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## Caste in the times of Neoliberalism: Cosmopolitanism and Dalit movement

**Dr. Anju Gurawa and Ashish Gautam**

### Abstract

This paper explores the concept of minor cosmopolitanism as a framework for understanding the efforts of Dalit-Ambedkarite movements to challenge the norms and boundaries of caste hierarchy and prejudice. Despite the absence of a feasible global cosmopolitan citizenship available to them, Dalit activists such as B.R. Ambedkar constantly sought international solidarity with other oppressed communities. The paper argues that minor cosmopolitanism is better suited to understanding the struggles of historically marginalized people, such as the Dalits, beyond the ambit of the cosmopolitan Enlightenment. The paper examines the efforts of global Dalit organizations, such as the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights and Equality Labs, to pressure the Indian State and global organizations to acknowledge Brahmanical caste complex and enforce anti-caste safeguards. Furthermore, the paper proposes a hypothesis that literary expressions produced under neoliberalism perpetuate the myth of individual merit to absolve institutions of their caste biases. Finally, the paper suggests studying literature written by both Dalit and upper-caste authors to understand their respective portrayals of Dalit subjects.

**Keywords:** Caste, neoliberalism, B.R. Ambedkar, human rights, Dalit literature

### Introduction

Dalit-Ambedkarite movements challenging the norms and boundaries of caste hierarchy and prejudice have often had an international, cosmopolitan approach despite the absence of a feasible global cosmopolitan citizenship available to them. Drawing from his own extensive corpus of work on political sciences, economics, and social theories, the globally trained and locally rooted B. R. Ambedkar forever argued in favor of a universalist conception of rights that recognized the untouchable, lower caste Dalit's 'rights as a human being'. In his paper *Problems of the Untouchable* delivered at Mont-Tremblant, Quebec in 1942, he states that international agencies have a moral imperative to uplift the Dalits out of their oppressed state since caste discrimination is antithetical to the conception of human rights (Ambedkar, *Mr. Gandhi* 7).

Ambedkar constantly strove for solidarity with international resistance initiatives that sought to end discriminatory practices and exploitation. In his correspondence with W. E. B. Du Bois, citing the similarities between both the community's social conditions, he concurs with African-American thinker in appealing to a legal body to end discrimination and oppression, 'following the suit of the Negroes'. From the vantage point of shared oppression, Ambedkar juxtaposed the Dalit's plight with other oppressed international communities such as the Jews under the Nazi Occupation and the plebian classes under the nineteenth-century French aristocracy (Ambedkar 22) to foreground Dalits as global citizens of the world entitled to human rights.

European Enlightenment can be considered as a project with a cosmopolitan core against European despotisms and it becomes a 'major cosmopolitanism' in its *longue duree*. However, the primary agents of such a cosmopolitanism were also 'implicitly male, bourgeois, and, not least, white' (Eckstein & Wiemann 4). Alternatively, 'minor cosmopolitanisms' are characterized by an undermining of a 'single universally valid cosmopolitan ideal'. It privileges the narratives of the historically marginalized people beyond the ambit of the cosmopolitan Enlightenment and who were subjected to 'systematic devaluation and disenfranchisement, dehumanization and even extermination' within and

outside Europe (Eckstein & Wiemann 1).

### Minor Cosmopolitanism in a Casteist, anti-cosmopolitan Brahmanical World

Global Dalit organizations such as the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) and Equality Labs have attempted to pressure the Indian State and global organizations to acknowledge Brahmanical caste complex and enforce anti-caste safeguards. Following Ambedkar, they argue that '[T]he caste problem is a vast one, both theoretically and practically. Practically, it is an institution that portends tremendous consequences. It is a local problem, but one capable of much wider mischief, for as long as caste in India does exist, Hindus will hardly intermarry or have any social intercourse with outsiders; and if Hindus migrate to other regions on earth, Indian caste would become a world problem' (Ambedkar). Equality Labs has to contend with the problem of Caste amongst the Indian Diaspora in the US. In a recent landmark case, the state of California's Department Fair Employment and Housing (DFEH) ruled against tech firm CISCO alleging caste-based discrimination against their Indian-American employees. Thenmozhi Soundarajan, whose report 'Caste in the United States' was quoted in the lawsuit, highlights the socio-political implication of this lawsuit: in a civil rights case in the US this was the first time "where a governmental entity issued a ruling against an American company for failing to protect caste oppressed employees and creating a hostile workplace'. The Equality Labs report has also been used in general by American Human Rights Commissions, immigration courts, domestic violence agencies, and Congress to implement a safeguard against caste discrimination and bias in American institutions. Additionally, in a historic Congressional hearing that took place at the office of representative Pramila Jayapal<sup>1</sup> in Washington DC, it facilitated a conversation between representatives from major progressive parties and groups, community leaders from 15 American states, along with Equality Labs in partnership with South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT) and API Chaya.

