

# **Dalits and Dalit Lives in 21st Century India**

Towards a New Politics

Edited by

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**Series in Social Equality and Justice**



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*Dedicated to the unsung aspirations of the Dalits of India*



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# **Dalits and Dalit Lives in 21st Century India: Towards a New Politics**

The dynamic economic and political transformations witnessed in contemporary India have significantly impacted the lives of Dalit individuals. Despite these changes, it is important to note that the traditional social hierarchy has not been completely overturned, and Dalits continue to confront discrimination on a daily basis. Nevertheless, tangible advancements can be observed across various areas. The political activism of the 1990s has sparked shifts in self-perception and reignited self-assurance among Dalits. Similarly, a certain degree of economic mobility has elevated the living standards of at least a segment of the Dalit population compared to previous generations. There has also been a surge in scholarly works focusing on Dalit movements, culture, and politics. However, the central concern at hand revolves around the evolution of caste discrimination, wherein the manifestations have evolved, yet the lived experiences persist unchanged. The advent of modernity and its assurances have proven inadequate in addressing the plight of survivors of caste violence. There exists a prevalent inclination towards obliterating the significance of caste rather than acknowledging and commemorating the heinous atrocities linked to it. This comprehensive body of work illuminates the new ways to remember caste and comprehend the enduring anguish it has imposed upon individuals across generations. The focus is not merely on the recognition of historical suffering but also on unravelling the intricate layers of caste-based oppression that continue to reverberate through contemporary society. Through a nuanced exploration of these themes, this volume endeavours to shed light on the imperative nature of acknowledging and confronting the enduring legacy of caste, thereby paving the way for a more informed understanding of its profound impact on Dalit lives throughout the annals of time.

This volume presents an endeavour to consolidate various facets of Dalit Studies, featuring several chapters that provide novel insights and intellectual contributions. Amidst the expanding body of literature on Dalit Studies, this comprehensive exploration of Dalit individuals' lives and experiences stands out as a significant effort. This work not only adds depth to the existing discourse but also serves as a catalyst for broader understanding and appreciation of the complexities inherent in Dalit experiences and their representation or (mis)representation. The genesis of this collection can be

traced back to the 53rd Annual North East Modern Language Association (NeMLA) convention in 2023, where the theme "Who Dalit? Why Dalit? How Dalit?: Reading Mediums of the Caste Phenomenon" was proposed, selected and co-chaired by the editors of this volume. Following the conference, the proposed theme gained momentum as it was circulated, captivating the interest of additional scholars who contributed their insights and expertise to the discourse. This collaborative expansion of perspectives and scholarly contributions further enriched the thematic trajectory of the collection.

This volume seeks to investigate the intricate relationship between various media and the representations they convey, and how these representations and deliberate (mis)representations intersect with ideas, ideologies, and entrenched casteist narratives. In doing so, the volume challenges the traditional social order's ability to address caste-based discrimination effectively and also makes an attempt to find alternative ways to understand the conundrum of caste. It delves into the necessity of alternative discourse, particularly the significance of Dalit discourse, and hence the imperative need for diverse and inclusive discourses. This facet prompts the formulation of pertinent research questions regarding the nature of texts in contemporary India, which are conceived as a dynamic and interconnected array of discursive potentials within a framework that intertwines language, writing methodologies, media environments, and the socio-cultural context that moulds notions and patterns of portrayal across various modes of expression.

Let's now look at some facets that can offer fertile grounds for further exploration in the area of Dalit Studies. The discourse surrounding Dalit Studies has become entangled in a web of polarizing and flawed politics, hindering its progress. The pivotal factor in uplifting this marginalized community lies in providing a platform for their voices to express their lived experiences. However, the overarching political landscape has stifled opportunities for continual reassessment of caste identity in contemporary India. The editors assert that a radical shift towards acknowledging and addressing discrimination is imperative for instigating meaningful change. They advocate for a practical approach centred on fostering a Gandhian ethos of self-reliance, breaking free from the narrow association of reservation with vote bank politics. This shift aims to transcend the victim-centric narrative that currently pervades discussions about this community. The envisioned future entails an India where the rallying cries of "Jai Bhim" and "Vande Mataram" harmoniously coexist, reflecting a society that embraces unity amidst diversity and empowers every individual to thrive.



