

**Caste, Identity and the Making of Dalit
Consciousness: The Chamars of Uttar Pradesh, c.
1919-1996.**

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Amit Kumar



**Centre for Historical Studies
School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi -110 067**

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RECOMMENDATION FORM FOR EVALUATION BY THE EXAMINERS/

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Umesh Ashok Kadam
Signature of Supervisor

Umesh Ashok Kadam
Signature of Dean/Chairperson

Date: 19.7.2021

 Centre for Historical Studies
School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi - 110067

Date:  Prof. Umesh Ashok Kadam
Chairperson
Centre for Historical Studies
School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi - 110067 (India)

CONTENTS

<i>List of Tables</i>	<i>i</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>ii</i>
Introduction	1-10
Chapter I Claims of a New Social Identity: Approaches of the Adi-Hindu Movement and the Jatav Mahasabha	11-36
Chapter II Poona Pact as a Historic Betrayal: Scheduled Caste Autonomy and the Emergence of Representative Politics in the 1940s	37-61
Chapter III New Histories for a New Future: Literary and Cultural Assertions in Independent India	62-83
Conclusion	84-87
Bibliography	88-93

List of Tables

Table 1: Allocation of seats to depressed classes. Vasnat Moon, ed. *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches (Volume No. 9)* (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014), p. 88.

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Introduction

At the time of independence, the newly minted constitution included eradication of the caste system as a directive principle of state policy, a list of broad guidelines for both the union and the state governments to work towards. However, due to the advisory, non-binding nature of the directive principles, and the exploitation of caste algorithms in India's electoral system, there has been little political will to work towards an anti-caste society. In fact, contestations between caste Hindus and Dalits persist in the new democratic structure and have extended to creating and exploiting fissures within Dalit communities. Yet, contemporary Dalit movements continue to place faith in the constitution both as a safeguard and a historical precedent in their demands for a transformative and egalitarian social order. Sustained presence of various Dalit assertions across the country have provided a commendable counter narrative to dominant, caste Hindu politics. Although the voices of Dalit movements were largely marginalised in the wave of nationalist histories of India in the 1950s and 60s, later historians of the subaltern school in 1990s, were more eager in their attempts to write 'histories from below,' to outline Dalit participation in anti-colonial struggles. However, the very categories of 'subaltern,' 'community,' and 'identity' were essentialised as unchanging entities.¹ Such histories have shown little interest in excavating the many strands of Dalit movements that even if constantly referred to one another and claimed earlier legacies, manufactured *new* identities and *new* Dalit publics. Dalit writers and activists have preserved the rich histories of anti-caste movements through their writings.

In Uttar Pradesh, the formation of the state government led by the Bahujan Samaj Party in 1995, 1997 and later, in 2002 and 2007 inaugurated debates in academia regarding questions of caste and popular Dalit movements in India. The processes of making and remaking of

¹ Sumit Sarkar, "The Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies," in *Writing Social Histories* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 83.

identities among the Chamar community in the colonial and postcolonial India played a pivotal role in the success of the imagination of Dalit consciousness in Uttar Pradesh. The political mobilization of the Chamars, played a crucial role in the short-lived success of the Republican Party of India and later, the Bahujan Samaj Party in the Uttar Pradesh. Badri Narayan argued that the Chamars formed the backbone of the BSP when it was formed and that its domination in the party's cadre and decision making continues.²

Ethnographic and sociological studies abound on the various Dalit movements and yet, the discipline of history has only now begun to seriously study the phenomena. Ramnarayan Rawat argued that the dominant discursive formations denied Dalits a place in Indian history as actors with their own agendas and initiatives.³ Histories of those who belong to the lower strata are yet to constitute a critical part of Indian historiography. Jyotirao Phule wrote that the brahmanical system subjugated the shudra and the ati-shudra by inscribing the false identities on them and 'if the downtrodden castes recovered the history of glorious struggle against oppressive, unjust caste system they would revolt against it.'⁴

Gail Omvedt called the Dalit movement as an 'anti-systematic movement,' that tried to build an egalitarian society by replacing the existing society based on the on social oppression, economic exploitation, and political domination.⁵ This study seeks to investigate the 'anti-systematic' trends of Dalit movements in Uttar Pradesh in colonial and independent India. First, the Adi Hindu Movement's propagation of the identity of a *mulnivasi* (original inhabitant) challenged Hindu revivalist organizations and their efforts to assimilate the

² Badri Narayan, *The Making of the Dalit Public in North India, Uttar Pradesh, 1950-Present* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 151.

³ Ramnarayan Rawat, *Reconsidering Untouchability, Chamars and Dalit History in North India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2012), p. 18.

⁴ Umesh Bagade, *Ambedkar's Historical Method, A Non-Brahminic Critique of Positivist History* (New Delhi: Critical Quest, 2015), p. 7.

⁵ Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit movement in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Sage Publication, 1994), p. 10.

untouchables into the hierarchical social order. Second, the Scheduled Caste Federation defined the need for minorities to stake a claim in representative politics. Third, the Republican Party of India and the Bahujan Samaj Party movement challenged the mythical past and culture imposed on the marginalized by a virulent Hindu nationalism. It instead, produced a history of anti-caste assertion through acts of commemoration and literary writings to provide a history to the marginalized. While on the one hand Hindu nationalism maintained the 'status quo' of caste, Dalit movements rallied to dismantle this oppressive structure.

In *Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawm argued that ““tradition” is an invention that served to inspire and legitimate the contemporary political action by finding precedents and inspiration for it in the past.’⁶ Dalit organisations employed the tool of History in similar ways to meet the contemporary political demands of anti-caste movements. The history of ‘betrayal’ permeated Dalit remembrance of pasts and were depicted in contemporary Dalit writings. The Adi- Hindu movement highlighted the betrayal of the original inhabitants (untouchables) by the foreign Aryans as the reason for the deprivation and subjugated position of the untouchables. Later, the betrayal by the Congress and caste Hindus were sharpened into the defining point in histories of dissent by Dalit movements in independent India. The Poona Pact of 1932 continues to be remembered as an episode of betrayal of Dalits by the Congress and that which has hampered the pace of the Dalit struggle in a significant manner.

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay in his study of the Namshudras argued that Namasudra politics showed 'alienation' from the Congress in the 1920s and 1930s and later, the process of

⁶ Eric J.Hobsbawm, "Inventing Traditions", in *The invention of tradition*, ed. Eric J. Hobsbawn and Terence O Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 6.

Namashudra's 'integration' with the Congress took place through the 1940s.⁷ He held that no independent movement remained visible among the Scheduled Castes at the time of independence based on his analysis of the 1946 election results and the performance of the Scheduled Caste Federation.⁸ This simplistic understanding of the processes of alienation and integration obscured the complexities of the Dalit struggle in the 1940s. Although the Congress won most of the reserved constituencies, it did not lend support to the Dalits or a validation of its politics. This phenomenon continues to have a contemporary life as well. For example, the BJP and its allies won 74 reserved constituencies out of the total 84 seats in the 2017 state assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh.⁹ BSP secured 2 seats out of the total 84 seats reserved for the Scheduled Castes in 2017 election, despite having a total vote share of 22.23 percent.¹⁰ Thus, the data provides an incomplete picture without the comparative study of the performance of all contesting parties with Dalit voters in the reserved constituencies. Chapter two of this thesis highlights how the provision of the reserved constituency has been reduced to a tool of political and electoral co-option by caste Hindus. In several commentaries and public debates of elections, the seats won by a party on a reserved constituency have been read as a marker of the Scheduled Castes' support to that party. The persistence of loopholes in the working of the reserved constituency and such superficial understandings of the system continue to haunt Dalit movements and parties.

The complex histories of each caste group and multiple strands within the Dalit movements are undeniable. Dalit histories have been shaped and developed during interactions with the caste Hindus and through a modelling of a 'self,' creating various form collective identities

⁷ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-1947* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 10.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Times of India, 12 March 2017.

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/elections/assembly-elections/uttar-pradesh/news/of-86-bsp-could-win-just-two-reserved-seats/articleshow/57603869.cms>. Retrieved on 4 August 2021.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

over periods of time: Adi-Hindu, Dalit, Buddhist and Bahujan. Such collective identities must be studied alongside histories of imposed identities like Hindu, Harijan, *Acchut* (untouchable). However, a self-manufactured identity like Dalit has its own limitation as it continues to connect the Scheduled Castes with their oppressed past, drawing from the same histories of deprivation and humiliation. Ronki Ram argued that,

Dalits became victims of their own Dalit consciousness which, instead of transcending caste and caste-based hierarchies, strengthened caste identities. Until very recently they (Dalits) were condemned as untouchable because of their low-caste status; now they have been given favours constitutionally by virtue of being low caste...and this has helped them to improve the economic status but provide no avenues for improving the social status.¹¹ On the other hand, the Adi Dharma identity helped Scheduled Castes seek social recognition through the process of cultural transformation and spiritual regeneration.¹²

The role of the colonial state is also important to understand the social and the cultural upsurge among the different communities. Nicholas B. Dirks termed colonialism as a cultural project of control.¹³ Colonial structures of power not only altered the relation between the colonizers and the colonized as Dirks has argued, but also significantly redefined internal political dynamics by shifting the position of the most oppressed i.e., the untouchables vis-à-vis the brahmanical social structure. The arrival of the colonial state as a new arbiter of claims had a significant effect on the identical contestations between the Dalits and caste Hindus. In 1919, all the ex-untouchables along with the present day Other Backward Castes had been designated under the umbrella term of 'depressed classes.' Such a categorization was contested by the then leadership of the untouchable castes who protested the clubbing together of the untouchables and the intermediary castes. Later, the colonial state revoked its earlier categorization and recognized untouchable castes as 'exterior castes' based on

¹¹Ronki Ram, "Untouchability, Dalit consciousness, and the Ad Dharm movement in Punjab." *Contributions to Indian sociology* 38, no. 3 (2004): 347.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind, Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 9.

persistent stigmatization and practice of untouchability. The Government of India Act of 1935 constitutionally replaced the term 'Depressed Classes' with 'Scheduled Castes,' which was also adopted in the Constitution of independent India. Constitutional classifications and the advent of representation politics based on communal lines made Dalit demands for new social and religious identities possible. Dirks argued that the colonial rule produced the conditions by which caste became the central symbol of Indian society.¹⁴

In 2014, the emergence of the BJP and stagnancy of contemporary anti-caste politics has led to the rapid co-option and assimilation of the Scheduled Caste into the Hindu fold. The long due project of the BJP and the RSS for Hindu unification has advanced in recent times. The BJP has not only recruited leaders from the SC/ST/OBC communities, but it has also managed to shed its unpopular image as a party against the provisions of constitutional reservations. Today, the BJP projects itself as the saviour of social justice while simultaneously advancing the interests of a narrow section of caste Hindu elites. This process of assimilation mirrors the earlier efforts of the Congress in neutralizing independent anti-caste movements, and effectively retaining a singular hold over the course of Indian politics.

In the hierarchical social order, caste has acted as a source and mechanism of exclusion for certain groups of people resulting in disadvantage and deprivation. The perpetual deprivation of the people belonging to the lowest rung of the caste system for the past many centuries has acted as a powerful force in the construction of an identity of the deprived and oppressed.¹⁵ This exclusion and humiliation forced the marginalized castes in India to conceptualize a different identity for themselves to fight against the hegemonic brahmanical structure.

¹⁴ Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind, Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 5.

¹⁵ Louis Dumont, "Hierarchy: The Theory of 'Varna,'" in *Caste and Democratic Politics in India*, ed. Ghanshyam Shah (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002), pp. 60-61.

The primary reason for selecting Uttar Pradesh as this research is that it became the only State in the independent India, where a party based on the ideas of anti-caste movement successfully captured the political power by a democratic process. Moreover, it gave the opportunity to a Dalit woman, coming from a Chamar/Jatav community to run the India's most populous state. Chamar, as a caste community constitutes the largest proportion of any single caste in the demography of Uttar Pradesh. As per the 2011 census, Dalits comprise almost 21.1 percent of the total population in Uttar Pradesh. Of this 21.1 percent, the Chamar community that is recognized by the different names across the state constitutes 54.23 percent of the total scheduled caste population of the state.¹⁶

Educational advancement among the Chamars through institutions set up by the colonial government and Christian Mission efforts from the early twentieth century played a major role in the political mobilization and emergence of collective identity consciousness among the Chamars. A small group among the Chamars, improved their economic condition through education, new occupational opportunities and the land holding. But the stigma and the stereotypes attached with the caste had not withered away with the improved economic condition. Rawat argued that that government policies of both colonial and independent India have perpetuated the "untouchable" status of Dalit communities and reinforced their domination by caste Hindu society, ensuring that individuals from "untouchable" communities remained in the margins, excluded to get the access of new opportunities and privileges.¹⁷ This had led to the emergence of the social and political protest in the form of Adi-Hindus. The educated members among the depressed classes provided the first leadership in the Adi Hindu movement and the political functioning of the Jatav Mahasabhas.

¹⁶ *Times of India*, 4 July 2015.

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/lucknow/jatavs-on-top-of-sc-population-in-up/articleshow/47931787.cms>. Retrieved on 14 August 2020.

¹⁷ Ramnaryan Rawat, *Reconsidering Untouchability, Chamars and Dalit History in North India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2012), p. 18.

In another parallel movement of the Jatav Mahasabha, we see instances of chamar community members who chose to leave their stigmatization behind by shedding the legacies of their caste. Owen Lynch argued that Jatavs claimed *kshatriya* status not just because that it gave them a higher ritual rank, but it promised them access to the strategic resources they wanted.¹⁸ However, this stalled their prospects in attaining educational and employment opportunities as reservations no longer applied to the new identity of ‘Jatav’ in the early 20th century. I argue that the emergence of ‘Jatav’ identity and its association with a *kshatriya* past was an attempt of Hindu revivalist organizations to keep the Chamars within the fold of the Hinduism and to counter the emergence of the powerful Adi-Hindu movement that was demanding a separate identity for the Chamars. Bernard S. Cohn also discussed the multiple strands of Chamar attempts to raise their low caste status and traced the shift among the Chamar community from traditional mobility by performing higher rituals to radically anti-brahmanical politics.¹⁹ This transition was reflected in the political participation of the Jatavs in the activities of Schedule Caste Federation in 1940s. Even after Independence, Jatav/Chamar remained staunch supporters of Ambedkarism and embraced Buddhism in significant numbers.