Theoretically, *minor cosmopolitanisms* is grounded in the formulation of 'minor literature' which is characterized by three principles: deterritorialization of the language, the inextricable relationship between the individual and their politics, and that every literary utterance has a collective value (Deleuze and Guattari 15). Minor cosmopolitanism will help to understand how the pervasive Caste system has successfully disguised itself as an entirely innocuous phenomenon while it shrouds the implicit structural violence of caste in economic systems, social spaces, secular institutions and cultural practices, including Literature and Cinema. My hypothesis is that in literary expressions produced under neoliberalism, the portrayals of victims of the caste system are distorted to perpetuate the myth of individual merit thereby absolving the institutions of their caste-biases. Often, they are portrayed as 'casteless' victims of their own individualistic inadequacies, that absolve the institutions specially designed to safeguard individual rights of their moral-ethical-legal-social responsibility. Following Gramsci's idea of *cultural hegemony* whereby the state

legitimizes oppressor class/caste ideology through cultural institutions, one can critique the casteist myths that the socio-material conditions of Dalits are borne out of their own individual deficiencies while paradoxically depriving the individuals of any potential to transform the system. To further develop this hypothesis, I would study Literature written by both Dalit authors and Upper-Caste<sup>2</sup> employing a comparative mode of analysis to delineate their respective portrayals of Dalit subjects. To corroborate this, factors that transform the caste question in the popular imagination to reductive individualized categories such as individual merit, aptitude, and, in extreme cases, genetic predispositions will be theoretically analysed. The transmutation and the dilution of the caste oppression to impose the onus of human rights on the individual agency is a deliberate attempt by institutions to absolve them from their casteist underpinnings. These institutions employ ideological hegemony to fabricate a fallacious 'caste-free' society where victims of caste are either rendered casteless or inadequately oppressed. This problem manifests in stigma against 'rich reserved category students' or 'urban Dalit' presuming that caste is only peculiar to poor, uneducated, rural circles and absent from urban spaces. I would also interview 'urban Dalits' as a case study to unravel the nuances of this socio-cultural hegemony.

The motivation to pursue this research project stems not only from an intellectual or academic curiosity but also from the personal experience of my social location – being a Dalit. This endeavor is essential to enter spaces that were considered predominantly *reserved*<sup>3</sup> for the upper-castes. As K. Satyanarayana declares, 'Dalit Literature does not grow out of the literary discussion or the practice of writers. It is a social movement invested in the battle against injustice and driven by the hope of freedom, not simply a literary trend or a formal development' (Satyanarayana and Tharu 8). Any engagement with Literature, for a Dalit, is a form of self-assertion. Furthermore, the project is inherently political as it will attempt to transgress the limits and predetermined vocations that are imposed upon Dalits. One could argue that the reproduction of casteist structures within the neoliberal regime is reinforced by the mainstream portrayal of Dalits in Literature, Cinema, etc.

Having been brought up in a sheltered Dalit household where the issue of my caste was deliberately concealed, it was only when I entered an academic institution that I was forced to reassess my position as a particular caste-labeled citizen of a 'secular' country. This encounter theoretically and at the level of praxis compelled me to find answers to questions such as: Why is it necessary for a parent to hide their children's social identity when others flaunt and take pride in the cultural significance and 'capital' of their identities? Why did certain people receive preferential treatment from teachers, or parents of other friends, if they signalled specific social markers such as the same last

<sup>2</sup> The author does not endorse or mean to perpetuate the hierarchy implied in the usage of these terminologies. The reason for retaining the popular and prevalent usage is due to its historical importance. It would be difficult to engage with the Dalit discourse without grounding our semantics within the power dynamics of history. The preferred terminology of the author are 'Oppressed castes' and 'Oppressor Castes'

<sup>3</sup> It is a prevalent belief amongst the upper-castes that the Reservation system deters meritorious candidates to secure positions in public institutions. Ironically, overwhelming evidence demonstrates that public institutions such as Higher Education, Judiciary, Civil Services, etc are all predominantly occupied by the upper-castes whose representation is disproportionately higher than their population.

