broken furniture with no electric lights or lamps. Ambedkar would be provided with a small hurricane lamp in the night, as well as breakfast and dinner. However, he longed for human company.

On the eleventh day of his stay, a dozen “angry-looking” Parsis come to his room and demanded to know who he was. Ambedkar stood “silent” before the “mob” of “angry and fanatic Parsis” without offering any defense as they accused him of being a “scoundrel” who had “polluted” the Parsi inn (16-17). He was issued an “ultimatum”: he must not be found in the inn by evening or “dire consequences” would follow. Ambedkar’s “heart sank” at the prospect of losing this by-now “prized” shelter and he “cursed all” and “wept bitterly” (17). Ambedkar tried to arrange alternative accommodation, but was unable to do so by nightfall; he had to catch the 9 p. m. train back to Bombay. The narrative recalls that Ambedkar had gone to Baroda with many a “high hope” even though he had several lucrative options; he felt it his “duty” to offer his services first to the Maharaja of Baroda since the latter had financed his education (18-19). However, he was “driven” out. Even now, the narrative recalls, eighteen years after the incident, the scene of a dozen “tall, sturdy” men armed with sticks and confronting him in a “menacing mood” has not faded. The memory of Ambedkar “imploring for mercy” with a “terrified look” continues to be “vivid,” so much so that he can “never” recall it

“without tears” in his eyes (19). It would seem, proclaims the narrative, that an untouchable for a Hindu is “also an untouchable to a Parsi” (19).

I now pick on one more such autobiographical illustration by Ambedkar, “The Dheds Have Polluted The Tank” to explore the “self” that the narrative is putting together in this attempt at a life-story.¹⁵ Here, the narrative recalls a sight-seeing trip Ambedkar and his colleagues in the movement for the depressed classes had undertaken in 1934. They reached Daulatabad fort, grimy and dusty. A small tank just outside the fort was full to the brim with water and some members drew from it to wash up on the pavement. Just as they reached the gate and were enquiring the procedure for obtaining permission to enter, an “old Mohammedan with a white flowing beard” came from behind shouting “The Dheds [untouchables] Have Polluted The Tank” (24). Soon, young and old Mohammedans joined in “abusing” them in a “menacing mood”; when the tourists stated that they were outsiders, unaware of local custom, the Mohammedans abused the local untouchables too. The situation heated up, says the narrative, and could have led to “a riot and possibly murders” because the abuse was “so vulgar” that it “exasperated” Ambedkar’s group.

It was the month of Ramzan, the narrative remembers, and an impatient and angry Ambedkar finally asked the men, “Is that what your religion teaches you? Would you prevent an untouchable from taking water from this tank if he became a Mohammedan?” (25). His “straight” questions had an “effect,” for the Mohammedans gave no answer and “stood silent.” The group was then allowed

¹⁵ B. R. Ambedkar, “The Dheds Have Polluted The Tank” in his *Autobiographical Notes*, 23-25.

to enter and look around the fort, escorted by an armed soldier and orders not to touch water anywhere inside the fort. This “instance” reveals, reminisces the narrative, that an untouchable for a Hindu “is also an untouchable to a Mohammedan” (25).

Ambedkar’s autobiographical “illustrations” serve the purpose of portraying several influential incidents in his public life; each of these events befall the individual on account of his identity as an untouchable and are very much related to his own community. Also significant, I argue, is the fact that the narrative clearly and repeatedly imbricates communities in each of his specific experiences—the individuals who act as they do, cruelly and deliberately, act only with a conscious understanding of a “self” as located within the matrices of community defined by religion, though quite clearly this location is also marked by their caste. On neither side, neither oppressor nor victim, are there “free” individuals acting out their will and choice; instead, the problem is located squarely within a communitarian identity of an individual, and community here is unmistakably defined by a casteism or racism in various religions.

Alok Mukherjee has drawn attention to the communitarian emphasis in Dalit literature. The narrator-protagonist of *Akkarmashi* is a “composite character”: though the character has many similarities with the author and the events are real, they did not necessarily happen in the author’s life. It is by making them part of the narrative that the autobiography “partakes” of the lives of all Dalits.¹⁶ I have

¹⁶ Alok Mukherjee, “Reading Sharankumar Limbale’s *Toward an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: From Erasure to Assertion*” in Limbale, *Toward an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, pp. 1-18.

analyzed in the above sections the autobiographical narratives of three Dalit men of different generations that curiously, repeatedly, lay emphasis not on a personal trajectory of “advancement” or “development” even though their lives are remarkable stories of extraordinary achievements. In fact, the three men focus not on any development around them, in terms of individual lives as men or women, in the sense that the narrative gaze is constantly, insistently, directed at the ideological hurdles and material problems besetting their community.