Joan Wallach Scott argued that the identity of the feminist was built on the imagination of the past as a ‘fantasy.’²⁰ The fantasy was based on the setting of desires; by at once reproducing and masking conflict, antagonism, or contradiction; and by operating as a narrative.²¹ Taking analytical cue from Scott, I attempt to correlate and untangle the ways in which fantasies of the past were deployed through the construction of historical narratives, connecting identities

¹⁸ Owen M. Lynch, *The Politics of Untouchability, Social Mobility and Social Change in a City Of India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 219.

¹⁹ Bernard S. Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and other Essays*. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 297- 298.

²⁰ Joan Wallach Scott. *The fantasy of feminist history* (London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 49.

²¹ Ibid.

and with accounts of subjugation (treachery and duplicity) and empowerment (glory and advancement). How and why these identities assumed significance at different junctures helps us understand the dynamic ways in which the Dalit movements were reacting to and shaping their contemporary politics.

The primary sources of this thesis comprise government reports published during colonial and postcolonial periods, especially census reports, district settlement reports and government commission reports. Interviews and oral narratives are also an important source in the writing of this thesis. I engaged with both English and Hindi-language publications including books, journals and the newspapers founded and written by Dalit activists and organizations such as the Republican Party of India, the Bahujan Samaj Party, and the Jatav Mahasabha. Personal collections of party workers and activist families have been the most useful in providing perspectives and critical information that is generally absent in state archival records. Oral interviews with political activists and leaders have been conducted for this work. As Rawat argued, the history of Dalit movements in northern India was made possible only by recognizing the differences between the regional or local archives and the more centralized all-India archival collections.²² Additionally, community folkloric traditions, stories, poetry, and songs transmitted from generation to generation provide a distinctive narrative aesthetic to Dalit writings. Using this methodology, this thesis seeks to pay equal attention to local sources and ‘national’ holdings in metropolitan cities.

The thesis is divided into three chapters. Chapter 1 delineates the origins of Chamar mobilization in the United Provinces under the Adi Hindu movement. It also traces the role of the Hindu revivalist organizations in shaping the mythical association of the Jatavs with the Kshatriya clan. The emergence of the Jatiya Chamar of the western Uttar Pradesh and the

²² Ramnarayan Rawat, “Colonial Archive versus Colonial Sociology: Writing Dalit History,” in *Dalit Studies*, eds. Ramnarayan Rawat and K. Satyanarayana (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 54-55.

workings of organizations like Jatav Mahasabha point towards histories of assimilation of ex-untouchables into the larger Hindu fold. The chapter further discusses the opposing positions of the Ad-Hindu Mahasabha and the Jatav Mahasabha in the articulation of the ex-untouchable's identity in the context of religious conversion in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Chapter 2 studies the Dalit mobilization for separate representation from the 1920s to 1940s as political representation become the central demand among the Chamars in Uttar Pradesh under the Adi-Hindu assertion and later, with the formation of the Scheduled Caste Federation. It also investigates the shifts in the demand for the autonomous socio-religious identity based on the theory of the original inhabitant. The chapter delineates the betrayal of the Congress and the caste Hindus through the Poona Pact, leading to widespread resentment among the Dalits of Uttar Pradesh. The chapter also charts the ways in which the specific episode of the Pact came to be deployed as 'duplicitous' behaviour of Caste Hindus, marking this incident as the defining moment of the Dalit political movement. The chapter also briefly discussed the change in the relationship between the colonial state and the Scheduled Caste leadership in the 1930s and 1940s.

Chapter 3 documents the efforts of the Dalit activists and writers to write and reclaim a past and examines the role of Dalit literary movement of the 70s, 80s and 90s in the building of the counter cultural hegemony under the leadership of the Republican Party of India. It attempts to demonstrate the efforts of the literary movement in laying the groundwork for the Bahujan Samaj Party. The second part of this chapter delineates the cultural and commemorative politics of the BSP and its role in shaping the Chamar identity. As we shall see, new notions of the Dalit past once again became an important medium to propagate the ideas of the party and its movement.

Claims of a new social identity: Approaches of the Adi-Hindu Movement and the Jatav

Mahasabha

This chapter is focussed on the process of politicisation and identity formation among the Chamars in the United Provinces in 1920s. It investigates the influence of the Adi-Hindu movement and regional organizations like the Jatav Mahsabha in shaping Dalit politics in independent India. The success of the Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh in 1990s and formation of its first state government under Mayawati on 3rd June, 1995 has sparked new interest among historians and political scientists to investigate the complex genealogies of the Dalit movement in Uttar Pradesh. This has further re-invigorated the need to write the modern histories of the subcontinent that complicate dominant themes of a singular nationalist movement and the role of the Congress in spearheading it. The present Dalit assertion in the Uttar Pradesh can be traced back to the 1920s as new calls for an autonomous and dignified identity of the ‘adi-hindu’ attempted to shed the degraded and servile pasts of the Dalits in the United Provinces.

The significant demographic presence of the Dalit population is an important factor in contributing to the success of such socio-political movements in Uttar Pradesh. As per the 2011 census, Dalits comprise almost 21.1 percent of the total population in Uttar Pradesh. Of this 21.1 percent, the Chamar community that is recognized by the different names across the state, constitutes 54.23 percent of the total scheduled caste population of the state.¹

The Chamar community enjoyed a certain degree of educational and economic mobility compared to other Dalit communities during colonial times. As per the census report of the 1931, literacy rates among the adult Chamars were about 0.5 percent, while upper castes having around 5 percent of the literacy among the adults. The Brahmins had the highest

¹ *Times of India*, July 4, 2015. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/lucknow/jatavs-on-top-of-sc-population-in-up/articleshow/47931787.cms>. Retrieved on 14 August 2020.

literacy around 10 percent in the United Provinces.² While education enabled the Chamar communities to explore new occupations, it also led to the emergence of a small group of educated leaders among the Scheduled Castes in the United Provinces. Ian Duncan argued that none was more astute in seizing the opportunity than the Jatavs of western UP when it came to the question of organizing and challenging their previously subjugated position.³ The Chamar community's comparative educational advancement contributed directly to the development of their demand of political representation, separate socio-religious identity in census records, and special safeguards to raise their economic and the educational backwardness. Their claim for an independent identity based on the theory of original inhabitant was the foundational stone for their political demands. The Chamar community's engagement with the Adi-Hindu movement, the All India Scheduled Caste Federation, the Republican Party of India and the Bahujan Samaj Party provides pertinent insights into the socio-political aspirations and the historical memories of inter-generational Dalit communities.

Sudha Pai claimed that the northern province of Uttar Pradesh failed to evolve into anti-caste movements because their goal was limited to improving the social-economic status of the depressed class through sanskritisation and the provision of material benefits.⁴ Sambiah Gundimeda challenged Pai's conclusions and argued that Dalit consciousness in the northern region was not underdeveloped in comparison with Dalit consciousness in the southern region and the other parts of the country. He further argued that Dalits in UP were among the first to make a claim for political power, while their counterparts in other regions were

² *Census of India 1931, United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, Vol. XIII.* (Allahabad: Superintendent Printing and Press, 1933) p. 480.

³ Ian Duncan, "Dalits and the Raj: The Persistence of the Jatavs in the United Provinces," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 56, no. 2 (2019): 143.

⁴ Sudha Pai, *Dalit Assertion and the Unfinished Democratic Revolution: The Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh* (New Delhi: Sage Publication, 2002), p. 68.

seeking social equality.⁵ In this chapter, I will delineate the beginnings of a Dalit movement in the early 20th century in the United Provinces and its radical vision to build an autonomous identity for the Dalits.

This chapter also argues that the processes of political identifications among the Chamar community in the United Provinces and later day Uttar Pradesh were not a linear, and involved contestations. Both Hindu revivalist and nationalist politics of accommodation and co-option from the 1920s persistently provided popular counter narratives. I argue that the construction of 'Jatav' identity among the Chamars was the brainchild of the Hindu revivalist organisations such as the Arya Samaj and the Hindu Mahasabha to counter the radical potential and growing popularity of the Adi Hindu movement during the first half of the 20th century. However this political ploy was strategically repurposed by the later Dalit socio-political movement led by the RPI and the BSP. In 2018, Shanta Kumar Jatav, a Bharatiya Janata Party lawmaker and Rajya Sabha member from Meerut claimed that the Jatavs are not Chamars historically, and were instead part of Yadav and Rajput caste clans.⁶ M.S. Srinivasan had termed this phenomenon as the '*Sanskritistion*' of the lower caste. In his words, "a low or middle Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual ideology, and way of life in the direction of high and frequently twice born caste[thereby, claiming]...a higher position in the caste hierarchy than that traditionally conceded to the claimant class by the local community."⁷

However, the sanskritization hypothesis fails to explain the complexity of identity transformations which cannot simply be categorized as an attempt to claim a higher position in the caste hierarchy. In his study of the Jatavs of Agra, Lynch argued that the theory may be

⁵ Sambaiah, Gundimeda. *Dalit politics in contemporary India*, unpublished PhD Thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2013, p. 44.

⁶ *Indian Observers*, 16 October 2018. <https://indianobservers.com/jatav-is-not-chamar-jatav-society-is-converting-from-yadava-and-rajput-castes/>. Retrieved on 20 January 2020.

⁷ M.N. Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India and other Essays* (New Delhi: Asia Publishing House, 1962), p. 48.

applicable in cultural terms but not in structural terms.⁸ The concept of sanskritisation is not applicable in the same way to an untouchable caste like the Chamars, the way it is to a Shudra caste like Jats, Yadavs or Gurjars. The stigma of untouchability attached with the untouchable castes obstructed their claim for the Kshatriya clan. I argue that the new identity of the 'Jatav' was a political manoeuvre by the caste Hindus to retain their hegemonic hold through symbolic gestures while weakening the demands for greater accessibility by the lower caste groups.

The term Chamars originates from the Sanskrit word 'chamkar', referring to those who were involved in the leather occupation in the Hindu caste system. G.W. Briggs, a colonial ethnographer wrote that the tanners of leather, the preparers of skins, the manufacturers of leather articles, and the makers of shoes, were generally termed as Chamars.⁹ He traced the origin of the word 'Chamar's to the Rig-Vedic term *charmaamna*.¹⁰ The Brahmanical text of Manusmriti refers to the *Karavara* or leatherworkers as a mixed caste originating from a Nisada father (a child born of a Brahman father and sudra mother) and a *Vaidehi* Mother (a child born of a vaisya father and Brahmani mother). British ethnographer William Crooke mentioned that the caste originated from the offspring of a Chandal woman and a man of fisherman caste.¹¹

Several popular stories also circulate the origin stories of the Chamars caste. According to one story documented by Briggs and Crooke,

In the beginning, there was but one family of men and they were all of the highest caste. They worked in the fields, and followed other callings.

⁸ Owen. M. Lynch, *The Politics of Untouchability* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 4.

⁹ G.W Briggs, *The Chamars* (New Delhi: Gautam Book Centre, 2010), p. 11.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 12.

¹¹ William Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh Volume II* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1896), p. 169.

In this family there were four brothers. It so happened that a cow died one day, and the body lay in the yard until evening. Since no one could be found to remove the carcass, the three older brothers agreed that their younger brother should carry away the body, and that, afterwards, when he had bathed, they would receive him on the old footing of equality. To this he agreed. After much pulling and hauling, he managed to drag the carcass to the jungle. When he returned from his bath, his brothers refused to receive him, but compelled him to live at a distance from them. He made a great fuss about it, but his complaints were of no avail. They told him that henceforth he was to do the work of a Chamars, that is, to skin the animals that died, and to make leather and implements of leather. The brothers promised to take care of him in return for these services. Thus, the Chamars caste arose.¹²

In another narrative, once there was king, who had two daughters, *Chamu* and *Bamu* each of whom had a son of great physical power. One day an elephant died in the Raja's grounds, and, as he did not wish to cut its body to pieces, he inquired if there was anyone strong enough to carry the carcass away and bury it. Chamu's son performed the task, whereupon Bamu's son declared him an out-caste.¹³

Such origin stories only reflect how some peoples were degraded into performing leather or carcass removing work. Later, those who were associated directly and indirectly with the leather work were categorised as Chamars. This profession was considered as impure by the Hindu social order and those who were involved in this practice were socially categorised within the untouchable category. Colonial ethnographers like Herbert Risley believed that the term 'Chamar' was derived from the Sanskrit word *charmkar*. The making of Chamar identity however, was very fraught. Often, the Chamar communities have made differing claims keeping in mind their regional social configurations and norms of respectability. The Meghwals of Rajasthan for instance, have distanced themselves from their Chamar past, hinting at conflicting claims within the larger community. In Punjab, Uttar

¹² G.W Briggs, *The Chamars* (New Delhi: Gautam Book Centre, 2010), pp. 15-16.

¹³ William Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh Volume II* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1896), p. 170.

Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, social reformist movements such as the Adi Dharma, Adi Hindu, and Adi Andhra have substantially shaped an independent identity away from the larger Hindu collective among the ex-Untouchables, particularly the Chamars.