<sup>1</sup> Pramila Jayapal is an American politician serving as the U.S. representative from Washington's 7th congressional district since 2017. A member of the Democratic Party, she represents most of Seattle, as well as some suburban areas of King County.

names? I found answers to these intricate social rituals in material-cultural production of Literature and Art.

### Why minor cosmopolitanisms?

The origins and the subsequent evolution of Dalit Literature – as a mode of resistance and assertion – are firmly rooted within the context of the conflicts between traditionalist Hinduist hegemonic ideology and Eurocentric modes of thought. According to the prominent Dalit Panther literary theorist and author, Baburao Bagul (1930-2008), the principal preoccupations of Indian Literature before the emergence of Dalit Literature were informed by the anti-colonial consciousness. Any attempts to critique the emerging nation's internal contradictions were regarded as antithetical to the nationalistic integrity of Indian consciousness. This marks the onset of Dalit literature's construction as ostensibly 'anti-national', which reverberates to this day. These 'internal contradictions' relating to class, gender, and, especially, caste were often sidelined in anti-/decolonial discourses.

The legacy of Gandhian nationalism in opposition to Dalit assertion found resonance in the narratives employed by the post-independent ruling class. This false dichotomy of the Indian independence struggle deliberately glossing over India's internal contradictions (among the colonized) deliberately diminishes the instrumental roles played by social revolutionaries such as B.R. Ambedkar (1906–1935), Mahatma Jotiba Phule (1840–1890), Savitribai Phule (1840–1890) and Fatima Sheikh (1831-?) in the establishment of the egalitarian frameworks that would enable the safeguarding of the rights of Dalits and other marginalized groups in post-Independence India. Drawing from the philosophies of Ambedkar and Phule – and countless other Dalit leaders – it has become possible for contemporary Dalit activists, literary theorists, social and political scientists, and artists to position themselves as actors of change within the purview of global movements. I wish to explore how contemporary Dalits employ and integrate international social movements, social media, and modes of expression such as film and literature to build movements that do not rely on the national institutions and instead attempt to establish affinities with other global marginalized movements. In order to successfully achieve this, I reinterpret and reevaluate the works of Dalit Literature, especially that of Ambedkar, and free them from the clutches of the nationalistic paradigm. Ambedkar along with other Dalit thinkers is understood not merely in opposition to the traditional nationalistic thought but as leaders who envisioned for Dalits a world that confers on them rights unavailable in either the traditional or modern frameworks. Additionally, the confluence of Ambedkar, Jotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, and Fatima Sheikh characterized by their inter-religious, inter-caste, and inter-class alliances have the potential for international communities to synergize their efforts toward the abolition of inequality throughout the world.

This model of solidarity-based struggles was problematized by Juli Perczel in the juxtaposition of the Hungarian Roma's social conditions with that of Dalits. Despite huge overlaps between their sources of discrimination – socio-cultural stigma resulting in disproportionate social exclusion – Roma have not been able to successfully mobilize a systematic framework to assert their rights. Perczel laments that 'Historically, the Roma do not have an Ambedkar who

would provide them a banner under which they could organize their struggle for liberation' (Perczel). This was sufficient impetus for János Orsós, who started a community-based movement *The Jai Bhim Network* (Jai Bhim Sangh) inspired by Ambedkar's socio-political thought. Drawing from Ambedkar's motto '*educate, agitate, organize*', Jai Bhim Sangh activists run schools for Roma children unable to acquire education in state-run, traditional schooling systems. Additionally, Ambedkar's proclamation of Buddhism as a path to reaffirming a community's self-respect found resonance with the plights of Roma. This demonstrates the efficacy of the interpretation of Ambedkar's thought within the lens of minor literature which seeks to address the 'communal action' of the solitary writer whose position within the oppressed society necessitates political action (Orsós).

Gopalakrishnan Karunanithi argues that owing to the parallels between the Roma and Dalit communities the models of empowerment that are employed by Dalit organizations, especially Dalit women platforms, can work for the Hungarian Roma community. Karunanithi argues that the success of Self Help Groups run by NGOs in India can facilitate the empowerment of Roma communities thereby building a bi-lateral fraternity that could guarantee the mutual upliftment of both societies (Karunanithi). Notwithstanding the viability of such collective enterprises, it brings to attention minor cosmopolitanism's potential for the emancipation of the oppressed throughout the world.