Further, it would be contradictory to my argument to read all the three Dalit autobiographies analyzed in the preceding section as narrating the lives of the community more than that of an “individual” alone. The identity of a Dalit Mahar man too is obviously splintered by socio-economic and political contours, since Mahars in eastern Maharashtra are relatively better off economically and have a history of being more aware politically. Ambedkar’s autobiographical fragments are framed by his desire to hammer home the point of casteism or racism inherent in every religion against the so-called lower caste people. Vasant Moon’s autobiography narrativizes the micro-level identity of the Ambedkarite organization, the discipline and dedication of workers at locality, regional and state levels. Sharankumar Limbale’s narrative delineates the brahminical, almost, colours amongst the most progressive as well as most oppressed groups of people, influenced as they are by upper-caste mores that pollute the very air and thought of their societies. So, the “outcaste” status of certain categories of Dalits taints them even within a progressive radical Dalit movement. Thus, my analyses have laid out the menacing complexities raised around the notion of identity even within a single Dalit community, the Mahar men of Maharashtra.

Bama: Caste Overcome

This section reads autobiographical narratives by Dalit/tribal women. Bama (born 1958), is the pen-name of a Tamil Dalit woman. Apart from her autobiography (published in Tamil in 1992), she has also published a novel, *Sangati* (1994) and a collection of short stories, *Kisumbukkaaran* (1996). Her autobiography *Karukku* (meaning palmyra leaves) has been widely hailed as intense and sharp, searing like the leaves of a palmyra.¹⁷ Written at a point of deep personal anguish as she has left the Roman Catholic Church after seven years of involvement, the narrative considers Bama's life afresh. She had joined the convent after giving up her job as a school-teacher and left it when she realized that, for all its talk of "serving the poorest of the poor," the institution of the Church was as casteist and discriminatory as the world in which it was located.

The narrative begins with the author's village—it was "very beautiful" (1) and became "even more lushly beautiful" with the rains (2). The landmarks are lovingly sketched, as are the sky, the landscape, the ponds teeming with varieties of fish during the season, and Bama's people, mainly landless agricultural labourers, the food, particularly some "characters" amongst them. Having established the locale and the cast, the narrative then gives details of a nearby temple and the myth associated with its deities and worship. The text's second chapter begins with Bama's life.

¹⁷ Bama, *Karukku*, trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom (Chennai: Macmillan, 2000).

The narrative sketches an early memory of walking to school—through streets crowded with life and people, a veritable distracting carnival—and a particular incident when the child Bama watched an elderly man from their Paraya community carrying a packet of fried vadais by its string, without actually touching it. He then bowed low before the Naicker—the dominant land-owning caste in her village—and extended the packet, holding it by the string. Bama “fell about” with laughter, recalls the narrative, as she told this story to her older brother who was not amused but explained that rules of untouchability and pollution were behind this “comic” incident (13). Saddened and “infuriated,” the narrative remembers that the young Bama had wanted to immediately rush off and touch those “wretched” vadais. The narrative recalls thinking furiously that “. . . we too are human beings” (13).

Bama’s older brother who was studying M.A. at a University explained the degradations heaped on their community to her, records the autobiography, and deeply impressed upon her the need to “study with care, learn all you can” (15). Because she took this to heart, studied “in a frenzy almost” (15) notes the narrative, Bama stood first in her class and many people became her friends “even though” she was a Paraya (15). Nonetheless, the Paraya students were treated with “certain contempt” and made to do all the chores for the school, as well as at the houses of teachers. One day, while playing at jumping atop a coconut tree at school, Bama accidentally dropped a coconut off the tree. At the next morning’s school assembly, the headmaster, a Chaliyar, recounts the narrative, made an example of Bama in front of the entire school with the comment that, as a Paraya, she had “shown . . . [her] true nature” and expelled her from school (16). The

narrative dredges up the shock she felt when she went to a priest to beg to intervene on her behalf, and his first comment too is similar. Since she came from a lower caste, she “might have done it.” Much begging later, he writes a note on her behalf to the principal who abuses her “roundly,” and allows her to enter the school. But the child, the narrative ruminates vividly, “still weeping,” wanted to “shrink” into herself when the entire class turned to watch her re-enter the classroom (17).

The text moves in time to when a little older Bama went to a neighbouring village school where the warden at her hostel periodically scolded the lower caste or poor children without rhyme or reason. Though these children too paid for their education and keep, the narrative reminisces that the warden would publicly humiliate them. But there, when the Harijan children are asked to stand up in front of nearly two thousand children during the school assembly, the children would feel “humiliated” says the narrative. The exercise of taking down their names was probably for some scholarship or the other, but the children would hang their heads in shame (18). But when Bama’s name was called out for winning a prize, the narrative recounts with pleasure, she was pleased and proud for it proved Parayas could study “just as well” and “make progress” (19).