Chamars constituted the largest caste group in the northern India and were located in almost every northern Indian district. The western part of Uttar Pradesh, comprising the districts of Meerut, Saharanpur, Bulandsahar and Agra have been dominated by the Chamar community. In the eastern part, Gorakhpur, Basti, Azamgarh and Lucknow districts share a large proportion.¹⁴ In Saharanpur, every fifth man in the population was a Chamar and in Meerut division 17 percent of the population were of Chamars in 1920s.¹⁵ As per the 1881 census, Chamars constituted 14.1 per cent of the total Hindu population in Uttar Pradesh, making them the single largest caste demographic. Brahmins, who constituted almost 12 percent were a close second, followed by the Ahirs, who constituted 9 percent.¹⁶ J.E. Nesfield, a British educator, mentioned that originally Chamars were the labourers that held the plough for their masters. They were field slaves, grass cutters, removers of the dead animals and hide skimmers and the carrion eaters of the Indian villages in the 1980s.¹⁷ As per the 1921 census, 768 per thousand of persons within the Chamar community engaged in agriculture and stock raising occupations, 51 per thousand were involved in leather work, 39 per thousand in other industries, 11 per thousand in trade, 12 per thousand in domestic services, 84 per thousand engaged in the unspecified labour work and the rest 17 per thousand in unspecified occupations.¹⁸

¹⁴ G.W Briggs, *The Chamars* (New Delhi: Gautam Book Centre, 2010), pp. 21.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Census of India 1881* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1983) p. 136.

¹⁷ John.C. Nesfield, *Brief View of the Caste System in the North Western Provinces and Oudh* (Allahabad: North Western Province and Oudh Government Press, 1885), p. 22.

¹⁸ *Census of India 1921, United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, Vol. XVI.* (Allahabad: Superintendent Printing and Press, 1923), p. 181.

The term 'Chamars' did not represent a homogenous nomenclature or community throughout the United Provinces. J.S. Nesfield pointed out that several castes were put down as 'Chamars' in census records. A census survey notes a Badhik man 'claiming to be a prosperous Chamar' and wanting to be 'put down in the census as a Rajput.'¹⁹ Nesfield further argued that Doms, Kanjars, and Cherus might have been added to the numbers of the Chamars community in the census of 1881.²⁰ Briggs argued that the fixed status of an occupational group may go hand in hand with the repeated recruitment of the group by those who have degraded from better positions. He further held that as in the case of the Jatiya Chamars "some clans lost their identity and prestige with the changing order, and consequently they have sunk to lower levels."

Among all the sections of the Chamars of the United Provinces, two sub-castes of Jatiya and Jaiswar predominate in terms of the population and the economic advancement. The former, which includes more than twenty per cent of the total Chamar population, are found almost entirely in the north and west of the Provinces, in the Meerut, Agra and Rohilkhand Divisions, being most numerous in Meerut, Agra, Moradabad, and Badaun Districts. It is supposition that the term 'Jatav' is derived from the word Jat, meaning a camel-driver.²¹ Other supposition connects them with the Jat caste. They are said to be descendants from the marriages of Jats with Chamars.²² Nesfield suggests that they may be an occupational offshoot from the Yadu tribe which Krishna belongs to.²³ These are all presumptions, and we are yet to receive a convincing theory about the emergence of the term 'Jatav'.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 151.

²⁰ John.C. Nesfield, *Brief View of the Caste System in the North Western Provinces and Oudh* (Allahabad: North Western Province and Oudh Government Press, 1885), p. 22.

²¹ G.W Briggs, *The Chamars* (New Delhi: Gautam Book Centre, 2010), p. 23.

²² *Ibid*.

²³ *Ibid*.

The Jatiya Chamars of the western Uttar Pradesh cultivated large land holdings and were largely dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. Rawat highlighted the highest share of the rent paid by the Chamar peasants in the several districts using district revenue reports.²⁴ The 1931 census commissioner explained that the Jatavs, Jatav-rajputs and Kurils might be Chamars who had adopted “a new name, which is considered more suitable to their new social position and new occupation of agriculture.”²⁵ This is basically an attempt by the Chamars to shrug away the stigmatisation associated with the name ‘Chamar’. In 1932, E. H Blunt’s (a civil servant) study on the taboos of untouchability found that Chamars were its worst victims, with seventeen castes considering Chamars to be untouchable and not wanting to be in contact with them²⁶. Eleven castes would not touch a Bhangi and, ten castes would not touch a Dhangar, while 6 castes would not touch a Dhobi or Dom.²⁷

In the western part of the United Provinces, the land tenure system was known as *Bhaichara* because proprietary rights were held by dominant communities with strong kinship ties, like the Jats, Rajputs, Gurjars. The rights of the non-proprietary tenants were not only recognized but also protected through tenancy legislation.²⁸ Rawat highlighted that the Chamars were *maurusi* and *ghairmaurusi* tenants in large numbers but were barred from buying and owning agricultural land by a number of laws and acts.²⁹ By 1921, the Chamars owned large tracts of agricultural land in western United Provinces in the districts of Agra, Saharanpur, Meerut, Bulandsahar and Aligarh under the *bhaichara* system. The *bhaichara* tenure enabled Chamars to acquire *maurusi* rights. For example in Bulandsahar, Chamars

²⁴ Ramnarayan S. Rawat. *Reconsidering Untouchability: Chamars and Dalit History in North India* (New York: Indiana University Press, 2012), p .61.

²⁵ *Census of India 1931, United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, Vol. XIII.* (Allahabad: Superintendent Printing and Press, 1933) p. 538.

²⁶ E.H.Blunt, *Caste System in Northern India* (Madras: Diocesan Press, 1931) p. 102.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Ramnarayan S. Rawat. *Reconsidering Untouchability: Chamars and Dalit History in North India* (New York: Indiana University Press, 2012), p. 62.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 65.

held almost 81,179 acres of land and many owned a pair of bullocks. Rawat argued that the Chamars were situated in a unique socio-economic position within the rural society. Despite being stigmatised as Untouchables, they worked in a range of trades as ploughman, cultivators, laborers, and artisans.³⁰ E. H. Blunt through his statistical survey found that in an average of thousand male workers, only forty eight Chamars were involved in the traditional occupation. And a majority of 744 were involved in agrarian work and 208 were engaged in unspecified work.³¹ Blunt even clubbed Chamar with agricultural castes of low social status, such as Pasi and Bhar castes.³² Rawat questions their stigmatization as Untouchables despite majority of Chamars being involved in agriculture activities. I would argue that the nature of caste dynamics precludes such simple understandings of economic empowerment as determining the rise of caste status. The stigmatisation or respectability of a caste community, while is firmly entrenched in the relative ‘publicness’ or humiliation of the labour performed is not dislocated by a rise in material conditions or professional upscaling. Instead, caste-based stigma lived on as it was fundamentally linked with the historical lineage of the Chamar community. While certain Chamar families did get access to agricultural land ownership in the late 19th and early 20th century, it did not translate into social dignity for the community. . This peculiar feature of caste society is evident in the fact that both Brahmin and Kshatriya castes enjoy high status across the country despite individual families not being well versed in shastric education or warrior activities respectively. This impels us to unpack the functioning of caste and its social reproduction as a feature of historical and genealogical stigmatisation.

A diversity of occupations certainly improved the conditions of the Chamars. Some members of community received English language education and went on to maintain

³⁰ Ibid, p. 70.

³¹ E.H.Blunt, *Caste System in Northern India* (Madras: Diocesan Press, 1931), p. 267.

³² Ibid, p. 68.

dispensaries and *vaid* (native Doctor).³³ One of the important reasons for better material conditions of the Chamars in the United Provinces that they were able to take advantage of new economic opportunities resulted from the urbanization led by the colonial authorities. The colonial urbanization coupled with the new job opportunities for the untouchable castes and provided with the accessibility to the education.

Educational efforts, although not specifically directed towards the Dalit communities, played a significant role in the development of an identity consciousness among them. In the United Provinces, a scheme for opening special schools for depressed classes was launched by the local Government Resolution no. 1231/XV on May 23, 1921³⁴. Through this a recurring grant of Rs.78, 920 and a non-recurring grant of Rs.7, 350 were distributed to district boards under this scheme.³⁵ The educational accessibility among the depressed classes increased significantly from 1922 to 1927. The enrolment of students from the depressed classes increased to 90,836 from the 39,173, an almost 32 percent increase in the United Provinces.³⁶ But this increase remained below the total number of the enrolment from the upper caste Hindus. The 1.1 percent of the depressed classes were under instruction in 1927, while 2.8 percent of the total population were under instruction in the United Provinces.³⁷ The appointment of special supervisors for the schools, remission of school-fees and the provision of post-primary scholarships were important steps to increase the accessibility of the education among Depressed Classes.³⁸ Under the contract system of financing primary education, the Government prescribed a minimum expenditure to be spent by local boards on

³³ John.C. Nesfield, *Brief View of the Caste System in the North Western Provinces and Oudh* (Allahabad: North Western Province and Oudh Government Press, 1885), p. 22.

³⁴ *Report on the Education of Boys and Girls in the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh* (Allahabad: Superintendent Printing and stationary, 1934), p. 55.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Interim Report of the Indian statutory Commission (Growth of Education in British India)* (Calcutta: Government of India, 1929), p. 218.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

the education of the depressed classes, and provided a lump grant annually. District boards were special schools for the pupils belonging to depressed classes increased in number from 582 in 1922 to 814 in 1927.³⁹ In 1932-33 however, the number of special schools for depressed class students reduced to 757, with an enrolment of 18,443 depressed class boys.⁴⁰ 9, 267 boys of higher castes also enrolled in these schools while the average enrolment was at 24 boys of depressed classes against 12 boys of other castes in the special schools. On the other hand, there were 88, 282 depressed class children reading in ordinary schools with about 5 times the number of boys from depressed classes enrolled in the special schools. Additionally, training schools were opened for providing skill training in several districts including Saharanpur, Meerut, Agra, Kanpur and Lucknow. These schools were majorly located in regions dominated by Chamars and Muslim population. Secondly, these schools were established to demonstrate new methods and techniques to those Chamars skilled at producing finished leather products. The first boot and the shoemaking school was established in Lucknow in 1908 and admission was restricted to the Chamars caste.⁴¹ The Chamar took benefit of these school for getting primary education that later helped them in their political advancement.

Western districts were the centre of the Arya Samaj movement in the United Provinces in the beginning of the 19th century. As per the 1921 census, the number of Arya Samajis doubled from 131, 638 to the 205, 570, an almost 56 percent increase in the number of the Arya Samajis population in the United Provinces.⁴² However the rate of increase of the Aryan population was much higher in the previous decades. The Arya Samaji population increased

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Report on the Education of Boys and Girls in the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh* (Allahabad: Superintendent Printing and Stationary, 1934), p. 55.

⁴¹ Ramnarayan S. Rawat, *Reconsidering Untouchability: Chamars and Dalit History in North India* (New York: Indiana University Press, 2012), p. 111.

⁴² *Census of India 1921, United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, Vol. XVI* (Allahabad: Superintendent Printing and Press, 1923), pp. 55-56.

at the rate of 196 percent between 1891 and 1901, and at 101 percent from 1901 to 1922.⁴³ The population of Chamars allied with the Arya Samaj increased from 1500 to the 6000 from 1911 to 1921.⁴⁴ The total population of the Christians was 4000 in the Kumaon region, it was majorly came from the Depressed Classes⁴⁵. The Arya Samaj movement played an important role in the hinduization of dominant castes like the Jats, Gujjars, and Yadavs. Shudhi ceremonies were projected as nationalist projects and successfully attracted the large shudra castes, especially dominant castes like Jats, Gujjars and Yadavs into the Hindu fold in the early 20th century. Arya Samaji activities invoked a kshatriya identity among these caste groups which later helped in their co-option into a pan-Hindu identity. The same process of the kshatriyaisation was also introduced to varying degrees of success among the Chamars of the western Uttar Pradesh in the 1920s. On 27 October 1917, Jatav Mahasabha was formed in Agra. The Mahasabha claimed to be formed for the economic advancement of the Chamars/Jatavs and held the spreading of vedic rituals and customs among the community as the most important work.⁴⁶ The Jatav Mahasabha also traced the origin of the Jatavs as part of the Kshatriya *Yadu* clan.⁴⁷ However, the lukewarm responses to Arya Samaji activities were also triggered by a strong politicisation of the Chamar community under the radical claim for political representation by the Adi Hindu Movement.

After the Government of India Act of 1919 extended political representation based on communal lines, different religious groups viewed the new opportunity to secure the support of untouchable communities. Even as sustained discriminatory practices of dominant caste Hindus made their electoral hold on untouchable communities tenuous, the Arya Samaj became a successful vanguard with its agenda to protect and advance a universal Hindu

⁴³ Ibid, p. 56.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 153.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Ramnarayan Yadevandu, *Yaduvansh (Jatavvansh) ka Itihas* (Ghaziabad: Prakash Singh, 1942), p. 102.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 99.

identity. The Samaj's reformist activities helped set a moderate tone within the Hindu nationalist project and secure the support of the India National Congress. Thus the Indian Congress initiative of the Harijan upliftment went along with the reformist program of the Arya Samaj to assimilate the lower castes into the Hindu fold. The anxiety was later acknowledged by Adi-Hindu leaders such as Swami Acchutanand, who were earlier associated with the Arya Samaj. As I argued in the earlier sections, Arya Samaji attempts to introduce a *Kshatriya* genealogy to Chamars must be read as the organization's strategy to challenge the proselytizing activities of Christian missions and firmly retain the community within the Hindu fold.

Nonica Datta demonstrated how the Arya Samaj utilised local beliefs and practices to maximise its outreach among Jat communities in Haryana. Datta argued that traditional local sects and cults were appropriated by the Arya samaj in the late 19th Century.⁴⁸ We notice a similar process in western Uttar Pradesh, where the Arya Samaj appropriated bhakti culture prevalent among the Chamars in the Uttar Pradesh. William Crooke, a colonial ethnographer reported that many bhakti sects in rural areas, especially in the case of heterodox bhakti sects of lower castes, were closed groups, which practised secrecy in their activities and followed strict rites of initiation.⁴⁹

The primary agenda of the Samaj was to strengthen Hinduism through *shuddhi* and *sangthan* efforts. Their programs were promoted through opening schools and increasing the accessibility of temples and water wells to Chamars. Their main agenda was to keep the Chamars and other untouchable castes within the Hindu fold especially against the challenge foreseen from Christian and Islamic missionary programs. A significant number of Chamars

⁴⁸ Nonica Datta, *Forming an Identity: A Social History of Jats* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 52.