The volume represents the individual voices of the editors and contributors, who are eminent academics, and provides a more holistic approach to the examination of the socio-economic, cultural and political landscape of the Dalit community in contemporary India. Their contribution enriches the current body of literature on Dalit Studies, with a specific focus on the evolving dynamics within politics, academia, popular culture, digital culture, political economy, ideological perspectives, and representation or (mis)representation, among others. The chapters also demonstrate the profound impact of various modern influences on the lives of the younger generation of Dalits. In doing so, it sheds light on how access to information technology, the pervasive use of social media- digital media, the influential role of music and cinema in cultural resistance, and the discourse of protest politics collectively shape the experiences and perspectives of the young Dalit community. This in-depth exploration offers valuable insights into the complex interplay between contemporary media, cultural expression, and political activism within the context of Dalit youth identity and empowerment.

This literary work presents an invaluable opportunity for scholars, researchers, students, and discerning readers to immerse themselves in an exploration of a significant community in India and its multifaceted presence within contemporary literature and culture. The comprehensive array of themes meticulously examined within this volume has unequivocally enriched its content, serving as a testament to the diverse and profound insights offered. The editors graciously acknowledge and express their profound appreciation to all the contributors for their intellectually stimulating and thought-provoking additions, which have significantly enriched this scholarly discourse.

Tamanna Priya & Amrit Mishra  
Editors



Chapter 1

# Cast(e)ing a Subversive ‘Sensible’: The Symbology of Cultural Resistance in Dalit Writing

Sanchita Khurana

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**Abstract:** Several Dalit writers/ critics share the view that Dalits have their own cultural heritage of artistic creativity in the form of arts, crafts, oral myths and performative traditions. Despite sociological examinations of Dalit artistic and political movements, there remains a dearth of literary criticism analyzing the utilization of these alternative traditions and symbols within Dalit literature. This paper seeks to bridge this gap by drawing critical attention not only to the portrayal of caste discrimination in Dalit literary texts but also to the aesthetic markers and ritualistic performances that contribute to shaping a caste-based sensorium. Analyzing caste as a semiotic system shows how Dalit literary aesthetics foreground the everyday cultural practices of the Dalit community, thereby facilitating a ‘redistribution of the sensible’ (Rancière). Further, drawing inspiration from Joel Lee’s work on caste and sensoria, it conducts a semiotic analysis of sense and symbology in Dalit short stories. Through examples of cultural symbols — such as the bottu, pendant, and political statues in M.M. Binodini’s short story ‘The Parable of a Lost Daughter’, or the symbolism of clothing, body art, and language in Ratan Kumar Sambharia’s short story ‘Bes’, or the use of smell as a social category in Azagiya Periyavan’s short story ‘Stench’ — this paper examines the alternate symbolism present within Dalit short stories. It posits that the utilization of specific cultural symbols and signs in these works serves not only to realistically depict a caste habitus but also as an invitation for the Dalit reader to re-engage with this habitus by appropriating sensory and aesthetic markers of oppression. In doing so, it aims to subject the larger symbolic economy of caste to scrutiny,

juxtaposing literary analysis with cultural phenomena—such as the proliferation of political statuary featuring figures like Ambedkar and anti-caste thinkers in Indian cities, the popularity of slogans like *Jai Bhim*, and the increasing recognition of the works of Dalit artists like Prabhakar Kamble—that contribute to what Kajri Jain describes as ‘sensible infrastructures of caste.’

**Keywords:** *Dalit writing; Dalit aesthetics; cultural resistance; semiotics*

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Dalit critic Sharan Kumar Limbale, in his seminal critique of Indian aesthetics, observes the need to turn our attention “towards an aesthetic of Dalit literature” (2004). Several Dalit writers and critics share the view that Dalits have their own cultural heritage of artistic creativity in the form of arts, crafts, oral myths and performative traditions, theorizing Dalit literature’s rethinking of the very categories of the aesthetic and the beautiful through its formal innovations and departures. Writing of an alternate Dalit aesthetic, P. Sivakami says that:

Although the aesthetic is considered to relate to perception and a sense of ‘beauty,’ I believe that it is predominantly related to the mind, which is a socio-economic and cultural context (...) By a Dalit aesthetic, I do not mean standardized expressions (...) A Dalit aesthetic is a perspective drawn equally from the Dalits’ historical seclusion and from their ontological and hermeneutical abilities. (437-38)

While there are several such important historical analyses of Dalit aesthetics and literature, little to no criticism exists analyzing the use of alternative aesthetic and cultural symbols to generate this aesthetic within Dalit writing. Attempting to bridge this gap, this chapter brings critical attention not only to the lived experience of caste discrimination highlighted in select Dalit short stories but also to the aesthetic signifiers and ritual performances that go into constituting a caste-based sensorium.