The story of discrimination and humiliations through college is recorded by the narrative, but Bama, because she “had the ability” and “dared” to speak for herself, held her head high successfully for she “didn’t care a toss” about caste (20). But when she went to work, the nuns at the school “did not care for Dalits like us.” Deciding therefore to work from within the institution, Bama joined a

religious order though she was warned by her people that caste counted “a great deal” within convents (20) too. Undeterred, claims the narrative, Bama joined the convent and found that the place was like coming from a “backwoods” into a “metropolis.” But it was not anonymity that is granted Bama; instead “every single one” was “anxious” to know Bama’s caste (21).

Bama’s caste education continued, notes the narrative, when she learnt that certain orders did not accept Harijan women as prospective nuns; when she went to her first place of work, she encountered more evidence of the casteism in her order. Lower caste people, she learned, were considered as people with “no moral discipline nor cleanliness nor culture” (23). Bama survived, avers the narrative, because though looked down as a Tamil, she was capable at her work; nonetheless, Dalits were generally “abused all the time” and treated in a “shameful and degrading” way (23). When she tried to explain to the Dalits around her, remembers the narrative, that they need not tremble in fear and only do the work they were paid to, she was reminded that she did not belong. She was rudely told that she would leave any time but it was they who “had to stay and suffer” (23).

Recalling a fight among the Chaliyar and Paraya men when Bama was around eleven years old, the narrative reminiscences that the police—bribed by the other side—swooped down in their locality to beat and arrest all the Paraya men. As days passed, the policemen began to enter houses on the pretext of searching for the men and used obscene language with the women, making suggestive comments and poking with their guns (35). When the women set off for their

customary coolie-work, remembers the narrative, seemingly managing quite well without the men folk, the police were “furious” and rounded them up too. The police loaded them into lorries and dropped them off on the other side of the village.

The narrative recounts a grimly humourous situation, when a young boy died and Bama’s grandmother hatched a plan to get the hiding father back by disguising him in a sari. The women arrange the grave and the burial, and the dead boy is buried by the women themselves. The incident became famous for how “clever” the women had been and managed everything themselves, “smartly” (38).

The narrative systematically unfolds the casteism saturating each section of society and each institution, including Christian ones. Not only are Dalits methodically disallowed any honour, self-respect or human dignity, they are stamped down whenever they strive against it. The upper castes appear to “conspire” to keep “us” in “our place”; they think, points out the narrative, that the Dalits who have worked “throughout history like beasts, should live and die like that” and never attempt to “move on or go forward” (24). In such a scenario, Dalits too have “come to believe” in their degraded status. Those who slumber under the spell of such mistaken notions have to open their eyes, exhorts the narrative; Dalits must crush all institutions that “bully” them into “submission” and “bring about a changed and just society where all are equal” (25). The autobiography of this “self” is not so much about the making of a self as also about the task of making a community conscious and aware of its rights and the hurdles it will have to face and overcome ahead.

The narrative also describes the grueling work that men and women from Bama's community have to do in order to eke out a living. However hard they may work, people from her community get the same rice gruel and same low wages every day (41-47) while the rich live off the labour of the poor, "fatten[ing]" themselves like "leeches" (68). At the same time, the narrative is aware of a gender differential between men and women. When as a child, Bama watched microphone being set up during Christmas or Easter, she "longed" to touch the microphone and tap it and say "hello, hello." The boys from her community did do so, but Bama "never once got the chance to do it" (51). On a similar note, the text notes in passing that while both men and women laboured day and night, nonetheless, the "men received one wage, women another" (47). Given these instances, the text is aware of a difference in the identity of the men and women in the community; nonetheless, given the extreme levels of the difficulties and discriminations obstructing their path to greater economic prosperity and a fair share in the nation's life, it is the community that is more central to this life-story.

The most significant departure from the Dalit men's autobiographies analyzed in the previous section and Bama's autobiographical narrative is the authorial tone—the tenor of the text holds Bama's life up as triumphant witness to the ability to conquer and overcome, and the community—particularly the women—is celebrated for prevailing over tribulations and outwitting the authorities, for its spirit of survival. However, I would read the critical factor here as an issue of authorial position—in terms of region, socio-economic as well as political legacies, rather than a male/female gender divide. Nonetheless, the

autobiographical framing calls attention to an-other Dalit ideological location and material lives that are narrativized in significantly different ways.