⁴⁹ William Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh Volume II* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1896), pp. 184-88.

started converting to Christianity under the missionary programs in the United Provinces. In one of the village in Hathras, thirty two Chamars were baptized into Christianity.⁵⁰ In Agra, the Church Mission Society acknowledged the potential of the community as new converts to Christianity. In Bulandsahar, Chamars social status improved with their conversion to Christianity.⁵¹ In Meerut, among the hundred baptized, there was a Chamar family and upon the persuasion of the mission, others too showed their interest in Christianity.

As the 1919 Montague-Chlemsford reforms extended the representation for communities based on their religious demography, lower caste communities became a significant population to woo and convert. The Hindu revivalist and Arya Samaji programs tried to counter this religious conversion among the Chamars just as the Congress party began to take note of the need for untouchable 'upliftment'. The District board teachers in western Uttar Pradesh majorly came from an Arya Samaj background.⁵² However, when Christian-converted Chamar students enrolled in these schools, these Arya Samaji teachers often registered them as Chamars, not as a Christians to retain them in the Hindu fold.⁵³

Hindu *zamindars* also prevented religious conversion practices among of the Chamars by sharply reducing the wages of Christian labourers in the districts of Meerut and Sahranpur.⁵⁴ Such intimidating tactics also extended to slapping Christian and other religious converts with fake cases.⁵⁵ Fearing the wrath of caste Hindus who controlled their livelihoods, lower

⁵⁰ *Annual Report of the Church Missionary Society for the 1922-23* (London: Church Missionary Society, 1923), p. 131.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Annual Report of the Church Missionary Society for the 1923-24*(London: Church Missionary Society, .1924) p. 310.

⁵³ *Annual Report of the Church Missionary Society for the 1923-24*(London: Church Missionary Society, .1924) p. 310.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 311.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

caste groups often gave up their courage and intentions to leave the Hindu fold. Yet, conversions did take place and brought about new social dynamics.

In Daurala (Meerut) everyday caste-based oppression led to the conversion of Chamars to Christianity. The All India Shradhananda Dalitodhar Sabha, a Hindu revivalist organisation claimed that it convinced many Chamars to return to the Hindu fold.⁵⁶ Several revivalist organizations also proactively participated in incidents involving clashes between the Depressed Classes and Muslims, in order to communalise the issue, and use it as a political advantage to foster Hindu communitarian sentiments among the Untouchables. In Mena (Khurja), a clash between the Jatiya Chamars and a Muslim *zamindar* resulted into the forced eviction of the Chamars and the destruction of their fields. The Dalitodhar Sabha claimed that it provided legal help to the Chamars, made the Muslim zamindar beg for pardon, and returned the lands of the Chamars.⁵⁷ In another incident in Balrampur (Khurja), clashes erupted between Jatiya Chamars and Muslims on 16 June 1928 when former claimed their well had been occupied by the latter. Several persons from both sides got wounded while the Sabha once again claimed that their intervention resolved the issue.⁵⁸ In Pachra (Ghaziabad), a person named Sukhna Chamar had refused to perform *begari* or bonded labour to a Pathan landlord. When the Pathan's forces attacked Sukhna the following day, the Sabha claimed its timely intervention helped procure compensation for the hurt man.⁵⁹ The Sabha claimed to have resolved several cases relating to conversion, *begari* and other local disputes affecting Untouchables by immediately dispatching their workers in Haryana, Delhi and western parts of the United Provinces. The Sabha's claim that it was a savior of the Untouchables and its pro-active role in clashes between Untouchable communities and Muslims reveal its

⁵⁶ *Annual Report of the All India Shradhanand Dalitodhar Sabha Delhi* (Khurja: Sudharsan Printing Works, 1928) p.14.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p.16.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p.16.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p.17.

communal agenda and the political interest of the Hindu organizations in highlighting these cases. This strategy continues to remain common in contemporary India too, where Hindu fundamentalist organizations often communalize issues for their political gains.

The Dalitodhar Sabha claimed that it had converted over 48 Muslim families and the 282 families of 2887 Christians into the Hindu fold.⁶⁰ Even within a month, from 27 February to the 28 March 1928, the Sabha's records claimed to have converted six Muslims and 203 Christians into the Hindu religion in Gurugram (Gurgaon), Delhi, Meerut, Ghaziabad, Sahranpur and Bulandshahr.⁶¹ The Sabha also claimed that its members successfully prevented a large number of Chamars who were ready to embrace Islam and Christianity in Meerut, Hapur, Ghaziabad and Bulandshahr.⁶² Hindu revivalist organisations became very critical of Christianity when a large number of the low-caste members showed interest towards the Christian missions' work and converted themselves.

In Hathras (Aligarh), Anupsahar (Bulandshahr), and Meerut, the Sabha held regular conferences and opened schools to prevent Untouchables from embracing the Christianity.⁶³ In these conferences and village *panchayats*, the caste Hindus promised to treat the Untouchables in a fair manner and with a sense of brotherhood. In a 500 delegate conference held in Bulandshahr district, a Rajput *zamindar* promised to treat the Untouchables as his own brothers, and vowed to be lenient while dealing with labour issues if the latter remained within the Hindu fold.⁶⁴ Jatavs/Chamars often used these events for collective bargaining. In a panchayat attended by over 800 members of the Jatav community in Toofapur village (Meerut), promises of increased wages and parity in social treatment of the Untouchables

⁶⁰ *Annual Report of the All India Shradhanand Dalitodhar Sabha Delhi* (Khurja: Sudharsan Printing Works, 1928), p. 23.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

with upper castes were demanded to stall their conversion away from the Hindu fold.⁶⁵ In several conferences, caste Hindus promised to fight against the social evil of untouchability and the harsh practice of *begari* to alleviate the concerns of the lower castes. These village panchayats were also held to counter the rising popularity of the Adi-Hindu movement among the Untouchables in the United Provinces by claiming the movement was funded by the Muslims.⁶⁶ The Sabha criticized the Adi-Hindus for the vilification of the Hindus. In a conference held in Jewar (Bulandsahar) on 27 February 1927, members from thirty neighboring villages passed a resolution against the Adi-Hindu programs and emphasized the need for extending the privileges of education and inter-dining to the Untouchables, having denied them for a long time.⁶⁷ The sacred thread was also distributed to six people belonging to the Chamar community.⁶⁸ These events were highly symbolic and provided much-needed publicity for the activities of revivalist organisations. Their concern remained clear, however: to retain Untouchables within the Hindu fold.

Arya Samaj's production of a Kshatriya genealogy later became the basis of a rhetorical construction of the community's past by various Chamar writers influenced by the Arya Samaj's revivalism. In imitation of the Shudra castes in western United Provinces, these writers attempted to draw the Chamars' genealogy with the Yadu race. Yadu is one of the five early Indo-Aryan tribes (*panchajana*, *panchakrishtya* or *panchamanusha*) mentioned in the Rig-Veda⁶⁹. Similarly, in identifying with the Yadav caste, they were imitating a shudra caste's claim for Kshatriya status. Ramnarayan Yadvendu, an important member of the Jatav Mahasabha authored a history of the Yaduvans (Jatavansh) in April, 1942, in which he drew

⁶⁵ Ibid pp. 32-33.

⁶⁶ *Annual Report of the All India Shradhanand Dalitodhar Sabha Delhi* (Khurja: Sudharsan Printing Works, 1928), p. 37.

⁶⁷ Ibid, pp. 34-37.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 37.

⁶⁹ Upinder Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th Century* (Delhi: Pearson Education, 2009), p.187.

the lineage of the Jatavs from the Yadu tribe, whose most famous member was Lord Krishna.

Yadvendu also highlighted the various aspects of the Jatiya Chamars claim to Yadav status.

According to him,

The Jatav ancestors fought against parshuram. But the Kshatriya were defeated and to escape persecution, the Jatavs disappeared from the earth by hiding in the forests, becoming artisans to hide their Kshatriya identity and in the process losing their “pure” status. Hindu discrimination against Jatavs began at that time.⁷⁰

Yadvendu argued that the term ‘Yadav’ morphed into ‘Jatav’ because of people’s proclivity to pronounce Hindi alphabet ‘y’ as ‘j’.⁷¹ He links Jatav surnames like *Sagar*, *Pipal*, *Kardam*, *Morya*, *Neem*, and *Harit* to the Yaduvansh clan.⁷² The construction of this hypothesis was influenced by the Arya samaj movement.

Meanwhile, Rawat through his study of the PAI reports, argues that Ravidas sabhas and the Jatav Mahasabhas emphasized the need for a dignified place in the society by urging their community members to shift to vegetarianism, abandon the consumption of alcohol, and leave professions of menial services. They also directed their women to be within the confines of their houses and observe purdah.⁷³ Some of these programs found acceptance by the Chamar community as these social markers provided inclusion within caste Hindu society. Moreover, an emergent educated class was keen to increase material power and gain via social mobility and began to consciously shed stigmatized practices.

As I argued above, Hindu revivalist attempts to bring Untouchables into the Hindu fold were varied and dynamic by playing to notions of self-improvement, promising changes in village social mores, and by constantly maligning the intentions of evangelical activities of Christian

⁷⁰ Sunderlal Sagar, *Yadav Jivan* (Agra, Shree Jatav Mahasabha, 1929), pp. 34-38. Cited in Ramnarayan S. Rawat. *Reconsidering Untouchability: Chamars and Dalit History in North India* (New York: Indiana University Press, 2012), p. 128.

⁷¹ Ramnarayan Yadvendu cites the example of the Yamuna pronounced as the Jamuna.

⁷² Ramnarayan Yadvendu, *Yaduvansh (Jatavansh) ka Itihas* (Ghaziabad: Prakash Singh, 1942), pp. 27-29.

⁷³ Ramnarayan S. Rawat. *Reconsidering Untouchability: Chamars and Dalit History in North India* (New York: Indiana University Press, 2012), pp. 135-136.

and Islamic missions. The strategy is no more evident than in the fact that the founders and propagators of the Jatav Mahasabha, Pandit Sunderlal Sagar and Ramnaryan Yadvendu belonged to Arya Samaji families and were themselves educated by the organisation.

The brahmanical structure of caste system that relegated the marginalised to a lower stratum of society also simultaneously produced the imagination of a collective Untouchable caste. The multiple subjectivities of Dalits helped to both imagine and redefine liberation from caste oppression. The new political identities and the vocabularies forged in the early 19th century led to the foundation of an important movement for liberation and dignity in the United Province for Untouchables. As the name suggests, the Adi-Hindu movement emerged as an important ideological movement to challenge the hegemonic and nationalist Hindu imagination in the 1920s and 1930s. Sudha Pai argued that the Adi-Hindu ideology attracted large number of Untouchables because it provided a historical explanation of their subjugation and poverty.⁷⁴ It later turned to be an important idea to develop the anti-caste consciousness and political awareness among the Depressed Classes.

This radical movement was systematically obstructed by the reformist and the revivalist Hindu movements in their attempts to incorporate Untouchables into the caste hierarchy and secure the political benefits of a majoritarian Hindu demography. Representative politics based on the proportion of the religious demographics also pointed to the political relevance of the Untouchables. The nationalistic politics of the Indian National Congress also invested significantly in efforts to hamper the autonomous assertion of the Depressed classes. The untouchability upliftment program of the Congress under the leadership of Gandhi attempted to neutralize the radical potential of the Adi-Hindu movement. Famously, Gandhi's new

⁷⁴ Sudha Pai, *Dalit Assertion and Unfinished Democratic Revolution* (New Delhi: Sage Publication, 2002), p. 49.

terminology of 'Harijan' (meaning, 'children of god') to refer to the Untouchables diminished the political challenge of an Adi-Hindu identity.

Post 1857 urban areas such as Meerut, Kanpur, Agra and Allahabad witnessed the consolidation of administrative services and the expansion of industries and military services, providing opportunities of employment to the lower castes. Higher castes kept away from menial jobs of caste stigmatization and ritual pollution. Also, in the industries like leather work, skilled Chamars became the ideal labour force. In Kanpur, Chamars and Mochis, who were often skinner of dead animals or leather workers in the countryside, found employment in the newly developing leather factories and tanneries set up by the government and British industrialists.⁷⁵

Nandini Gooptu writes that the Untouchables community attacked caste inequalities through an assertion of bhakti devotionalism, a rejection of Vedic Hinduism and the construction of a pre-Aryan identity of the Untouchables as the original inhabitants, Adi Hindu of India.⁷⁶ This can be conceived as the foundation of the Untouchables assertion for radical transformation. This also set the tone of alternative religious and political ideologies in their challenge to Brahmanical hegemony. Gooptu further adds that the migration of Untouchables to the urban areas did not necessarily bring them affluence or economic self-sufficiency, but the nature of the urban occupations of Untouchables came to undermine their direct caste subordination at work. Though wage employment was not free from economic conflict and exploitation, it could give rise to a sense of liberation among dominated caste groups, for whom caste subordination had been the prominent social experience in rural areas.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ *Cawnpore: A Gazetteer: vol. XIX of the District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh*, (Allahabad, 1909) pp. 104, 117.

⁷⁶ Nandini Gooptu, *The politics of the urban poor in early twentieth-century India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 144.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p. 146.