I argue that in an analysis of caste as a semiotic system, the Dalit literary aesthetic foregrounds the political potential of everyday cultural practices, enacting a “redistribution of the sensible” (Ranciere 43). French philosopher Jacques Ranciere describes *le partage du sensible*, often translated as “the distribution of the sensible,” as the way in which a society defines what is visible, sayable, and audible and who has the ability to see, speak, and hear. This distribution of the sensible, rather than being fixed, is constantly contested and renegotiated, which leads to a “redistribution of the sensible,” a political act that

challenges the existing distribution of the sensible. Often, this redistribution occurs through forms of protest—including artistic interventions and creative dissent—opening up new possibilities for thought and action. Essentially, Ranciere views the aesthetic as a sense experience whose distribution is tied to the political. It is in this sense that I view aesthetic symbols and cultural practices within the realm of the sensible. Methodologically, I also take inspiration from Kajri Jain's contention that:

Image-practices, and aesthetic or cultural practices in general, are not an epiphenomenon of social or political change (...) particularly (...) in the case of caste practices, where material or economic and symbolic or cultural modalities of oppression are indistinguishable, for what must be reconfigured is a hugely recalcitrant habitus and a highly institutionalized sensorium. (142)

Conceptualizing the aesthetics of caste in the same philosophical strain, Dalit poet Yogesh Maitreya has pointed out that the 'sensible' in India is defined by the caste agency of the writer. He notices great potential in translated Dalit literature to generate an "anti-caste sensible," arguing that:

If Brahminical literature, which imagines a society through an unequal gaze and from the divisive location of one's caste, reaffirms and solidifies the Brahminical aesthetic, then, Dalit literature, if it has to become sensible and eventually reflect the sensibilities of social life, has to be disseminated widely, across different linguistic societies. (77)

I show in this chapter that the anti-caste sensible that he refers to is achieved in Dalit writing not only by resisting appropriation into universal aesthetic categories such as beauty and harmony but also through conscious use of and reference to cultural symbols and ritual practices that are important to the Dalit reader. Nicolas Jaoul (2006) has highlighted the history and pedagogical importance of the political symbol in the anti-caste movement in India. The use of these loaded cultural symbols and signs not only realistically depicts a caste "*habitus*" (Bourdieu 1977) but is also an address to the Dalit reader into re-inhabiting this *habitus* via the appropriation of sensory and aesthetic markers of oppression. Using examples of specific cultural symbols—such as the *bottu*, the pendant, and political statues in M. M. Binodini's short story "The Parable of a Lost Daughter" (2013), for instance, or the symbolism of clothing, body art, and language in Ratan Kumar Sambharia's short story "*Bes*" (2015), or

the use of smell as social signifier in Azaghiya Periyavan's short story "Stench" (2010)—this paper studies an alternate symbolism present through the Dalit short story. It also opens up to scrutiny the larger symbolic economy of caste in the public sphere, going on to pose literary analysis in juxtaposition with and context of other cultural phenomena—such as the rise of political statuary of Ambedkar in Indian cities, the implementation of cultural policy works addressing cleanliness and stench and increasing critical acclaim for contemporary Dalit artists like Savi Sawarkar and Prabhakar Kamble—that constitute, what Kajri Jain refers to as "sensible infrastructures of caste" (2021).

### Alternate Symbols of the Everyday

In his poem "*Yadi Acchoot Pahanta Hai Saaf Kapdey*" (1942) ("If The Untouchable Wears Clean Clothes"), B. R. Ambedkar asked: "If an untouchable wears clean clothes/ Why is he met with atrocity? / How is a Hindu hurt by it?" During the famous Mahad Satyagraha of 1927, Ambedkar urged untouchables to refuse to eat discarded scraps and to regain their self-respect and self-knowledge. He believed that in order to do this, it was necessary to challenge the prevailing negative stereotypes of Dalits and to raise awareness about the importance of dressing clean and well, which he thought was a way to assert Dalit dignity. In an important political statement against the dictates of caste for the untouchables, Ambedkar always wore a three-piece Western suit and tie. Much like, and in opposition to, Mahatma Gandhi's *khadi dhoti*, Ambedkar's blue suit and red tie challenged India's clothing hierarchy. This sartorial choice was rooted in the political address he wanted to make to the Dalit and *Bahujan* communities. His choice of clothing was a reflection of his belief that Dalits should not be confined to rural areas but should be free to move and live where they wanted.