Projects by Equality Labs, National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, International academic students' bodies, and globally interconnected Dalit communities have received criticism due to their affinity with Eurocentric paradigms; they nonetheless enable the Dalits to project themselves as active stakeholders in the self-assertion of their rights. *Minor cosmopolitanisms* as formulated by the RTG Minor Cosmopolitanisms account for a 'perspective crucially informed by post- and decolonial thought (Eckstein & Wiemann)' which resonates with the objectives of the international Dalit organizations fighting for recognition of the Caste system as discriminatory within the UN definition. Despite the Indian government's antagonisms toward these attempts as a '...conspiracy to defame India... by some NGOs...to malign the country' (Cabrera 281), Dalit groups have succeeded in linking with other marginalized groups all over the world. Their efforts bore fruit when the United Nation's Committee on Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) on August 23, 2002, condemned caste-based discrimination as a violation of the International Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (Pinto 1). This demonstrated the strategical efficacy of invoking international definitions of human rights to assert Dalit rights thereby leveraging the geopolitical dynamics between transnational states.<sup>4</sup>

There is an attempt to undermine this model by the BJP whose implementation of the draconian Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 (UAPA) deters social activists from mobilizing anti-caste resources against the Hindutva forces. The incarceration of anti-caste scholar Anand Teltumbde in the 2018 Bhima Koregaon Elgar Parishad is such a case (Sukumar 35). The BJP's attempt to erase the cultural significance of Bhima Koregaon celebrations as 'anti-

<sup>4</sup> My formulations about the relevance of international alliances for Dalit emancipation are based on my discussions with Florian Schybilski.



national' is part of a larger project of forcibly integrating Dalits into the Hindu-fold to undermine their agency. UAPA's misuse as a perversion of the idea of justice runs contrary to the UN framework of universal individual rights (Sekhri). Sekhri argues that the UAPA is an affront to the presumption of innocence and its connected presumption of harmlessness, as it ensures that even if a person accused under the Act is ultimately acquitted, they suffer the punishment of the process. In relation to this, the UN Human Rights Chief condemned the Indian government for stifling the voices of marginalized dissenters (Scroll). *Prahar*, a civil rights organization from Maharashtra, submitted a statement citing the recent violence on Dalits at Bhima Koregaon 2018 event to the Human Rights Council of UN, urging the council to convey to the Government of India the urgent need of preparing an action plan to annihilate caste violence in India (Mahamatra 119).

### Objectives of the research

I want to translate my first-hand experience into a productive research problem and aim at exploring the factors which disabled the proliferation of Dalit revolutionary voices in the mainstream nationalistic discourses – especially the reduction of Ambedkar as a nationalistic leader. Furthermore, I would like to examine how the suppression and erasure of the significance of the radical Ambedkarite thought make it imperative to re-conceptualize and re-orient the anti-caste modes of thought to better suit the neoliberal global world. I would like to situate my analyses within the backdrops of Luis Cabrera's two significant works: *Dalit cosmopolitans* and *'Gandhiji, I Have no Homeland'*. Cabrera argues that Ambedkar's legacy as the Architect of the Constitution and a vociferous critic of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi has overshadowed the international dimensions of his work, thereby allowing the subsequent ruling parties to co-opt Ambedkar as a nationalist bourgeois-democrat. This undermines his life-long attempts to annihilate the Caste system. BJP's saffronization<sup>5</sup> of Ambedkar's political thought whereby his anti-caste project is distorted is pertinent to the scope of our investigation. Ambedkar categorically rejected any 'uncritical loyalty to the state, and he criticized presumptions of unity within states, arguing that foreigners' support for the self-determination of an 'Indian people' would merely perpetuate caste oppression within the country' (Cabrera 1).

Ambedkar's radical interventions in the field of internationalism, Cabrera claims, have been deliberately diminished to legitimize the bourgeois model of the nation-state (Cabrera 2). Cabrera proposes a theory of human rights cosmopolitanism building on the tenets of *moral cosmopolitanism* which confers autonomy upon the Dalits. This theory presupposes that Ambedkar's model of associating with international marginalized communities validates the demand for rights of the Dalits under the UN's model of individual rights. Ambedkar provided the methodology for this analysis in his 1942 correspondence with Du Bois where the former expressed interest in '[the] similarity between the position of the Untouchables in India and of the position of the Negroes in America that the study

of the latter is not only natural but necessary' to which the latter responded that he has 'every sympathy with the Untouchables of India' (Du Bois).