To challenge the cultural hegemony of caste practices legitimized through scriptures, the Untouchables shifted towards bhakti devotionalism. The religious practices of Untouchables have been different from that of caste Hindus. In the census of 1921, the government acknowledged the differentiation of the Chamars religious practices with the Hindus and highlighted the non-conformity of the Chamars with the Hindu social practices.⁷⁸ However, the religious distinctions assumed a deeply political tone in the early 20th century. Although urban spaces improved living conditions, dominant castes viewed Untouchables within the same caste prism. This reflects why in the early twentieth century, it was in the towns that heterodox bhakti devotionalism gained a large following among urban Untouchables. The Untouchable's caste followed the *nirguna* form of bhakti, while the caste Hindus mostly relied on the *saguna* form of the worship through the Shaivite and the Vaishnavite devotionalism in north India. While *saguna* bhakti represents the dominant version of north Indian devotional Hinduism, *nirguna* bhakti developed partly in opposition to it among lower castes as a heterodox devotional alternative, and partly to resist hierarchical, brahmanical Hinduism through an egalitarian religious message.⁷⁹ The message of caste equality and humanity in the bhakti inspired the Untouchables. They conceived it as an important tool to fight against caste oppression and the caste discrimination. The bhakti devotionalism became a significant force behind the formation of the Adi-Hindu movement which claimed that it was the religion of the ancient, pre-Aryan inhabitants and rulers of India, the Adi Hindus, from whom the Untouchables were supposed to have descended.

⁷⁸ *Census of India 1921, United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, Vol. XVI* (Allahabad: Superintendent Printing and Press, 1923), p. 53.

⁷⁹ Joseph Schellar, "Sanskritization, Caste Uplift, and Social Dissidence in the Sant Ravidas Panth," in *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community Identity and Political action*, ed. David N. Lorenzen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 98.

The Adi-Hindu movement emerged in the context of the rising political and the social consciousness among the literate Untouchables. The idea preached by the western missionaries played an important role in inculcating a critical reflection of the caste system. This rethinking transformed into a formation of counter ideology to the hegemonic brahmanical system. The Adi-Hindu movement, articulated by a generation of literate Untouchables, pointed that illiteracy was the primary cause for social and cultural domination by the caste Hindus. They emphasized the need of education for expanding the socio-political message of the movement. Moreover, the lack of education resulted in the exclusion of the Untouchables in the government jobs and other job opportunities.

A small section of Untouchables, particularly Chamars had acquired elementary literacy from Christian missionaries in cantonments and civil stations. Others, born in the 1880s and 1890s to Untouchable parents who had migrated to the towns, were sent to municipal schools, insofar as their parents could afford the expenses. Accessibility to the education system became the backbone of the Adi Hindu movement. Two important leaders of the Adi Hindu movement, Acchutanand and Ramcharan completed their primary education in the Christian missions. Bhakti resurgence thus gradually produced a group, albeit a small one, of literate Untouchables, who emerged to be the leaders and ideologues of the Adi Hindu movement.

From its political inception, the Adi Hindu movement was working primarily on two fronts. Firstly, it challenged the religious hegemony of the Hinduism and claimed them as the outsiders on the basis of a continuous claim on Aryan ancestry and lineage. Secondly, the movement was very vocal about the political demands of the Untouchables, including in the representation of Depressed Classes in educational institutions and government services in the United Provinces. The Adi Hindu movement played a very important demand for the separate settlement for the Untouchables in the 1930s. Rawat has documented that in the first meeting of Adi- Hindu movement, Acchutanand declared that the present day

‘Untouchables’ were the original stock of the India, and Hindu and Muslims were the upstarts.⁸⁰ He urged Adi Hindus to protest against the practice of begari in the countryside. He stressed that the Dalits who had their own traditions based on saints like Ravidas and Kabir, did not need the Hindus, their vedas, or their Gods, like Ram and Krishna. He asked the government to employ Dalits into the army and the police services.⁸¹

The Adi Hindu movement actively demanded separate electorates for Dalits in United provinces like the other religious minorities. Swami Acchutanand also advocated for the representation of the Dalits in the local bodies like boards, municipalities, town and districts. Acchutanand was of the opinion that the British rule helped the Untouchables from the liberation of the Untouchables from the Hindu hegemony. He was very critical about of the nationalist movement run by the congress. In fact, he opined that the Congress’s ‘*swaraj*’ meant the continued subordination of the Depressed Classes by the caste Hindus.⁸² In a letter addressed to the H.E. Malcolm Hailey, the governor of the United Provinces, the Adi Hindu leaders charted out their 14 demands and blamed the Aryan origin caste Hindus for the deprived condition of the depressed classes in the United Provinces.⁸³ They demanded separate electorates in all local bodies and legislature, in every district there should be ten lower primary and ten upper primary schools along with two middle schools for the Untouchables with the teachers from the Depressed Classes, three students from the Untouchable community should be send for the special training school each year.⁸⁴ There should be one European officer in each *thana* with Hindi knowing clerk from Depressed Class.⁸⁵ They also demanded the recruitment of the Depressed Class community in the police,

⁸⁰ Ramnarayan S. Rawat. *Reconsidering Untouchability: Chamars and Dalit History in North India* (New York: Indiana University Press, 2012), pp. 148-149.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *The leader*, 14 April 1926. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper.

⁸³ *Times of India*, 8 March 1930. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

military and other government services in the proportion of the population of Depressed Class community.⁸⁶

The Adi Hindu movement drew the combined ire of the nationalist movement, Arya samaj and the Hindu Mahasabha as they conceived the movement's spirit as a ploy for dividing the Hindu Unity. According to a report published in the *Times of India*, Arya Samaj and the Hindu Mahasabha alleged that the Adi-Hindu movement was financed by the British government.⁸⁷ Adi-Hindu strongly repudiated the charges and called it as the propaganda by the enemies of the Adi Hindu movement.⁸⁸

In the first All India Adi-Hindu Mahasabha meeting in Allahabad on 27 and 28 December 1927 about 350 delegates from Punjab, Hyderabad, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Bihar, Poona, Bengal met to chart the joint futures of the movements in their regions. Resolutions passed in the meeting acknowledged the unanimous support for the proposed arrival of the Simon Commission, an Adi-Hindu identity for all Untouchables, fair representation of the community in the government services, free education for children, ban on the Manusmriti, and the repeal of the Criminal Tribes Act.⁸⁹ Further, a committee comprising of B.R. Ambedkar and M.C. Rajah was charged with the duty to collect the popular support for the resolutions passed by the Mahasabha. The committee submitted this evidence to the Simon Commission in a memorandum in May 1928.⁹⁰

In my discussion, I have charted the programmes and functioning of two movements that co-existed simultaneously, and often challenged one another: the Jatav Mahasabha and the Adi Hindu Mahasabha. Both the organisations reflect conflicting aspects within the Dalit

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Times of India*, 8 August 1928. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Chand*, February, 1928.

⁹⁰ Memorandum from All India Adi Hindu Mahasabha, Kanpur, May 25, 1928, Evidence, UP/427.OIOC.

movement—while the Jatav Mahasabha played into assimilatory politics with the intentions of finding respectability within an existing Hindu social world, the Adi-Hindu movement charted the need for an autonomous identity of the Depressed Classes for a meaningful emancipation. In 1984, Kanshiram the founder of the Bahujan Samaj party argued that, two types of forces exist in India—one is the status quoist forces, who want to protect the caste structure and the other who are fighting to dismantle this caste structure and to bring the social transformation. In his famous ‘Chamcha Yug’ (the Age of the Stooges), he held that the caste Hindus have always tried to produce some chamchas within dalit political movements to divert the attention of the masses away from the genuine causes.⁹¹

The Jatav Movement combined the upper caste anxieties towards a demographic and social alienation of the Untouchables from the Hindu society with strategic reconciliatory politics. The philosophy and the functioning of the Jatav Mahasabha was deeply influenced by the Arya Samaj movement. In fact, the ‘Chanvar Puran’, ‘Jatav Jeevan’ and ‘Yaduvansh (Jatavvansh) ka Itihas” were the important texts used by the Mahasabha for spreading the propaganda among the community. *Jatav Jeevan*, written by Pandit Sundarlal Sagar in 1924 talked about the affinity of the Chamar/ Jatav with Yadav clan.⁹² He also outlined Shudra castes like Jats, Yadav, and Gujjars who came under the fold of Arya Samaj gave the similar genealogy of their claim of Khsatriya status.⁹³ Jatav Mahasabha propounded to associate the Chamars with Aryan race and forge their relationship with the mythical Hindu tenets like Mahabharata and Ramayana.

⁹¹ Kanshiram, *The Chamcha Age, An Era of Stooges* (New Delhi: Siddhartha Publications, 2015), pp. 87-88.

⁹² Pandit Sundarlal Sagar was the important member of the Jatav Mahasabha, He also formed Jatav Prachark Mahamandal. He wrote two books *Jatav Jeevan* and *Jatav pratha sangraha* (traditions of Jatavs) in which he outlined the rituals to be followed from community from birth to death.

⁹³ Ramnarayan Yadevandu, *Yaduvansh (Jatavvansh) ka Itihas* (Ghaziabad: Prakash Singh, 1942), p. 104.

This proposition is verified by the fact that the first book written by Ramnarayan Yadevindu , an important member of the Jatav Mahasabha in Agra, titled as “ *Yaduvansh (Jatavvansh) ka Itihas* (History of Jatavansh)” reflects the symbolic and political agendas of Hindu revivalism. The cover page includes religious symbols of the Arya samaj, most notably, that of ‘om’ on the top of the first page. The book was also published and promoted by the Jatav Mahasabha, on the day of *Vijaydashmi* in 1924. *Vijaydashmi* is a ritually significant day for the caste Hindu revivalist movements. Even the extremist Hindu organisation, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in his calendar, conceives *vijaydashmi*, *raksha bandhan* and the hindu new year as the most sacred days for the Hindus, far more religiously relevant than Holi or Diwali.

The ideas advanced by the Adi-Hindu movement and the Jatav Mahasabha were mutually contradictory. On the one hand, the Adi-Hindu movement wanted to establish a counter ideology to the Hinduism by substantial critique and the contextual framework. While on the other, the concept of the ‘Jatav’ contributed to the assimilation of Chamars into the Hindu fold.

The 1920s witnessed the emergence of vigorous Dalit movements led by the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha. These movements including its leadership largely involved the participation of the Chamars. Resisting both the Congress and Hindu revivalist organisations such as the Arya Samaj and the Hindu Mahasabha, these movements effectively advanced an identity based on the notion of the ‘Moolnivasi’ or original inhabitant. In this regard, an autonomous political path and socio-cultural identity was a critical strategy to disentangle the depressed classes from the caste Hindu hegemony. In the next chapter, I follow the history of counter-hegemony politics against the caste Hindu supremacy and the emergence of a demand for the recognition of the Depressed Classes as a separate identity.

Poona Pact as a Historic Betrayal: Scheduled Caste Autonomy and the Emergence of Representative Politics in the 1940s

This chapter delineates the social and political developments that took place in the 1930s and 1940s with the emergence of the Scheduled Caste Federation in the United Provinces, and how the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha and Jatav Mahasabha responded to the newly formed Federation under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar. The first section outlines the articulations of separate political and social identities by the Adi Hindu movement and the Scheduled Caste Federation, and the particularities of the United Provinces as a unique site of experiment for new social formations. The second section studies the political demands of the Scheduled Caste Federation and how it shaped the aspirations of the Dalits, particularly the Chamar community. The Federation made the demand for separate constituencies central to the Dalit cause, significantly changing the future of politics in Uttar Pradesh. The concluding section of this chapter briefly discusses the demand for separate electorates and how the provision of joint electorates accorded by the Poona Pact 1932 furthered the practices of co-option and created conflicts among different Dalit communities.

The formation of the Adi Hindu movement was an important moment in the history of the United Provinces. It is estimated that some 25 thousand Depressed Class members participated in the first conference of the Mahasabha held in Allahabad. Participants travelled from other states like Punjab, Central Provinces, Poona, Hyderabad, and Bengal to attend this conference and coordinate many local movements. Three major resolutions of this conference were: first, that untouchables are the original inhabitants of this country; second, that the *acchuts* should not be considered as a part of Hindu religion; and third, that safeguards were required in legislative institutions through separate electorates. The final resolution gradually became the central demand of the Dalit movement in the following years. When the Simon Commission arrived in India, the Adi Hindu leaders opposed the Congress's call for boycotting the

commission and welcomed the commission at many places like Agra, Meerut, Lucknow while they put forward their demands.

The demand of the representation of the Depressed Classes became very prominent in 1920s. The Reforms Enquiry Committee, constituted in 1924, under the chairpersonship of Sir Alexander Muddiman rejected the demand for the extension of the general Indian franchise but supported the proposal for providing special representation for the Depressed Classes.¹ The committee recommended an increase in the share of the seats for Depressed Classes in every province and particularly recommended increasing the Dalit representation in the United Provinces council from 1 seat to 19 seats.² The Indian Central Committee also recommended an increase in the representation of the Depressed Classes in every province. It was in favour of increasing the number to 10 from the existing single seat for the Depressed Classes in the United Provinces.³ In a memorandum submitted to the Indian Franchise committee, the Indian Depressed Class Association wrote,

The problem of the Depressed Classes is by far the greater than that of the Muhammadans. Muslims are a compact community. In education they stand next to advanced Hindus. Economically they are as strong as the Hindus. They do not suffer from social and economic disabilities as the Depressed Classes. They have not got the stigma of untouchability which is a unique feature in the social life in India. This being so, if the Muhammadans clamour for more political powers to be given to them by means of weightage of votes in the Central and Provincial Legislatures the Depressed Classes should claim twice as much to come up to the standard of the advanced Hindus or Muhammadans.⁴

Invoking their 'traditional loyalty to the British,' the Association laid its 'perfectly natural claim of seven crores of His Majesty's Depressed Class subjects to have a legitimate share in

¹ Indian Reform committee or Muddiman Committee, 1924 was formed by the Government of India in 1924 to investigate the empirical data on the working of the Constitution as set up in 1921 under the India Act of 1919.

² *Indian Franchise Report* (Vol. 4) (Calcutta: Government of India, Central Publication Branch, 1932), p. 340.

³ *Ibid*, p. 341.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 342.

the Provincial and Central governments.’⁵ Later, the Indian Statutory (Simon) Commission also supported the demand for the representation of the community in both the legislative councils and the legislative assembly. The commission also recommended the provision of the separate representation of the Depressed Castes because of their social and political backwardness.