Historically, upper-caste people have used clothing as a way to oppress Dalits, forbidding them from wearing proper clothing and sandals for centuries. In places where they were allowed to wear clothes, they were prohibited from dressing well or even being fully clothed. Emma Tarlo highlights in her book *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India* that Dalit bodies had to always bear "symbols of untouchability" (Tarlo). Similarly, Bama's *Sangati* (2005) describes how neckpieces were a symbol of upper-caste status, and Dalit women were not allowed to wear them, even if they could afford to. To prevent Dalits from passing themselves off as upper castes, they were forced to wear identifying symbols, such as a black thread around their neck, a spittoon attached to their body, a branch around their waist, an untwisted turban, or to carry a broom in their hands. This practice of sartorial superiority has continued to this day, even as

members of the Dalit community have consciously begun to adopt different sartorial choices because “for Dalits, clothes reflect the shift in social and economic station assigned to them: from oppressed to relatively free, from poverty-riddled to empowered and upwardly mobile” (Masoodi, na).

Such symbolic assertions of identity, however, have been met with angry and often violent critiques by the upper castes. While there may be a change in the nature of aggression, although reports of physical aggression also abound, modern Dalit identities continue to be shaped by epistemological violence. Kajri Jain points out that while the caste system has always used visibility and spectacle to control and oppress Dalits, there have been two key shifts in the way that caste violence is used in the context of modern Dalit political subjectivation (Jain 233-262). The first shift is from the routine visibility of enforced bodily difference—such as via everyday policing of their clothing, posture, sexuality, access to spaces, food, and water—to the visibility of caste antagonism. As Dalit assertions for equality lead to an increase in their visibility, Dalits and upper-caste groups clash over issues such as land rights, access to education, and political representation. The second shift, as Jain highlights, is from the direct perpetration of violence on Dalit bodies and homes to the mediation of violence via representative iconic bodies, such as statues of Ambedkar (141-142). The Ambedkar statue has, in recent years, become a powerful symbol of the Dalit movement and thus has often been at the receiving end of desecratory violence in response to claims of representation.

Debates around the (il)legitimacy of Dalit representation have also pivoted in realpolitik around the figure of Dalit politician and former Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Mayawati, who commissioned many statues of herself and other Dalit icons during her time in office. In 2003, she celebrated her fiftieth birthday with an extravagant show of diamond jewellery and leather bags, a political symbology of reclamation that was not lost on the Dalit community. Not only have many of the statues she erected been vandalized, but her tenure and politics have often been linked to a profligacy of character, suggesting the inappropriateness of a Dalit leader spending so much only on the symbolic and not the ‘real’ issues. Here, one must go back to Jain:

A crucial feature of the terms of the discourse on Mayawati has been the way that the ‘merely symbolic’ activity of statue and monument building was pitted against the ‘real’, material benefits of schools, universities, hospitals, roads: a discursive distinction that obviates the ways in which

caste injustice works so inextricably in both symbolic and material registers, at the embodied level of the habitus. (150)

In this respect, Ratan Kumar Sambharia's translated short story "Bes," published as part of a collection of stories titled *Thunderstorm* in 2015, speaks directly to the cultural "*habitus* of bodies structured by caste" (Jain 151). Set in a small village near Udaipur, "Bes" tells the story of Agani, an educated young tribal woman who is left stranded on the side of the road after her bus breaks down in a desolate and dangerous area one night. "Dressed in a pink saree and a matching blouse, her feet shod in sandals, a black bag in her hand" (127), Agani finds herself alone and helpless in the midst of nowhere. Back home, her mother, Hugana, also worries for her daughter's safety, with Agani's clothing being the primary concern. She recalls how she had forbidden her from wearing the saree as "only Rajput women wear them. I had warned you not to flout tradition. I had urged you to abide by the strictures laid down by our own community" (127). Agani, however, in a conscious act of "mimicry" (Bhabha) and a decision to break caste barriers, chooses to wear the Rajputi women's dress on this visit to the city.