### Contemporary Dalit endeavors: A cosmopolitan approach

I wish to do a comparative survey of the depiction of caste-relations in various media under neoliberalism. I would analyze the trivialization of caste dynamics by mapping out the depiction of Dalit characters from texts such as Premchand's *Rangbhoomi*, *Godaan*, Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, and Ananthamurthy's *Samskara*. I would juxtapose them with narratives like *The New Custom* by Ajay Navaria, Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things*, Marathi film *Sairat*, the Hindi films *Dhadak* and *Masaan* produced after the neoliberal policies were implemented in India. I want to investigate the socio-cultural factors that entail the implementation of an economic neoliberal system. The living conditions of Dalits improved with economic liberalization, and allowed them entry beyond their stigmatized traditional roles. The depiction of low-caste characters vis-à-vis the contemporary author's caste location has to analyse the role of the socio-cultural forces of neoliberalism. For instance, Premchand's depictions of Dalit characters, Toral Gajrawala (34) argues, are either lacking in autonomy relegating them to the typological paradigms of a caste-less peasant or always on the receiving end of mercy or 'change of heart' of his upper-caste characters.

Similarly, U.R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* exposes the decadence of the Brahmin society that celebrated the Caste system despite the emergence of modern social systems in India. His portrayal of lower caste women is, however, extremely stereotypically sexist and casteist. Sharon Pillai (136) contends that the portrayal of lower caste women in *Samskara*, rife with cultural symbols of the mythological Hindu past instead of strengthening their characters, presents them as overtly sexual beings.

A brief overview of Velutha's character in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* would demonstrate the distinctive portrayals. An assertive Communist, surrounded by Christian anglophones, he defies all traditional casteist social norms. Under the logic of neoliberal social values it becomes evident that his experience as a Dalit differs greatly from the Dalit characters written before the emergence of neoliberal cosmopolitanism. Velutha faces a fate similar to his pre-neoliberal Dalit counterparts: killed for engaging sexually with an upper-caste woman. However, the socio-political conditions under which Velutha operates are distinct from the traditional rigid casteist society of Premchand, U.R. Ananthamurthy, and Omprakash Valmiki. For instance, he is allowed to play with Brahmin children, and enter Brahmin homes—barring the kitchen. This transmutation of the mechanism of caste must be contextualized within the backdrop neoliberal cosmopolitan ideas.

This recent upsurge in the portrayal of assertive Dalit characters is also reflected in the contemporary Dalit Hindi author Ajay Navaria's short stories, and, Dalit directors Nagaraj Manjule and Pa. Ranjith's movies. The juxtaposition of *Sairat* and *Dhadak* allows us insights into the transmutation (and obfuscation) of caste in real-time. *Sairat*, which originally portrays the horrors of the caste system entrenched in modern Indian society, loses its anti-caste fervor in its Hindi remake. The central conflict is

<sup>5</sup>Metaphors aside, in a recent absurd turn of events, where life imitates art (of politics), one of Ambedkar's statues was painted saffron in Budaun, Uttar Pradesh, only to be repainted Blue by the Bahujan Samaj Party legislator (Shahane).

sanitized to render the narrative more palatable for the sensitive caste-blind society. This is indicative of a deliberate attempt to perpetuate the myth of a caste-free society under neoliberal cosmopolitanism.

Gajendran Ayyathurai regards Caste as an 'entrenched social disorder' that needs to be rethought in global academia to delegitimize the 'self-privileging views of caste groups, such as Brahmins' (Ayyathurai). With the advent of global intervention in the field of Caste studies, mainstream work on Race is being viewed through the prism of Caste as, for instance, in Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste: The Origins of our Discontents*. Additionally, Dalit contemporary writers' usage of English in works like Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir* and Suraj Yengde's *Caste Matters* highlights the importance of deterritorialization of English which finds parallels in the assertion that 'German in Prague is a deterritorialized tongue suitable for strange, minor uses (cf., in another context, what Blacks today can do with the American tongue) (Deleuze and Guattari 14).

Such a mode of analysis can also help us understand how neoliberal socio-cultural systems make it possible for Dalit political leaders like Chandrashekar 'Ravan' and Jignesh Mevani to enter mainstream acceptance. I contend that neoliberal cosmopolitanism permits the emergence of anti-establishment movements under their own terms. This is achieved through creating a false binary of 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' voices accentuating the divisiveness thus making it impossible to consolidate revolutionary movements.

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