The Adi-Hindu movement stressed upon the representation of the Dalits in the United Provinces councils. In a letter addressed to H.E Hailey, the Governor of United Provinces, the Adi-Hindu committee demanded for the separate settlement for the Depressed Classes in all legislative councils and local bodies along with educational facilities.⁶ They criticized the tyranny the caste Hindus inflicted upon the depressed classes, and opposed the demand of the *swaraj* as written in letter, ‘we do not desire *swaraj* (self-rule). *Swaraj* will trample us under foot. Before *swaraj* is granted, we should be raised to a position equal to a position of equality with the caste Hindus.’⁷

The political churning among the Depressed Classes created a public discourse among the community for an autonomous identity and prepared the ground for the future politics. Since the 1930s, the Chamars more than any other section of the Depressed Classes, used public institutions like legislative councils and district boards to voice their demands. Later, they also fought for representation in these bodies.

In 1920s, the growing political assertion of Chamars led to the emergence of many local leaders, who represented the community in the local bodies of the districts. Bhore Khemchand belonging to the Jatav/ Chamar community was nominated to the Agra Municipal Corporation

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Times of India*, 8 March 1930, p. 14. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

from 1918 to 1936, and was also the Depressed Class representative in the United Provinces legislative council between 1930 and 1936. In the 10th annual session of the Jatav Mahasabha held on 7th April 1928 in Sahagunj, a significant number of members participated under the leadership of Bhore Khemchand.⁸ The major demand of the Mahasabha was to formulate a law to allocate the fallow land to the Depressed Classes for grazing and the other purposes.⁹ The sabha also urged to define the term “Depressed Classes” and allocate the adequate number of seats for them in all the local legislatures and the district boards in the proportion of their population. Also the position of the magistrates, munsifs and other posts should be opened for the Depressed Castes.¹⁰

Khemchand, as a member of legislative council, demanded that a members of the Depressed Class should be nominated in every district board in the United Provinces.¹¹ This demand was later accepted by the colonial authorities. Many leaders took the benefit of this provision and nominated in the district board some names includes Dharm Prakash in Meerut, nominated to the Meerut district (from 1930 to 1932), Pyarelal Kureel (Agra board) and Mahadeo Prasad (Gorakhpur board). Karan Singh Ken (an important Jatav/Chamar leader of Agra) prepared the ground for the Dalit movement at the local level. Karan Singh left congress in 1940s and joined the Uttar Pradesh Scheduled Caste Federation, and became a close associate of the Dr. Ambedkar. He contested election by the UPSCF in 1946 and from RPI in 1962.

The United Provinces unit of the Adi Hindu Mahasabha in its memorandum to the Indian Franchise committee demanded direct adult suffrage for all males and females and opposed property qualifications for enrolment as a voter.¹² The association strongly supported the

⁸ *Times of India*, 17 April 1928, p. 10. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Ramnarayan Yadevandu, *Yaduvansh (Jatavvansh) ka Itishas* (Ghaziabad: Prakash, 1942), p. 101.

¹² *Indian Franchise Report* (Vol. 4) (Calcutta: Government of India Central Publication Branch, 1932), p. 832

separate electorates for Depressed Classes to secure representatives of their own choice and firmly stood by the minorities' pact arrived at in London.¹³ The association explained that the Depressed Classes were in a minority in every territorial constituency and therefore were not in position to win a seat for themselves. The economic dependence and the social and religious influence of the higher Caste would made the possibility of many Depressed Class member to vote for a higher Caste candidate over the candidate of his own Caste. No Depressed Class man had ever been elected to the Legislature.¹⁴ The Sabha also gave the example of the 1930 elections in which eleven dummies from the Depressed Classes were elected by the Congress to bring the Council into ridicule and contempt.¹⁵

In their memorandum to the Indian Franchise Committee, all the major organisations run by Caste Hindus like Hindu Mahasabha, United Province Dharma Rakshni Sabha, Indian Liberal Association and others, opposed separate electorates for the Depressed Classes, claiming that untouchability and social backwardness was a religious and internal matter of the Hindus. The Congress showed similar apprehensions. Although the Congress accepted special provisions of representation granted to the Muslims in the Lucknow pact, the Nehru Report of 1928, sidestepped the question of the same to the Depressed Classes. Meanwhile, Dr. Ambedkar and R. Srinivasan submitted a memorandum titled 'A scheme of political safeguards for the protection of the Depressed Classes in the future constitution of self-governing India' at the Second Round Table conference. The document demanded separate representations for the Depressed Classes and the need for power to influence governmental action through their presence in the Legislature. Significantly, the memorandum also demanded that the Depressed Classes in common with other political minorities, be given a share in the opportunity to frame

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

the general policy of the Government.¹⁶ They also demanded that the Depressed Classes be considered a distinct category outside the Hindu fold while determining the franchise.¹⁷ However, the two leaders faced stiff opposition from Gandhi and other Caste Hindu leaders like Madam Mohan Malviya and B.S. Moonjeand. No consensus was reached on the two issues.

On 6 August 1932, the British Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald announced a document famously known as the Communal Award, an order on the question of representation in India. The MacDonald award accepted the Dalit demand for a separate electorate that was advanced at the Round Table Conference but while it allocated seats in the provincial legislatures, it failed to take cognizance of the seats in the central legislature. The award further extended the franchise to those Depressed Class members qualified for voting in the general constituencies. The Award allocated 71 seats out of the total 1508 in the provincial legislatures for the Depressed Classes. In these 71 reserved seats, only a Depressed Class member had the right to vote and choose their own representative to the provincial legislature.

Province	Total number of Seats	Number of seats allotted to Depressed Classes (Macdonald Award)	Number of seats allotted to Depressed Classes (Poona Pact)
Madras	210	18	30
Bombay	200	10	15
Bengal	250	10	30
United Provinces	228	12	20
Punjab	175	-	8
Bihar	175	7	18
Central Provinces	112	-	20
Assam	108	10	7
North West Frontier Provinces	50	4	-
Total	1508	71	148

¹⁶Vasnat Moon, ed. *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches (Volume No. 9)* (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014), p. 51.

¹⁷Ibid, p. 52.

Table 1: Allocation of seats to depressed classes. Vasnat Moon, ed. *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches (Volume No. 9)* (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014), p. 88.

Separate electorates invited the venomous ire of the Congress, the Hindu Mahasabha, loyalist Scheduled Caste groups such as All-India Depressed Classes Association along with major sections of a vocal Hindu civil society. The Hindu Mahasabha wholeheartedly rejected the provisions of separate representation and criticized it as an attempt to break the spirit of the nationalist movement. Gandhi claimed that, “the separate electorates will create a division among the Hindus and will lead to bloodshed...Untouchable hooligans will make common cause with Muslim hooligans and will kill the Caste Hindus.”¹⁸ Gandhi had vowed to resist the provisions at the cost of his life and kept his words as he sat on a fast unto death on 20 September 1932 for the immediate withdrawal of the separate electorates for the Depressed Classes.¹⁹ Gandhi’s fast caught the attention of the entire country and led many prominent leaders of the Congress to persuade Dr. Ambedkar to accept the system of joint electorates in place of separate electorates. As National Government headed by Ramsay MacDonald left the matter to the Depressed Class representatives, specifically to Ambedkar to negotiate the matter, deliberations between Rajagopalachari, Rajendra Prasad, Madan Mohan Malviya, M.C. Rajah and Dr. Ambedkar followed. The agreement came to be known as the Poona (Yervada) Pact and replaced the separate electorate of the Communal with joint electorates.

The Poona Pact doubled the number of the reserved constituencies from 71 seats to 148 seats in the provincial legislatures. In the United Provinces, the number of seats increased from 12 to 20 seats. The pact also formulated a unique system wherein,

All the members of the Depressed Classes registered in the general electoral roll in the constituency, will form an electoral college, which will elect a panel of four Depressed Classes members. These four members has been elected by the vote of the Scheduled Caste voters in the primary phase. In the

¹⁸Vasnat Moon, ed. *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches (Volume No. 9)* (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014) p. 52.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 82.

second phase, the four-person getting the highest number of votes in each primary election shall be the candidate for election by the general electorate.²⁰

In a two-day conference on 23rd May and 24th May 1936, the All India Adi Hindu Mahasabha passed important resolutions, reiterating the fact that they did not view the Poona Pact as bringing forth positive relief for the Depressed Classes.²¹ First, the Mahasabha opposed the use of the word 'Harijan' and demanded a ban on the use of the word while referring to the Depressed Classes. Second, it demanded free primary education for Scheduled Caste students. Third, the Mahasabha drew the attention of the government towards the prevalence of forced labour and demanded that a committee consisting of a European member, a Hindu, a Muslim and 2 Depressed Class members investigate the matter and find means for its abolition. Significantly, the conference accepted Dr. Ambedkar's leadership, supported his decision to convert to Buddhism at Yeola, and proposed to form a committee to study religious conversions as an emancipatory method of struggle.²² At several protest demonstrations, Adi-Hindu leaders criticized the resolutions of the Poona Pact and termed it as yet another instance of historical betrayal towards the Scheduled Caste community by the upper Caste-led Congress party. In Agra, the chamar community organised a protest on 3 April 1937 against the Poona Pact under the leadership of Manik Chand, a community leader from the Jatav Mahasabha.²³ The *Times of India* reported the participation of around 2000 protestors.²⁴

In Jaunpur, a conference was organised by the Adi Hindus had over 3000 people in attendance.²⁵ Bhagat Sumerdas Jaiswar, who presided over the meeting expressed his gratitude to the British government for heeding to the demands of the Depressed Classes and slammed

²⁰ Ibid, p. 89.

²¹ *Times of India*, 25 May 1936, p. 13. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Times of India*, 5 April 1938, p. 14. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Times of India*, 14 June 1938. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper.

the Congress for foiling their hard-won victory. His rousing speech warned the Depressed Class members that the Congress would invariably perpetuate the miseries of the past: “Do not believe on getting the *swaraj*, Congress will remove your troubles, your hardships will be doubled.”²⁶ Separate electorates, Jaiswar argued, would be the only institutional redressal mechanism that would secure the civil and political rights of the Depressed Classes.

The Congress’s attempt at pacifying the Depressed Class communities stressed repeatedly that they secured an increase in the number of seats for Scheduled Castes from the 71 to 148. However, what was left unsaid, but dissected by several community members, was that the Poona Pact’s resolutions awarded the Congress as the sole beneficiary by retaining the power to elect Schedule Caste candidates, even within reserved constituencies firmly within the grasp of caste Hindu voters. Dr. Ambedkar acknowledged the disaster when he reconsidered the consequences of the pact:

Although, the Poona pact has doubled the number of Depressed Caste seats, but it also took away the right to the double vote. This increase in the number of seats can never be deemed for the compensation for the loss of the double vote. The second vote given by the communal award is a priceless privilege. Its values as a political weapon is beyond reckoning”²⁷

The Communal Award had guaranteed the value of both the Depressed Class vote and candidate, ensuring that no party could dare ignore or manipulate the communities.

The Government of India Act, passed on 4 August 1935 carried forth all the provisions proposed by the Poona Pact, and further increased the total tally of the reserved constituencies from 148 to 151. Significantly, the Act substituted the term ‘Depressed Classes’ with ‘Scheduled Castes’, marking a new official terminology to refer to the ex-untouchables. The

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Vasnat Moon, ed. *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches (Volume No. 9)* (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014), p. 90.

1937 election was the first election held under the Government of India Act of 1935. Of the total 151 reserved constituencies, the Congress contested on 139 seats.²⁸ Other parties like the National Agriculturist Party, Muslim League and independent candidates contested on 137 seats.²⁹ The Congress managed a victory in 78 reserved constituencies and the remaining went to non-congress and independent candidates.³⁰ It is also important to note that ‘The Hindu voters in a joint electorate are almost always in a majority, if not in an overwhelming majority and the Scheduled Castes voters are almost always in a minority, if not in a hopeless minority.’³¹

In the 1930 elections, some members from the Chamar community had been elected to the United Provinces legislative assembly. In Lucknow, Ramdayal Chamar was elected unopposed in the bye-election in 1930 as an independent candidate. Later, in the legislative elections, Ramdayal Chamar was re-elected to the Lucknow seat with 624 (73.43%) votes.³² In Dehradun, Tappu Ram Mochi won the election with 1,329 votes.³³ In Bulandsahar, Arjun Chamar was also elected with 3,006 votes (90.23 %) votes as an independent candidate.³⁴ However, the electoral success of these lower caste candidates must be contextualised with the Congress party’s decision to boycott the elections during the non-cooperation movement. Some reports suggested that the Congress Youth League not only boycotted the 1930 elections but had also attempted to jeopardize the chances of its opponents by nominating dummy candidates. These ‘dummy’ candidates belonged to the sweeper or cobbler castes that the Congress hoped would

²⁸ P.D.Reeves, B.D.Graham, J.M.Goodman, *A Handbook to Elections in United Provinces, 1920-1950* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1975), pp. 246-48.

²⁹ *Times of India*, 1 April 1937, p. 33. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper.

³⁰ P.D.Reeves, B.D.Graham, J.M.Goodman, *A Handbook to Elections in United Provinces, 1920-1950* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1975), p. 247.

³¹ Vasnat Moon, ed. *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches (Volume No. 9)* (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014), p. 154.