Sambharia repeatedly draws on animal imagery to refer to the tribal mother-daughter duo—sometimes Agani is a hen or a bird, and at others, a monkey or a cat—shoring up the human/ animal and hunter/ prey binary to highlight the forest tribals' stark distance from this 'other' world of civilization in the city. The binary is reversed later in the story when two tribal men, Harji and Marji, begin to stalk Agani with a lascivious intent. They try to identify her caste through the cultural markers on her body—her clothes, tattoos and language—for it is only through their caste relation to her that their entitlement to Agani's body may be made certain. While her face is covered, they notice the tattooing on her arm, a common custom among tribal women. As they approach her, she cleverly raises her hand in warning, making the bangle on her wrist, along with her Rajput-style attire, visible from under her veil. Upon seeing the cultural dress of a Rajput woman, the two men retreat in caution: "She is not a tribal at all (...) She is some Rajput's wife. Look at her clothes – the *lehenga*, the *kurti kanchali* and the *chundri* (...) Imagine a tribal woman wearing bangles all the way up to her elbows!" (129). Soon after they come to the conclusion that she is indeed a Rajput woman, they decide to not only leave her alone but also to protect her 'honour'.

It is not surprising then that Sambharia calls his story '*bes*', which usually means a dress worn by women of a particular caste in villages. But the literal



translation of *bes*, or *bhesh*, is 'disguise', an ambivalence of meaning that Sambharia has consciously tapped into. It is through her clever disguise as an upper-caste woman that she saves her 'honour' from possible sexual assault. Keeping silent at the right moments, Agani brings to ingenious use her knowledge of the codes of purity and behaviour prescribed for upper-caste women. Sambharia cleverly lays bare the trope of untouchability to examination as predatory men out to get the tribal girl to refuse to touch Agani, thinking her to be a Rajputi woman: "Sir, she is no tribal woman (..) She is a Rajput. I beg of you, don't force me to touch her" (133). Utilizing the trickery of language and *vesh-bhusha*, she employs the symbols and codes of the upper caste as a tactic against the upper caste, and escapes, performing what Sambharia calls "a magical act" (133).

Although the story leaves the reader wondering about what Agani's possible fate would have been if the two lascivious men had been upper caste, it does hint at the "carnavalesque" (Bakhtin) potential associated with the act of donning costumes to subvert the social order. One is reminded here of the traditional figure of the *bahurupiya* in India. The word '*bahurupiya*' comes from the Sanskrit words '*bahu*' meaning 'many' and '*rupa*' meaning 'form'. The art of the *bahurupiya*, a wandering mimic and comic, is rooted in the Hindu tradition of disguise and impersonation, where the *bahurupiya* would typically wear elaborate costumes (*vesh*) and makeup to transform themselves into and perform as different characters, including gods, goddesses, kings, queens, beggars, and holy men. In Rajasthan, particularly, *bahurupiyas* have been extremely popular. Hajari Bhand, a renowned *bahurupiya* from Chittorgarh region of Mewar, Rajasthan, has played hundreds of characters over the past forty-five years, including Rajputs and holy men, professional men and tribals, gods and goddesses, traders and rogues, and beggars and fools. As someone who takes on several identities and adopts multiple forms, Bhand is helped by the fact that in Rajasthan, a lot about a person's work, social position, and expected conduct is known through clothing.

In general, the *bahurupiya*'s comic juggling of identities is both appealing and threatening in a social context that is traditionally dominated by the principles of fixed identity and *karma dharma*, which dictate the obligations and duties, as well as the social rank, dress, and occupations of each caste. The *bahurupiya*'s ability to seamlessly assume diverse identities seems to momentarily challenge this social order, suggesting that individual identity may be wrenched from the designations of caste and social status. By mimicking and satirizing different social types, the *bahurupiya* exposes the

hypocrisies, inconsistencies and inequalities of caste society. For instance, the *bahurupiya* may impersonate a Brahmin priest but then speak and act in a way that is unlike the social behaviour associated with the Brahmin, in a way ironically reflecting on the constructed nature of what it means to be 'a Brahmin'.

While Sambharia's tribal heroine mimics cultural codes to overturn the caste order, in her short story "The Parable of the Lost Daughter," Telugu Dalit writer M. M. Binodini shows us the role that cultural codes may play in the solidification of caste identity. The story is set as a 'parable' about the realization of the protagonist, Suvarthani, a Dalit Christian woman who is embarrassed by her identity and tries to create a new identity for herself by imitating the manners and mores of her upper-caste friend. After graduating from college in Rajahmundry, Suvarthavani befriends a Brahmin girl, Gayatri, soon developing awe and fondness for her upper-caste lifestyle. When Suvarthani visits Gayatri's house for the first time, the latter uses a Reynolds pen to draw a red *bottu*, a red mark often worn by Brahmins, on her forehead, almost as if initiating her into Brahminical aesthetic practices. When Gayatri's mother first meets Suvarthani, she is impressed with her "chaste pronunciation" despite her caste. Enamoured by the Brahmin family's refined cultural practices, Suvarthani gradually begins to force herself to develop a taste for the Sanskrit language and classical poetry.