Janu: Trails and Trials of a Tribal “Self”

The last autobiographical narrative under study in this section is that of Chekkote Kariyan Janu (born 1966/67), an Adiyar—an Adivasi or tribal community—from the Wayanad area of north Kerala. Janu became famous in her State after she organized a 47-day sit-in strike of the Adivasis in front of the Kerala Secretariat in 2001, and shot into national prominence in 2003 when she, among others, led a group of tribals to “illegally” occupy a part of a wildlife sanctuary in Mathunga, Kerala. The adivasis were protesting against a government failure to restore land alienated from them for “development”; police repression resulted in the death of one tribal and many were seriously injured. Janu’s autobiographical narrative is a very brief, 56-page write-up that talks of her childhood, her “education,” her work as a Literacy Instructor, her involvement with the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) and its Labour Wing, her break from the Party to form an Organization for Tribal Development Workers (A. V. P. S.) in 1992.¹⁸

Janu’s autobiographical narrative begins with an almost mythical “where we all lived there was a time . . .”: the sentence immediately raises expectations of a “natural,” unspoilt by Man, world of forest and mountain and rivers and idyllic lives. But the narrative is equally clear on the hard life of those spaces and times. “Labour” was

¹⁸ C. K. Janu, *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C. K. Janu*, as told to and written by Bhaskaran, trans. N. Ravi Shankar (Delhi: Kali for Women and Women Unlimited, 2004).

carrying dung to the field digging up the soil with spades sowing pulling
out the seedling transplanting them weeding watering reaping carrying the
sheaves of corn and such. again picking . . . then more work . . . (1)

Janu was “already” part of this work-face even at ten or eleven, points out the narrative, and at twelve earned wages of two and a half rupees. When “young,” all the children would go to catch fish, lure crabs, snare water fowls, pluck wild fruits, gather honey, dig for wild tubers, graze cattle for the feudal landlord, the *jenmi* or just “roam aimlessly” in the woods. According to Janu’s narrative, they “never knew what hunger was,” since the forest provided fuel and food and took care of their basic needs. Then there was some land and woods around the huts where they could sow some cereals or vegetables (3). Although there were elephants, wild pigs and monkeys, these could be frightened away by beating on tin drums. The narrative reminiscences about the almost cosmic play of nature’s forces when it rained in the forest, and the sky and trees turn an “ugly grey” as giant trees bent down to become “infants”: the sights of the very hills “swaying” was “awesome” (4). Sometimes, in a matter-of-fact tone, we are told that there was nothing to eat and the children would simply go to sleep.

Janu also worked for a time as a maid in the house of a Mary Kutty Teacher in a nearby town; she, the narrative informs us, had to take care of a “fair-skinned” baby girl (7). The teacher bought her a dress, there was food to eat, there was light even after dark, there was a radio on which they heard songs and plays and when the teacher visited her hometown, Janu traveled with her in a “Bus” for the first time (9). The narrative frames the period of work as a maid, though spent away from her family and her mountains and trees, as nevertheless a period of discovery

for a curious, alert child. For instance, at the teacher's natal home, Janu met a girl of her own age, Sally, who showed Janu her books with lots of pictures and read stories of talking animals for Janu from the books. The adult's narrative now recalls thinking to herself that she "never saw such animals in our forest"; when the girl showed a peacock feather, the child-maid Janu thought of the many peacocks in her forest and the fact that the children stayed away from them because snakes ate peacocks (10). The autobiographical narrative is clearly aimed at establishing, in small and yet significant ways, through these differing values of similar objects in two different socio-cultural worlds, the very dissimilar ethos of two different life-worlds.

Janu learnt to read and write, remembers the narrative, not so much through the lackadaisical efforts of an upper-caste Warriero woman working on a literacy drive (23) but more through the efforts of a Solidarity group which came and lived among her people. The narrative recalls

some one called Sibi used to teach. he was committed to reaching us. . . .
he would partake of the *kanji* and *chakka* curry made in our hut. sibi was just like one of us. he used to tell us about many things outside the Textbooks. he had a thorough knowledge of the forest and the countryside. he would tell us about our own starvation and the meagerness of our wages and about other places. he knew the traditions and songs of our community and of others. he had so much enthusiasm for teaching. (24)

The strong recollection of an individual activist is underlined by an admiration for the strategies of work, strategies that were obviously more successful than those of the earlier upper-caste woman who came as "she willed" (23). The

narrativization of the memory calls attention to the fact that change cannot be implemented from above or outside: Sibi the teacher lived in the huts of the Adiyar, ate their food, displayed an awareness of their social, economic and cultural lives. The narrative suggests that by such a personal involvement and commitment alone to a cause can an activist bring about the desired shifts.

As she read every scrap of printed or written paper that came her way, the narrative informs us, Janu also became involved with the CPI(M) party's activities, particularly its Labour Wing. The narrative recalls various activities and incidents that she was involved in or witness to. The Party would take the tribals in lorries for rallies and strikes—like “cattle,” comments the narrative in scathing hindsight—and then made speeches about “our people” and “our wages” (27). During elections and agitations, the tribals were “not allowed to go to work” so that they could come and add to the numbers of the political protests (31). The landlord would then hire workers from outside, including the landlords in the Party; it would result in fights, points out the narrative, and then the Party would get involved in the talks and bring about a “Compromise” (31). Rumours of money-making by Party men in these “settlements” would be rife.