³² *Ibid*, p. 254.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 160.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 161.

discourage both dominant caste candidates and voters from participating in the elections. In instances where dominant caste candidates chose to enter the electoral race, lower caste voters were mobilized to outnumber and vote down the candidate, and thereby preserve the intended effect of nullifying the elections.³⁵ However, the Congress steadily denied these claims. B.N. Sharga, a member of the United Province Dharma Rakshni Sabha, (a Hindu revivalist organization) held that the Congress remained neutral during the 1930s elections and its followers strictly adhered to the high command's call for boycott. Ramdayal Chamar's victory for instance could not be subscribed to Congress's withdrawal as he had also won in the last bye-election and was a popular leader.³⁶

As the signing of Poona Pact faced criticisms from the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha and the Jatav Mahasabha, the Congress felt the pressure and political need to work for the uplift of the Scheduled Caste communities in the United Provinces. The Harijan Sevak Sangh's upliftment programs and the temple entry movement launched by Gandhi after the Poona Pact became the Congress's core strategies to placate the alienated and discontent Scheduled Castes. The Congress also felt the need to foster Dalit leaders to garner the support of the Scheduled Castes in the seats reserved for the Scheduled Caste constituencies. This led to the formation of the All-India Depressed Classes league in 1935, under the presidency of Jagjivan Ram, a leader belonging to the Chamar community. Another Chamar leader, Prithvi Singh Azad was the general secretary of the League. While the Scheduled Castes emerged as a new power bloc who could not be ignored any longer, the Congress's untouchability eradication programs failed to have any true impact. Gandhi's orthodoxy and reactionary politics thwarted the

³⁵Ibid, p. 71.

³⁶ *Indian Franchise Report* (Vol. 4) (Calcutta: Government of India, Central Publication Branch, 1932), p.770.

possibilities of radical change. On the other hand, Dr. Ambedkar formed the Independent Labour Party at the same time but its reach was very much limited to Maharashtra.

The demands placed at the Round Table Conference (in 1930 and 1931) and the signing of the Poona Pact changed the political direction of the Dalit movement towards a pan-Indian character and Dr. Ambedkar emerged as a tall leader of the Dalits in the 1940s. Mark Juergensmeyer termed this new turn in Dalit politics as the “Ambedkar alternative.”³⁷ Several strands of regionally assertive voices within Dalit movements across different provinces culminated in the formation of the All-India Scheduled Caste Federation under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar. Although the Adi Hindu movement was assertive about the need for representation, the demand became more central for the Federation as its members, who were largely educated Dalits felt the need for claiming political rights as they migrated and settled in urban areas. The first autonomous political outfit of the Scheduled Castes participated in the 1945 elections of 1945 and although it failed to win any seat in United Provinces it emerged on as a formidable alternative political front.

The Scheduled Caste Federation (hereafter, Federation or SCF) demanded a revocation of the Poona Pact and separate settlements for Scheduled Castes and Tribes. Several prominent leaders of the Adi-Hindu and the Jatav Mahasabha movements joined the Uttar Pradesh Scheduled Caste Federation. At this juncture, two major shifts took place: First, the demand for political and the administrative representation became dominant. Second, the focus of the socio-religious aspects of the Adi Hindu movement receded to the background. Significantly, assimilatory attempts to bestow a Kshatriya identity on the Chamar community was thwarted by the rational politics of the Federation in the 1940s. Jatiya Chamars had begun to use the

³⁷Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religious Rebels in the Punjab, The Ad Dharm Challenge to Caste*. (New Delhi: Navyana Publication, 2009), p. 163.

‘Jatav’ title to distance themselves from the ‘Chamar’ term and simultaneously espouse a ‘kshatriya’ past. However, the SCF’s puncturing of these strategies of assimilation led to the transformation of Chamars as a separate political category in the United Provinces.

The arrival of independent Dalit leadership punctured the Congress’s claim that the party was an unequivocal representative of all communities in India and this political new ground in turn allowed the government to neutralise the reach of the Congress. Even during the war years, the government acknowledged Ambedkar as a powerful leader of the Scheduled Castes and invited him as a representative of the community for meetings held to decide the future policies and programs. In turn, the Congress came to be gradually sidelined on matters concerning the Dalit cause in India. Ambedkar and M.C. Rajah were invited to take part in the proceedings of the Cripps Mission in 1942. The Depressed Class League was not even considered for dialogue, despite repeated appeals from the Congress. Prithvi Azad, the general secretary of the League, questioned the legitimacy of the Scheduled Caste Federation as the sole representative of the Scheduled Castes. The League also criticized the British government for playing a game of divide and rule and exploiting the SCF’s demand for separate settlements to create a wedge within the Hindu community.

Several provincial leaders who were smarting from sense of betrayal by the Congress, showed their faith in Dr Ambedkar and M.C. Rajah and accepted the Scheduled Caste Federation as a legitimate organization to represent the Dalits. Later in 1942, Ambedkar was invited to the Viceroy’s Executive Council by Viceroy Linlithgow to raise the grievances of the Scheduled Castes. In continuation of the positive discrimination policy, the government extended reservation in the Indian Civil Services, including 8.5 percent in the central government recruitment, technical training for the Scheduled Caste students and scholarships worth rupees

three lakhs for technical training in India and abroad. The Government also included a seat for a Scheduled Caste member in the Central assembly.³⁸

Meanwhile, as the binary between Hindu and Muslim communities became sharper in the 1940s, the Federation's leaders actively demanded that the Scheduled Castes be recognized as a separate, third party. Dr Ambedkar assertively put forward this demand in his public speeches and in several memorandums addressed to the government. On 14 June 1945, Viceroy Wavell convened a meeting in which N Sivraj, the Federation's president was in attendance. Dissatisfied with the underrepresentation of the scheduled caste members in the meeting, the Scheduled Caste Federation lobbied for the inclusion of four more of its members in the proposed executive council: Dr Ambedkar, N.Sivraj, Jogendranath Mondal and Ram Prasad Tamta (United Provinces). The Congress also put forward two names: Radhanath Das from Bengal and Munniswami Pillai from Madras. The Wavell government provisionally selected Dr. Ambedkar as the labour minister and Munniswami Pillai as the education minister to the council. Although the council was not formed due to differences between the Congress and the Muslim League, the Federation emerged as an independent party, recognised not only by the community it claimed to represent but also by the government.

The 1946 election laid bare the fault lines of the joint electorate system. The fears of the SCF leaders and Ambedkar came true and were reflected in the election results. The Congress was the major beneficiary of this new structure and swept all the constituencies reserved for the Scheduled Castes. The Scheduled Caste Federation won only two seats out of the total 151 seats that were reserved. While the Federation managed to enter Bengal and the Central Provinces, the Congress swept all twenty reserved seats in the United Provinces.³⁹ This result

³⁸ *Indian Franchise Report* (Vol. 4) (Calcutta: Government of India, Central Publication Branch, 1932), p. 905.

³⁹ Graham, Goodman and P.D.Reeves, *A Handbook to Elections in United Provinces, 1920-1950* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1975), pp. 250-53.

however, must not be conceived as one-sided victory for the Congress as a closer scrutiny reflects the steady rise of the independent politics of the Scheduled Castes in the United Provinces.

In the 1937 elections, a significant number of Chamar candidates contested from double member reserved constituencies independently. However, even in most of the seats they contested unsuccessfully, they managed to receive a large number of votes in the primary elections. In the 1946 elections, the Scheduled Caste Federation contested unsuccessfully on 11 seats, in which nine seats were urban and two seats were in rural constituencies. In the nine urban seats, the Scheduled Caste Federation received 19,687 votes i.e., 9.90% of the total votes. In the two rural constituencies, the Federation's total vote share was 893 with 0.23%. On the other hand, the Congress won eight urban seats out of the nine seats it contested and 25 out of the 27 reserved constituencies. The vote share of the Congress was 80,787 (77.41%) and 4, 80, 343 (63.17%) respectively.⁴⁰ The two-phase election system for reserved constituencies proved disastrous for an independent party like Scheduled Caste Federation. In the primaries, only Scheduled Caste voter could vote for the Scheduled Caste Candidate. This process was followed only when the number of nominations filed by the Scheduled Caste candidates was more than four. This meant that the phase was non-obligatory when the number of candidates were four or less than four. In the second phase, the reserved constituency's electorates comprised of caste Hindus, and in this phase each voter had two votes in which, the voter could exercise flexibility to vote for two general candidates or two SC candidates or, for one each of the general and the reserved candidates.⁴¹ In the 1946 elections, only three seats faced the obligatory primary election, while the remaining seats had four or less than four candidates contesting. In UP, the SCF fielded candidates only on four seats due to limited resources and

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p.116.

the unavailability of suitable candidates. However, in Agra and Allahabad seats, where the Federation fielded their candidates, they performed excellently in the primary elections. In the primary elections, the Federation won nine seats, double than the number of seats won by the Congress.

Unpacking the voting pattern in Agra will help us understand the phenomenon clearly. The four Scheduled Caste candidates who contested on a Congress ticket received 27.1 percent of the votes while the panel consisting of four candidates from the Scheduled Caste Federation received 46.69 percent. It is important to understand that Agra was one of the centres of Dalit mobilization and the Chamar community constituted the highest proportion in the constituency's demography. The Federation's Karan Singh Ken and the Ram Narayan got 24% and the 22% of the votes respectively, the Congress candidate Ram Chandra Sehra got 26.97% and the Hindu Mahasabha's schedule caste candidate Pyarelal got 14.58% in the primary election.⁴² All these candidates qualified for the second phase of the elections. In Allahabad, the Congress possessed a minor lead over the Federation: while the Congress got 51.27%, the SCF managed 48.23% of the total votes in the primary election.⁴³ The SCF secured three seats while Congress managed to win the remaining single seats. The Congress candidate Masuria Din got 49.4% of the total votes while the Federation's candidates, R.S. Shayamlal, Prabhu Dayal and Kallan got 19.58%, 10.49%, and 10.4% of the total votes respectively in the primary elections.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, the Atlee government announced a Cabinet Mission for planning the transfer of power and the formulation of a constitution. The Mission reached India in February 1946, just after the year's elections and representation became the central question once more. Unlike the

⁴² *Ibid*, pp. 250-53.

⁴³ *Ibid*.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 316.

Cripps Mission, the Cabinet Mission met the leaders of the All-India Depressed Classes league including Jagjeevan Ram, Prithvi Azad and Radhadeb Das. The League also submitted a memorandum in which they placed their faith in the Congress to speak for the Scheduled Castes and argued that the Dalit cause is neither religious nor social. They reiterated that that the All-India Depressed Class league represented the Scheduled Caste community as reflected in the 1946 election results. They also opposed the Federation's demands for separate electorates and that the Scheduled Caste be considered a separate category. In acknowledging the Congress as the legitimate party to represent the Dalit community, the Cabinet Mission side lined the Scheduled Caste Federation.

The Federation argued that the Cabinet Mission had neglected the demands and undermined the Scheduled Castes in the making of future governments and constitution. On 4 June 1945, an All-India Scheduled Caste Federation meeting was held at Dr. Ambedkar's home in Dadar. The Federation's working committee took serious note of the fact that in the Mission's long document of 5000 words, the Scheduled Castes were not referred once. The committee then authorized a council to take direct action against the Mission and pointed to the fallacy that the Scheduled Castes did not require autonomous representation. In fact, post-election violence specifically targeted the Federation's candidates, voters, and campaigners. Ration shops operated by caste Hindus stopped giving supplies to Scheduled Castes.⁴⁵ Community members claimed that instead of taking cognizance of the matter neutrally, the police sided with the dominant castes.⁴⁶ Ambedkar asserted that even though Gandhi and the Congress had serious disagreements with the proposal, the side lining of special provisions for Scheduled Castes motivated their favourable stance towards the Mission.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ *Times of India*, 5 June 1946. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Times of India*, 18 July 1946. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper.

Furious over the conduct of the Cabinet Mission, the then general secretary of the Federation, P.N. Rajbhoj said that “if the attempt is made to ignore the Schedule Caste and move ahead without their cooperation then there may be a civil war between the Caste Hindus and the Scheduled Caste.”⁴⁸ Ambedkar argued that the *swaraj* congress is demanding was nothing but the transfer of power from the hands of the British to the hands of caste Hindus. He claimed that if needed, he would seek justice at international tribunals for the Dalit’s cause.⁴⁹

Dr Ambedkar refuted Congress’s claim of representing the Scheduled Castes and called out the British government for “gross misinterpretation” of the elections. In his telegram he argued that Caste Hindu votes decided the victory on all Scheduled Caste constituencies.⁵⁰ He even demanded that a referendum be held to decide the tussle between the joint electorate and the separate electorate system.⁵¹ In a press conference in Madras, N Sivaraj, the president of the Federation criticized the Congress for stabbing the political rights of Scheduled Caste in India.⁵² He also appealed to the government to seek redressal from an international tribunal or national-level committee to understand whether Ambedkar’s Federation or Gandhi’s Congress enjoyed the support of the scheduled castes.⁵³ The working committee of the Federation passed a resolution in response to the Cabinet Mission plan in Bombay on 5 June 1946 demanding that Scheduled Caste have the Constitutionally mandated right to be represented in the legislature with the separate electorates. Additionally, the resolution demanded that the Scheduled Caste candidates who topped in the primary phase in the last election be given right to nominate five other members from the Scheduled Caste community to the advisory council.⁵⁴ P.N. Rajbhoj,

⁴⁸ *Times of India*, 2 December 1946. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper.

⁴⁹ *Times of India*, 18 February 1946. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper.

⁵⁰ *Times of India*, 22 July 1946, p. 9. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Times of India*, 6 June 1946, p. 7. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper.

the general secretary of the Federation, met Gandhi on 11 July 1946 to reiterate that the Congress Harijans like Jagjivan Ram had no rightful place in the newly constituted interim government as they were not a true representative of the Scheduled Caste community.⁵⁵

The viceroy in his proposed twelve-member council allocated five portfolios to the Congress including one Scheduled Caste member, five seats were allocated to the Muslim league and one each for Anglo-Indians and the Sikhs. This was further extended to six seats for the Congress. From the Congress, Jagjivan Ram was nominated for the allocated Scheduled Caste seat and was given the portfolio of Labour Ministry, earlier held by Dr. Ambedkar in the previous Executive council. In a telegram to Atlee, Dr Ambedkar wrote,

“In the Shimla conference, viceroy promised to increase the Scheduled Caste to two in the 14-member council. We demanded 3 seats but compromised for 2 seats. It is a gross breach of the solemn promise after long deliberations. The Scheduled Caste nominee does not represent the Scheduled Caste and entirely elected by the Hindu votes and creature of Congress. Representation by a Scheduled Caste congressman is no representation to Scheduled Caste, it is representation of the Congress. The Cabinet mission is heaping upon the Scheduled Caste one wrong after another. It has bent to sacrifice Scheduled Caste independent politics to appease the congress... I hope some sense of justice left in British government.”⁵⁶

The Scheduled Caste Federation rejected the interim council in highest possible terms and organized protests. In Lucknow, the Federation’s leaders disrupted Congress meetings and gave a call of Satyagraha against the Cabinet Mission. Six leaders of the Federation’s leaders were arrested for organizing protest gathering in Lucknow on July 15. In a protest on 16 July 1946 against the council meeting, some 223 members of the Scheduled Caste Federation branch in Lucknow were arrested by the police for defying the government order prohibiting the gathering.⁵⁷ On July 22, dozens of Scheduled Caste persons protested in the front of the

⁵⁵ *Times of India*, 13 July 1946, p. 1. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper.