Suvarthani's enamoured with Gayatri's lifestyle is characterized by a simultaneous dislike and rejection of her own community and ritual practices. Not only does she pay extra attention to her own appearance, manners, and language, but she also expects the same from her family. In an attempt to distance herself from her roots, she drops "Suvatha" from her name, abbreviating it to Vani or S. Vani. She becomes increasingly concerned with purity and cleanliness and even gives up eating meat, which she used to relish earlier. In fact, she is almost nauseated by the way her brother Zachariah eats meat at the table, uttering a "*chi*" in response to his manner of eating. By and by, she picks up other cultural habits that would bring her culturally closer to Gayatri's family, like "bunking church, wearing a red thread around her wrist like she had seen so many Hindus do, and wearing a *bottu* whenever she visited Gayatri's house" (168). Her entry into the Brahmin home is metaphorically spoken of in terms of the material switch from leather to leaves.

But, it is not simply that the epistemological influence of caste ideology manifests in the story in these outwardly symbolisms; it is also that aesthetic and ritual practices become a way of ascertaining and reinforcing the caste

position for Survarthani. Her aspirational negotiations with her identity as a Dalit Christian girl are realized in the various aesthetic symbols she embraces and rejects in the story. In the second half of the narrative, she comes to Hyderabad to stay with Gayatri's family. While in an auto rickshaw, she gleefully recognizes the statue of the Dalit poet Jashuva in Hyderabad city, but at the same time, is reminded of the cross pendant that she is wearing on her neck. She quickly makes sure to remove the pendant from the chain before reaching Gayatri's house: "She opened her palm and looked at the pendant—it was a cross. Smiling, she said, 'Sorry, Jesus,' and threw it into one corner of her handbag. She took out a small packet of sticker-*bottus* and stuck a *bottu* on her forehead (...). The auto drove past Ambedkar standing at the end of Tankbund" (171). This scene is rich with the suggestion of her makeshift identity leading her away from her socio-cultural and political moorings.

However, it is also through these symbols that we are shown the first inklings of Suvarthani's disillusionment with Gayatri's family, whose cultural practices and aesthetic markers gradually become empty signifiers, even as they serve as reminders of the (in)civility of their caste status. During her interaction with Gayatri's brother-in-law at the cafe, she ironically observes the "half-hidden Brahmin lock in his 'modern' crop of hair" and the "tiny vermilion dot on his forehead and many a sacred thread on his wrist" (174). Later, she is confused by Gayatri's father's bookshelves when she comes across him immoderately abusing his wife. Both these instances of sexual and verbal assault reveal to her the power relation between Brahmin men and Dalit Christian girls like her, and she develops a sense of outrage at the contempt these men display towards her community. She realizes then that regardless of what cultural markers she dons, "she was still a *harijan* girl, a Christian girl!" (176).

It is here that she has a moment of political recognition, asking, "why did she ever think that their customs and their language were respectable? Why could she not respect her own language and culture?" (176). When Suvarthani finally bids farewell to Gayatri's parents on the final day of her stay, she consciously wears her Jesus pendant again and deliberately avoids wearing the *bottu*, throwing the packet of stickers into the dustbin. When Kameswaramma, Gayatri's mother, reminds her that she has forgotten her *bottu*, she says, "No, Mother. I haven't forgotten. I am a Christian girl. I am a Dalit girl" (177). No longer ashamed of being a Dalit Christian woman, she refuses to conform to upper-caste expectations and to don a makeshift identity to assimilate into their practices. It is only sticker-*bottus* that she was wearing, after all!

### Smell as Signifier

Malayali writer Azaghiya Periyavan's short story "Stench" opens with a two-word sentence—"Kakkasi stank."—a definitive declaration about what characterizes Kakkasi, a Dalit meat tanner. Not only is the fact of Kakkasi's stench established right in the beginning, its socio-political implication is soon driven home through his son Pamandi, a young Dalit man who is forced to return to his village after Kakkasi falls ill and is unable to send him money. "Stench" is essentially the story of Pamandi's struggle against, and final acceptance, of his caste identity. It is, in fact, his mnemonic and phenomenological experiences which become our perspective of his father and his world. Pamandi spends most of his life in hostels, away from his family's everyday life, which, in a necropolitical (Mbembe) understanding of the division of caste labour, is repeatedly equated with death, decay and disease. Revulsed by the stench of his village, which is dominated by the tannery where his father works, he has sought an escape from this social set up. The reader must acknowledge that while Pamandi's aversion to the stench that he associates with his father is visceral and personal in nature, it is also a linguistic signifier that is socially determined.