In other words, the labour of the adivasis would be exploited by a political party that used the problems of the tribals to harness their own electoral strength, simultaneously created a problem among the landlords and the tribal workers and finally made money by “settling” the issue of work for the tribals. The narrative is systematically drawing apart myths about institutions as sacred as “The Party” in Kerala. Memories are culled and reconstructed to render a first-hand account of

the various power games and strategic counters involved in institutional politics where upper-castes are involved. The narrative criticism of political parties, including the Communist Party of a State whose development and literacy are held as models for the rest of the nation, is both scornful and remarkably lucid in its analysis.

The focused nature of the narrative's criticism of this development model is laid out clearly when she points out the tribals could not collect fallen twigs when "tree after tree" was cut and carried down to far-off plain economies. There would be a panchayat pipe taking drinking water down the hill but the tribals were disallowed access to the water source. Neither could they get piped water, since their huts did not have numbers.

We who dug the earth and found water at will are now reduced to agitating for drinking water supplied through pipes. We created a system of life . . . [that] did not conform to the needs of civil society, [but] it was a system of life that was complete in itself. . . . civil society and parties looking for power had to cook up projects apparently for our people, but actually to fulfil the needs of civil society, siphoning off all that money and transforming our people into good-for-nothings. (47-48)

Janu's autobiographical narrative is marked by a degree of sophistication in its analytical skills, a degree that is never allowed to get into place in Limbale's narrative for instance that deploys stark prose to shake his readers out of secular, upper caste ennui. On the other hand, Janu's narrative seems to have a different profile of readers in mind: readers who will be responsive to a methodical setting

worlds, the tribal women were also used by people from “Civil Society” as well as men from the Party.

The nature of transactions of humans with land also changed: the Migrants divided the land for “different” types of agriculture, to “extract profit” from commercial crops instead of a “yield” and paddy fields for sustenance began to disappear (30). Agriculture turned into commerce as it “went to people who read from books that it belonged to the farmer!” (53) Once again, the narrative wryly shrugs at the obdurate naiveté of an arrogance that presumes to know all, and will “educate” the ignorant, hapless tribals.

In between her biting analyses of governments, political parties and “development” gurus, the autobiography also celebrates the sisterhood and strength that is the backbone of her community. Janu herself did not care for the marriage to “someone” named Chekkote Kuliyan arranged for her, says the narrative: she didn’t “stay with him for long” and came back to her own hut (25). Her constant companion from girlhood, Ammini too does not care for marriage. Later, Janu built her hut atop a hill and lives among a community of women—Lakshmi who walked out on an alcoholic, abusive husband; Devi who never married and Valli who has no other family—along with a dog and fifteen goats. All these women earn their own living, and are fond of each other (43-46). The narrative notes that in their community, women—who earlier did not go out as much as among the other tribal communities—traditionally take up more responsibilities than men, as do women among the Cholanaykkars, Kurumars, Kuttunaykkars, Paniyars too. Men spend a lot of time “doing nothing”; they spend

their time “squatting” on shop verandahs, lazy with “easy access too toddy and arrack”; “wast[ing] time” waiting for government protects or submitting applications (46). This male “attitude,” claims the narrative, is responsible for the losses the community has suffered.

The unity of her community, according to the narrative, “originates” from the women; they have “something” in common that “shelters” them from “meaninglessly” adopting the ways of “civil society.” The fact that the Adiyar women are used to doing “men’s work” in the fields may be source of their power (53). Men, on the other hand, get easily “influenced” with a tea or a beedi (53).

While Janu’s autobiographical narrative comes to an English reader through a translation from the Malayalam text, her narrative is also one that has been penned down—“as told to”—by an illustrator, cartoonist, artist/journalist, and painter, Bhaskaran. The text is accompanied by small sketches on every page, of a tree, or a hut, or a tool, of clothes drying or goats wandering. The quick, neat lines imply a swiftness and immediacy related directly, I would suggest, to the simple, uncluttered lives of its protagonist(s) as if without any authorial intervention, either of the autobiographer or the translator.