Owing to this aversion, Pamandi develops an ambiguous relationship with his father and home, feeling overwhelmed and revolted by the smells of the tannery where his father works, but at the same time observing his working conditions and worrying about his deteriorating health. This is perhaps why, while visiting home, he thinks of his childhood with odium but is soon gripped by fear and anxiety upon witnessing Kakkasi's poor health: "layers of sedimented stench memories wafted through him and curled into dusty smoke as he sat before his father, who seemed like a decaying corpse propped against the wall. At the same time, the thought of his father as a corpse left him trembling like the branch of a shaken tree" (233-34). The ambiguity of this father-son relationship, instead of being rooted in personal politics, must be understood as emerging from within the sensory regimes of power which sustain, and are sustained by, caste relations, producing Dalit subjectivities rooted in phenomenological disgust and historical shame.

Shivani Kapoor writes that "this violence of odours has no place in the deodorized discourse of law and yet in the sensuous ordering of caste there is nothing more repulsive than to carry the stench of tannery on oneself" (Kapoor 234-252). She argues that the history of a material such as leather generates complex "affects of desire and disgust". Pamandi's all-consuming need for cleanliness, then, must be seen here as a product of these affects of desire and

disgust, which are governed by the larger symbolic aspiration to fit into Brahminical notions of cleanliness and purity: “like the students in the Vedic *gurukulas*, Pamandi had been living away from home, in hostels. There, he felt he was liberated from the world of stench and had entered a scented garden. The thought of going home made him squirm” (235). His repugnance with his childhood, his father and his home is, thus, a battle with his caste identity, which plays out through the sensory politics of smell. His longing for a fragrance to emanate from his father may be seen as his subconscious desire to gain an alternative understanding of his own social identity.

Within the caste-based distribution of labour in India, the untouchability of leather, tannery, and sewage workers is maintained through the association of their work with dirt and smell. Joel Lee, in his work on caste and sensoria, studies segregation in the villages of Uttar Pradesh, highlighting caste as a socio-spatial sensory order and demonstrating “meaningfully patterned relations between caste ideology, the organization of space, and the marking of bodies and sensoria by the sensuous content of the environment” (470). In Periyavan’s story, Kakkasi’s labour, his corporeal state and the smell he emits are so inextricably intertwined that they appear to be not only one and the same but also as ahistorical conditions. Lee also highlights the basis of segregation of the sanitation labour castes and the unequal distribution of malodor in Indian cities as being lessons in a “pedagogy of place,” which then play a crucial role in reproducing the caste order at a level that is not articulated in language. This sensory training through a caste-based organization of space shapes the experiences and expectations of persons who inhabit that space, instructing not just the bodies but calibrating the sensorium. This calibration inculcates habits of living and action that correspond to social and geographic location, “not in a mechanistic fashion, but in the manner of the acquisition of a caste *habitus*” (473). It is this caste *habitus* that Periyavan’s Pamandi is negotiating in his ambiguous relationship with his father. One is reminded here of Lee’s citation of M. L. Singh, a Valmiki man who works in the Uttar Pradesh civil service, who spoke of the sensory environment of the caste-specific urban quarters in his village:

Above all, though, he said, there is *voh bū*. That smell. “Our children,” said Singh in Hindi, “need a place to study that is not pervaded by that smell.” What Singh meant by this was unclear to me at the time, but audience members all around me, in a palpable shift from their heretofore rote appreciation of the speech, surged with applause. Faces drew taut with attention; clapping became muscular, rapid, and

intensified. This wave of collective affect renewed itself when Singh announced that he had opened, for youth of the sanitation labor community, a residential student hostel that was like those available to savarn bacche (privileged-caste youth): quiet, clean, far from the bastī, and free from voh bū. (472)

So, smell, boundary violating though it may be, reflects, and in turn governs, the ways in which relations of caste are inscribed onto urban segregation and governance. In urban management even today, the work of garbage collection is unidirectional and hence, smell often represents this “systematic flow of privileged-caste ‘filth’ into Dalit spaces—from the landlord’s latrine to the manual scavenger’s manure basin” (Lee 472) even though caste Hindus, who survive on this labour, often fail to acknowledge the unidirectional nature of it.