In his “Translator’s Note,” N. Ravi Shankar comments on the flavour of “Janu’s intonation” and the “sing-song nature of her speech,” stating that this was a demanding task, a “challenge,” for a translator (xi). For instance, “Janu’s language” uses verbs with greater emphasis than nouns and an attempt to “capture” that rhythm in English would result in “distorting” the text. Instead, he

reworked the draft in order to retain a “flow” of language that came closest to the Malayalam that “rolled off” Janu’s tongue.²⁰

Among other strategies for the English version, the text uses small letters, without capitalization and word order in “proper” sentences of noun and verb and adjective etc is eschewed to make for a more “racy” prose in chapters that deal with Janu’s personal details or memories of earlier times. However, in polemical chapters that take a stand on issues such as “development” or the increasing number of fatherless children amongst them, or criticize the Communist Party and the governments, the narrative occurs in “proper” sentences. The translator claims that this was a strategy adopted to “indicate” the “stresses” in Janu’s spoken language (xii). While the choices are interesting in terms of a methodology of translation, a reading of the text has to take into account all these turns, ethnographic subtexts, to the telling of an “authentic” “tribal” life-story.

Janu’s autobiography “writes” of her initiation into the world of political rallies and public demonstrations that “all the people in our area used to go . . .” and therefore, when she was fifteen, she too went along. Precisely how the issues of using Adivasi as slogan-shouting “cattle” or “exhibition pieces,” the complete neglect of the language, culture, economic needs and even the sexual exploitation of their women became issues in the narrator’s thinking remain unclear. In a context of narrative strategizing, it is illuminating that while “great” men often feel an obligation to place their struggles and achievements in the history of

²⁰ This note on the task of the translator is all the more interesting in this case since the “original” itself was “told” to the “author” by the “subject” and written by him. The translation then reached the publishers, whose editorial input “smoothened its rough edges” and helped in “fine-tuning” the “final product” (xii).

patriarchy, women of extraordinary achievement generally begin with their incidental, even accidental, entry into public domains. Such women may be the first to break significant barriers of hitherto male-dominated fields, and yet struggle between a desire to write as intellectual observers of their culture and the desire to emulate the male model of maker of culture.²¹

For instance, Lakshuibai Tilak (1870-?) was an upper-caste Brahmin who converted to Christianity at the instance of her husband, Narayan Waman Tilak.²² The most striking aspect of her autobiography is the warm bantering tone of the narrative, the ability to have a humourous take on the grim realities of women's lives as daughters, wives or mothers as they more or less "obey" the men in the household. For instance, the narrative recounts early on her father's obsessive mania about pollution and ritual cleanliness—currency notes had to be "purified" in cow dung and washed; since he promptly forgot to get the washed notes back from the river, pennies and pounds were washed away in the "flood of purification" (6). Even as the narrative describes the meanness of her father-in-law Wamanrao, Lakshuibai does not lose sight of the hilarious part of almost any situation. For instance, he knew that Lakshmi was afraid of the dark but ordered

²¹ In an interesting observation, Jane Marcus remarks that this problematic split is resolved through a removal of "the self from the circle of preoccupation The more she tells anecdotes about her foolishness or rashness and creates her own eccentric character on the page, the less she reveals of her own inner weakness, pain or suffering." Marcus reads the memoirs/journals/autobiographies of prominent white women, achievers in the public world, as re/signing their names in women's history in order to "show that they were also women, creatures for whom relationship and community were very important. Their achievements were brilliant, but they show themselves in the *mediocrity* of their lives as women who are connected to community by the ordinariness and materiality of their womanhood" (127; emphasis in the original). While re/signing themselves from the public sphere to the domestic world, she argues, the deployment of natural conversation—a juxtaposition of memory and present concern—rather than established literary form gives women autobiographers their non-linear model from life instead of art. Jane Marcus, "Invisible Mediocrity: The Private Selves of Public Women" in Benstock, ed., *The Private Self*, 114-146.

²² Lakshuibai Tilak, *I Follow After: An Autobiography*, trans. E. Josephine Inkster (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998 [1950]).

that water had to be fetched from the well beyond the village at night since there was a never-ending queue during the day. Taunting the scared twelve or thirteen-year-old bride, Wamanrao tells her to tell any ghost attempting to “gobble” her up to first go and eat the father-in-law at home (39)! At the same time, the narrative recalls fair-mindedly, he is also the man who during the wedding negotiations declared that he would not “sell” his son for a dowry, only that the girl’s horoscope should match (9).

The autobiography is replete with instances of Lakshmibai’s “immaturity” and “lack of application—her conducting an elaborate dolls’ wedding along with her niece, after her son was born, and when they were sixteen and ten respectively (60-63), or Tilak’s initial efforts to teach his wife to read and write despite her “uncontrollable fits of laughter” until finally, the “flames” of his anger “leapt into a great blaze” that “engulfed even the books” (66). The narrative recounts with unmistakable affection the antics of her husband—when, once, all the daily rations were finished and Lakshmi gave the last of her money, all of three rupees, to buy rations, he came back “full of glee” with a three-rupee watch (54). As she controlled a “fever” of temper, the narrative says solemnly, Tilak set the watch before him and sat down to write a poem, “What Does the Clock say?” The next day he sold the poem for about twenty rupees (54) and gave the money to Lakshmi!