The socio-spatial distribution of smell and visibility is often assumed by upper-caste writers and artists to be of a uniform nature for all citizens, overlooking the fact that often members belonging to certain castes are forced into taking up occupations that involve working with stench and dirt on a daily basis. Some contemporary works of street art by upper-caste artists even make indirect references to the work of cleanliness and smell while anonymizing the labour of sanitation and naturalizing the caste division that expects Dalit sanitation workers to collect and process the garbage the city produces. It then solidifies what Lee calls the “infrastructure of sanitation” (481) in the Indian city and the ideology of caste behind it. A series of street art pieces made in Delhi by street artist Hanif Kureshi in 2014 are worth a discussion in this context. In one, a stencil-painting on a garbage bin in Hauz Khas Village shows a perfume bottle in yellow with the text “No. 155 KUDA Delhi Parfum” written on it. The Hindi term for garbage, *kuda*, is used as the name of the perfume to effect a playful reversal of the artist’s own graffiti pseudonym, Daku. He left similar art works in the garbage dumps of the other two urban villages in Delhi: a wallpaper of sorts made of lettered stencils covering garbage bins in Khirkee and Shahpur Jat. The pieces have the text ‘*kuda*’ written in continuity so as to also be read as Daku against a background of logos resembling that of the premium leather brand Louis Vuitton.

The art is perhaps intended to shock the citizens into action and to care about the affairs of the city. But it works precisely because of the invocation of a middle-class consumer sensibility by shocking the viewer with smell, its shock factor being an inversion of expectation. For the inversion to work, the idea of stench must be associated in the viewer’s mind with the unexpected, directly

opposed to the aspirational fragrance associated with an expensive perfume. The viewer that is addressed is not only the middle-class consumer but also the upper-caste citizen, who has been privileged enough to choose to stay away from a sensorium that displeases their senses. The use of stench as the shock factor, thus, only underscores the distance of the experience of the stench for the *savarna* middle-class viewer.

Periyavan's short story, however, while showing the spatial and sensory implications of caste to the upper-caste reader, addresses primarily the Dalit reader. On the one hand, it draws the reader into a sensorial world, where even cleansing rituals become one with the constant presence of mud, faeces, meat, phlegm, vomit and pus. On the other, it makes a conscious address to the Dalit reader's caste identity, calling for its recognition and dignification. In the last part of the story, when Pamandi goes to the tannery to collect money from his father, he is confronted by the image of his father in the middle of work, where he finds his shame turns to horror. Forced to consider the materiality of his father's smell, Pamandi has a moment of guilty recognition: "he could not bear to see (...) his father, a stinking man, in a whole environment of stench (...) he realized in that second that it was he himself who had become a stinking thing (...) Pamandi's conception of stench withered and dropped" (237). Pamandi has no words to say to his labouring father, coming to a realization towards resolving the ambiguity within their relationship. Overpowering language, it is the experience of smell within its socio-historical context which brings him back home to his own personal and caste identity.

### **Towards Reformulations...**

It is interesting to note that all the narratives referred to above urge an acknowledgement and embrace of caste identity, mainly through a 'redistribution of the sensible', in as much as the 'sensible' here implies an accepted cultural *habitus*. We see how cultural symbols and practices are not only employed to bolster caste relations but also ultimately used as tactics of subversion or refusal by Dalit characters to negotiate and reclaim identity. Instead of simply being carriers of caste ideology, aesthetic practices are identified as linguistic constructions which lead to the production and solidification of it. The task of the Dalit writer in each of these stories has been to use the aesthetic in a renegotiation of the political. This warrants that we reconsider the relationship between aesthetics and politics, especially with regard to the category of 'Dalit art' or 'Dalit literature'. Srinjoyee Dutta writes that "the reformulation of the category of the aesthetic is necessarily the

movement of the literary from matters of ‘form’ to those of socio-political context” (2023, 142). Echoing and extending Dutta’s argument, I suggest that it is a socio-political study of the aesthetic category of Dalit literature—both through its form and content—that will lead us to discover the anti-caste aesthetic.

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In addition to his scholarly interests, he finds solace and inspiration in various artistic forms. Old-school hip-hop albums, with their raw and socially conscious lyrics, serve as a sonic backdrop that resonates with the themes of resistance and empowerment that he explores in his research. The genre's

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