When news of Tilak’s conversion to Christianity spread like “wild fire” and reached Lakshmi—who was staying with her son Dattu at her sister Bhiku’s place—people gazed with silent vacant eyes at mother and child, commiserating

(133). That night, the narrative tells us that Lakshmi fell into a “shock” where she became a “log of wood” (136). For a whole month, remembers the narrative, she had to be looked after day and night—she could not even brush her teeth herself (136-137). Tilak sent her notice demanding custody of the child; he later sent her letters daily—“furious” or sometimes remembers the narrative, “in excess of fury, an empty sheet of paper” (155). He visited her a few times. Nonetheless, when a European woman who had once come with him told Lakshmi that Tilak was a good man since he had not married again, a furious Lakshmi retorted that neither had she married again (156).

Nonetheless, after five and a half years of separation, Tilak finally threw out an ultimatum one day: he gave her five and half hours to decide whether she would come with him so that their son’s education would suffer no longer or threatened that there were “other ways open” to him (174). Thrown in a tumult of “blazing” chaos, the narrative says ruefully, Lakshmi finally agreed to go with him. As the cart left the town, “sob after sob” broke out from her and she “stare[d] fixedly” at Vithoba’s temple “weeping steadily” (175-177).

When her sister’s husband, Pendse, offered to make over a field to her, send ten rupees every month and give gold worth two hundred rupees if she would leave with the child the house Tilak had set up for her and go back to the village, the narrative recalls, Lakshmi refused and returned all the clothes and jewellery she had from them (179). Given only a quarter of a bajri roti and salt to eat each time and a saddle to sleep on in their house, Lakshmi suffered from the material and emotional deprivation of her natal and marital family. Meanwhile, thrown out as

tenants by one Brahmin household, they move to another where mother and son are told that they cannot use the toilet (180). The servants too leave. They then move to Fergusson Gate Compound and all the Christians there are moved out, since Lakshmi did not want to be their neighbour (181).

The domestic travails of this Christian father and Brahmin mother and son continue for a while, as Lakshmi's purificatory rituals become more and more impossible to maintain. As she is exposed to Christian kindnesses and Mohammedan hospitality, one day the "chains" of caste too fall off in the "twinkling of an eye" (191). Her "perturbation[s]" all came to a sudden end, claims the narrative, as "clear" ideas about caste as a construction of Man, not God, "whirl" through her head (191-192). Henceforth, the narrative informs her, she decided she would eat food "from anyone's hand" and "drink . . . from anyone's cup" (192).

The narrative of Lakshmi's conversion and baptism is also similarly interesting: as neighbours and family gathered for a hymn-singing session, Lakshmi and Dattu were also present. She began to "like" the "new experience," says the narrative, of a direct "commune with God in my heart" (201). She therefore goes "straight" from prayers one day to arrange to be baptized the next day (202).

The narrative's capacity to step outside of a situation, even one in which Lakshmi is involved, shed whatever feelings she might have had at the time and cast her observant eye on what is happening give the autobiography an intimacy and warmth that make it immediately "readable." Yet, the silence or elision on how

exactly she felt she could see the light of the day on the discriminations of caste or feel the joy of Christ is never quite explicable. Nonetheless, the text offers significant clues: the night before she broke free from her “caste pride,” Lakshmi had vomited her entire dinner after being forced by circumstances to sip some water by a Muslim woman (190-191). But, morning brings a “light shining about” and the chains of caste distinction “burst and [fall] rattling down” (191).

A more interesting clue about the pressures that may have prompted this illumination comes a bit later in the text: as she gives up on her “caste distinctions,” the parallel domestic “regimes” of husband and wife are “merged”: Lakshmi worships her idols and Tilak his God and they begin their married life “anew” (193). We also know that her conversion is preceded by a session of hymns and prayers during which Tilak accuses Lakshmi of having deserted him, though bound by their wedding promises to be with him, earlier: the ordeal of such an accusation on a “good” Hindu wife and the consequent stress on her, I would argue, would have had its effect.

Coming on top of the untold traumas of having been separated from a tumultuous but loving husband for more than five years, the rigours of having to live on the charity of relatives all this while who constantly supervised her suspiciously for fear that she too would run away to her husband with her son and convert to Christianity, the despair of raising a child alone, the situation would have exerted an immense strain on her. While it is not my contention that Lakshmi lacked any agency in her conversion, that she did not chose herself to convert or that she did not become a true Christian, it is also easy to understand that as an individual—a

woman dependent emotionally, economically and socially on her marital relationship—the choice to convert can hardly be considered a “free” one. For the narrative does impishly let us know that when she is to be “examined” before the baptism, a “kindly” pastor sits beside her, “prompting” her with answers to the questions from the Bible and she “repeated his answers” to the examiners (202)!

I have dwelt on Lakshmibai Tilak’s autobiography at some length to complicate the issues raised by Dalit and tribal men and women from the perspective of an upper-caste woman who converted to Christianity. The logic of her life that she presents in her autobiography, the narration of the embattled situations she found herself in and the ellipses that are revealing of unmentionable tensions, are illustrative of the ways in which an upper-caste woman understood her life and identity in terms of “caste.” Lakshmibai, apparently conforming to a “modern” notion of help-meet and companion to her husband, negotiates considerable social pressures to model a “self” based on marital and social requirements. At the same time, she demonstrates a self-reflexivity of the stress she finds this “self” under, and through her textual slips and silences, proclaims the very contradictions that she had to manage.

* * *

My aim in this chapter has been to read autobiographical narratives by women and men from “other” locations—most specifically, marked by a systemically oppressed caste and/or tribe—in order to understand the ways in which non-canonical texts delineate their selves and deal with identities imposed upon them from the so-called central, even national, locations. The deployment of caste as a

category of historical analysis is a critical factor in contemporary questions of self and identity.

Colonial modernity evolved through multiple and complex mediations in newly-independent India, and the vastly different socio-historical conditions ensured that the classic chronology of western history could not exactly be replicated. While the traditional power centres continued to hold sway, now using a language of reason and freedom, now appropriating a past and mapping a tradition, the language of reason and the rhetoric of liberal politics did not quite work, scholars have argued, to situate the idea of “rights” in a politico-economic framework. The question of social reform versus national independence during the struggles for freedom in early twentieth century has been well-documented and studied. As research has shown, the quest for establishing a organic, golden age in India’s past and the construction of “national honour” through debates on social reform were directly related to patriarchal, caste-related interests that abandoned serious and sustained social reform. The neologism “depressed classes,” for instance, is argued to be a convenient ruse to domesticate “untouchability” and consign it to the margins of public life and intolerance; it served to reify a continued social ghettoization while doing little to demolish caste biases.

Ambedkar’s fragments demonstrate the structural centrality of casteism, as maybe even a substitute racism, which pervades the mindset of all major religious communities. Vasant Moon documents the challenges raised by organized groups of underprivileged people, the undeniable leadership and alternate vision that can arise from outside a nationalist framework of history or politics. The existence of

a history of resistance, and its recording, as in Moon's autobiographical narrative is important for the sense of a continued struggle to resist and overcome brahminical hegemony; this is not to suggest reading Moon's text as a certain return to a past but rather as a fragment of memory, a disjunctive moment that fudges the dominant historiographical tradition. Sharankumar Limbale's narrative articulates an ideological and semiotic critique of caste power and the increasing complexities of group identities, given the narrativization of more and more marginalized peoples. His narrative lays stress on the complication of mainstream notions of "freedom" and "choice," for example and raises challenges to its national resolutions in terms of constitutional rights or legal guarantees. The existence of reservations, for instance, has enabled generations of "untouchables" and any talk of abolishing reservations will not be tolerated. However, the legal safeguards, though enabling up to a point, do not appear to have engineered the requisite social and cultural shifts in a constantly changing world of identity-based politics.

The narratives of Bama and Janu bring entirely differing perspective to bear on their life-stories. Bama's narrative also enunciates a felt need for education, if her people are to progress, but posits it in a new context that would recognize the voice of desire as well as reason, thus creating other words and other texts. The narrative brings into question a mainstream trajectory of a "self" that sheds its caste, gender, ethnic and linguistic markers to attain an abstract identity of a citizen and to become an "individual." As Janu's autobiographical narrative demonstrates the instability of textual knowledge and pluralizes it, while being appreciative of formal "education," it is also critical of the implied dismissal of

indigenous knowledges. Her narrative critiques the State's secular imaginary of a political and civil society—progress, planning, democracy—and the liberal, humanist nationalist logics of economic development or progress, placing an agentive tribal subject of history, a subject-in-process moreover who is engaged in conflictual discursive encounters.

My readings have attempted to understand the richness of ideas that are possible about the idea of “self” or identity that each of these underprivileged women or men, not quite, aspires to. They in fact, as my analyses have endeavoured to bring out, dispute notions of freedom, choice, development, or progress as defined under prevailing hegemonic liberal patriarchal regimes of a benign nation even as they offer particular interpretations of caste experiences. They seek not so much to achieve that which is “available” to, say, an upper-caste male citizen, I would suggest, but much more: they critique neat nationalist framings of “caste” or “gender” and the norms of such standards even as they refute a reification of the category “caste.” In other words, the “menacing” tone and mood of such interrogations of identities imposed through mainstream frameworks are simultaneously juxtaposed with imposing claims of their own that shake up generical, normative categories and question their very premises.