⁵⁶ *Times of India*, 18 June 1946, p. 5. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

legislative chamber in Lucknow as the ministers' proceedings of the day began. All protestors were arrested by the police.⁵⁸ In certain regions of the United Provinces, the Chamar community withdrew their labour and stopped performing the traditional work of carrying cattle carcasses. Some also refused to cultivate the lands of dominant castes unless they were paid adequately.⁵⁹ This led to a rising animosity between the Chamars and dominant castes including Jats and Gujjars. At many places, incidents of clash were reported. In retaliation, dominant castes prevented Chamars from grazing their cattle in their field and prohibited them from entering their fields at many places. In the meanwhile, Ambedkar wrote several letters to the Atlee government urging them to reconsider the Schedule Caste demand for a separate electorate and adequate representation in the council. At a meeting presided over by Jogendranath Mondal in Calcutta, Ambedkar described the Cabinet Mission's proposal as 'atom bomb' that 'has been dropped on the cause of the Scheduled Caste in India'.⁶⁰ Ambedkar was not satisfied with the allotment of one seat to a community that constituted 60 million. But all appeals and demands were met with deafening silence in the context of sharp polarization between the Congress and the Muslim League politics. However, even as the Scheduled Caste question was silenced on the national stage, resentment persisted at the provincial levels.

In 1946, P.N. Rajbhoj evoked a provision in the Poona Pact pact to scrutinize the terms after every 10 years on the call of the Scheduled Castes,

It was stipulated in the pact when it was signed that Scheduled Caste would be entitled to ask for its revision after 10 years. Ten years has been passed now, Scheduled Caste have found that pact is not in their interest so clamouring for its abrogation.⁶¹

⁵⁸ *Times of India*, 23 July 1946, p. 1. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper.

⁵⁹ Ramnarayan S. Rawat, "Making Claims for Power: A New Agenda in Dalit Politics of Uttar Pradesh, 1946-48," *Modern Asian Studies* 37, no. 3 (2003): 604.

⁶⁰ *Times of India*, 1 July 1946, p. 6. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper.

⁶¹ *Times of India*, 29 July 1946, p. 7. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper.

The Federation organized the observance of anti-Poona Pact week in every province. In Madras, the observance week and its activities were presided by the N. Sivaraj, the president of the Federation.⁶² In March 1947, the Federation declared a call for demonstration at the legislative assembly against the neglect of Scheduled Castes and their concerns during the process of power transfer.⁶³ The ruling Congress government arrested all the protestors even as the Federation appealed to the government to rethink their stance. Pyarelal Kureel, a Federation leader from Uttar Pradesh said,

It is wrong to think that the Scheduled Castes are against the Congress demand for political freedom or that they want to defeat the so-called popular Government. They are equally patriotic and democratic in their outlook. Their demands are just and are not opposed to the principles of social justice and constitutional democracy. I earnestly ask the Government to try to understand them.⁶⁴

Ramnarayan Rawat has argued that the Poona Pact constituted a defining moment in the formulation of a Dalit agenda in the 1940s. The Pact created structural constraints to the emergence of a radical *achhut* polity that would hope to win elections and challenge the Congress.⁶⁵ I agree with Rawat that the Poona pact was the defining point of the Scheduled Caste politics in the 1940s but it is not the articulation of an *acchut* identity but rather an autonomous identity of the Scheduled Castes which later transformed into the category of a Dalit. Chamars particularly, wanted to shed the stigma attached to *acchut* and this illustrates the wide appeal of an autonomous social formation outside the Hindu fold. Eradicating the stigma of untouchability was the core of several anti-caste movements. The Scheduled Caste Federation made a claim on the administrative and later, constitutional category of the Scheduled Caste rather than the *acchut* identity, emphasizing the need for representative

⁶² *Times of India*, 23 October 1945, p. 6. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper.

⁶³ *The Pioneer*, 28 April 1947. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Ramnarayan S. Rawat, "Making Claims for Power: A New Agenda in Dalit Politics of Uttar Pradesh, 1946-48," *Modern Asian Studies* 37, no. 3 (2003): 587.

politics based on the social, education and economic backwardness. Sekhar Bandopadhyaya in his study of the Namsudhras in Bengal tries to establish the politics of Scheduled Caste vis-à-vis the Congress and the British government. He argues that the Namshudra movement was integrated into the Congress's agenda and merged with national politics. It may be true that a number of the Federation's leaders along with their supporters were co-opted by the Congress. However, the Federation remained an independent and autonomous wave within anti-caste movements and politics, sustaining monetary hardships and propaganda politics by the Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha. Uttar Pradesh is one example where this is reflected in the ensuing success of the Republican Party of India in the 1960s and later, the emergence and political career of the Bahujan Samaj Party.

This abrogation of the pact remained an important part of Scheduled Caste politics. Buddha Priya Maurya, the face of the RPI in Uttar Pradesh, was against reserved constituencies allotted for the Scheduled Castes and announced he would never contest from one.⁶⁶ The Republican Party also opposed the extension of seats reserved for the Scheduled Castes and Tribes in in the Bombay legislative assembly and contended that the practice did not serve the interests of the Scheduled Castes.⁶⁷ Kanshiram, the founder of the Bahujan Samaj Party, held a huge demonstration on the 50th anniversary of the Poona Pact and released a book named *Chamcha Age* (The Age of Stooges) on the same day.⁶⁸ The book explains the impact of the Pact in damaging the political fortunes of the Dalits and introducing the caste Hindu strategy of creating stooges within the Dalit communities to achieve their aims.

The immense focus on the need for political representation led to a fading away of the Adi Hindu movement's primary category of emancipation and the cultivation of a *new* socio-

⁶⁶ Personal Interview with Mr. Banarsi Das in Munirka, New Delhi (7February 2021).

⁶⁷ *Times of India*, December 22, 1959, p. 11. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper.

⁶⁸ Kanshiram, *The Chamcha Age: An Era of the Stooges* (New Delhi: Siddhartha publications, 2015), ii.

religious identity. There were many reasons for this transformation. The most important was the successful penetration of the Congress's untouchability programs among the Scheduled Castes which rendered a veneer of social acceptability and inclusivity. Through the 1930s and 40s, the British government chose its moments to grant, abandon or revoke the legitimacy of political demands and those who got to represent them. As the Hindu-Muslim binary sharpened, the shift in government attitude diminished the claims of the Dalit movement in the United Provinces. However, the setback provided new political grounds for the Dalits, particularly Chamars. The Chamar community took a leading role in the foundation and the political development of the Federation in the United Provinces and even dominated its leadership. The Poona pact became the major agenda of the public debate and the mobilization of the Dalits in the United Provinces.

Even as the clamour for political representation took centre stage in the Federation's politics, the Adi-Hindu movement's stress on the necessity of a new socio-religious identity took different shape. The idea of the untouchable as an 'original inhabitant' and the demand for the separate religious identity of Adi Hindu dissipated and changed form. The Government of India (Scheduled Castes) Amendment Order 1941 included the Jatavs in the list of the Scheduled Caste and extended all the safeguards.⁶⁹ The demand of the Chamars for a dignified identity got legal sanction from the government through a new constitutional term of the 'Jatav' but in practice, could not displace the earlier Chamar identity. Shallow claims of assimilation revealed the fact that caste Hindus did not fully accept the Chamars as equals and continued to address and treat the community with stigma. This establishes that an identity that any individual or group seeks to attain does not merely depend upon the legal authenticity or individual choice, but also on the recognition by the social milieu. Within the

⁶⁹ Ramnarayan Yadevandu, *Yaduvansh (Jatavvansh) ka Itihas* (Ghaziabad: Prakash Singh, 1942), p. 152.

operation of the caste system, respectability could only be bestowed by the Caste Hindus or the upper Varna. Charles Taylor argued that

Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its essence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or a group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Non recognition or misrecognition can inflict harm; can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.⁷⁰

So in the context of the Chamars the essence of using the ‘Jatav’ Identity was neutralized and in contemporary times came to be used simultaneously with ‘Chamar.’

The lacuna of the political representation brought about by the Poona Pact became a major impediment in the path of independent politics of the Dalits. Yet, the Republican Party and Bahujan Samaj Party cultivated a counter hegemony based on the historic betrayal of the Dalits by the Congress and Gandhi, not only puncturing the Harijan consciousness manufactured by the Congress but by underscoring the relevance of political representation as the only meaningful way of progress in society. The political association and influence of the Dr. Ambedkar ideas on the Chamars developed strongly in the 1940s and the Scheduled Caste Federation became the first political platform and bedrock of an independent and autonomous political movement among the Dalits, particularly among the Chamars in the United Provinces. This also fostered the first line of political leadership to the Dalit movement which later shaped or merged into the Republican Party formed after independence. Although the 1946 election results failed to provide adequate representation from the Scheduled Caste Federation in the council, a sense of historical betrayal shaped a political consciousness among the Dalits. In the next Chapter, I discuss how the Dalit literary movement in independent India highlighted this

⁷⁰ Charles Taylor. ‘The Politics of Recognition’ in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 75.

betrayal to represent a counter hegemonic discourse against the Congress.

New Histories for a New Future: Literary and Cultural Assertions in Independent India

Commemorative projects have been historically wed with the politics of hegemony. The dominance and valour of certain ethnicities, castes and linguistic identities have been projected by commemorative structures, cementing their superiority as an acceptable and justifiable fact. Yet, public spheres have been contested spaces, as marginalised and minority communities assert their community histories including episodes of contribution and sacrifice. Dalit assertions in independent India laid claim to an egalitarian public space and civil society through the popularization of alternative and minority history narratives. Such narratives widely employed the motif of historic betrayals to stress the significance of *new* knowledge systems, foster the sense of fraternity and espouse constitutional values as safeguards for the community. Dalit commemorative projects and literary movements not only paid public tribute to its community leaders but also articulated its collective inheritance. In certain instances, especially during the tenure of the BSP in Uttar Pradesh, these efforts directly deployed state power through acts of fund allocations, official naming and renaming efforts and remaking of public spaces. In this chapter, I trace the literary movement led by the Dalit activists to chart the motifs and pedagogic efforts of the Dalit movement in Uttar Pradesh. These early literary interventions shaped the later day Bahujan Samaj Party led-state commemoration of anti-caste histories in the form of installing statues and constructing memorials, parks, and the museums. The chapter also highlights the role of these projects in contouring a new imagination of a Buddhist self, in the making of Dalit consciousness among the Chamars.

This chapter traces the process of developing a Dalit/bahujan counter hegemony in mounting a challenge to the dominant, Brahmanical interpretations of the past in independent India. The emergence of the Republican Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party in the Uttar Pradesh

marked a new framework of politics and identity based on Ambedkarite thought. The political success of the BSP movement forced the wider attention of the rest of the country to the Dalit cause. The Chamars among the Dalits continue to be the largest electoral support base of the BSP and have historically played a transformative role in the articulation of a 'new' Dalit imaginary. In a public contestation of Hindu appropriation and co-option of Dalit communities, the BSP's project staked claims to an independent and rich history of the anti-caste struggles, symbols and leadership through its commemorative efforts.

Acts of commemoration publicly acknowledge the making of history and stake a claim in the production of knowledge. The Foucauldian concept of knowledge /power is very relevant to understand the relation between the history, dominance or subjugation. Foucault argued that power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations.¹ This rightly explains the domination of the brahmanical hegemony in India manufactured from different institutions. In her study of the 1947 India-Pakistan partition, Urvashi Butalia points out that studies have primarily concentrated on the political developments of the period and ignored memories and narratives of people who lived through violence, mass migration, and rehabilitation efforts.² Collective memories and narratives of Dalits are testimonies of the past, yet they have been neglected in standard historiographies of India.

In several third world countries, the process of decolonization led to emergence of the nationalist consciousness and a transfer of the power from an imperial entity to local elites. The modern nation of India, dominated by the caste Hindu elites invested in inculcating a historical consciousness that celebrates a single story of the nationalistic project. A common

¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of sexuality Volume 1* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p. 94.

² Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (Gurugram: Penguin Publications, 2017), p. 6.

consciousness was developed through curriculum, school plays, newspapers, films, and television shows by stressing the themes of economic drain and domination during the colonial period, and popular Gandhian protests that overthrew the imperial yoke. Several caste Hindu Congress leaders became new symbols of national commemoration. In the process of the homogenization of the country's past, histories of contentions and uncomfortable challenges to internal authority of a singular struggle for independence were brushed aside. However, as Dipesh Chakrabarty argued, the nation cannot have just one standardised historical narrative, but rather is founded on the silencing of multiple contesting narratives.³

Wendy Doniger argued that 'Brahmins erased much of the low caste contribution to Indian culture and erased its presence in it at all.'⁴ Caste elites codified the rules of the historical writing and simultaneously balked at other accounts as 'popular' or inauthentic histories. Yet, these so-called inauthentic histories reflect acts of rebellion in choosing to remember and record collective or individual memories of struggle, aspiration, assimilation, and new imaginations. Writings of local activists and political leaders also provide us access to the collective memories of Dalits and the ways in which it shaped the ideological and the cultural discourse of the movement.

The anti-caste movement from the very beginning was the movement for the democratic values and a claim for a dignified and egalitarian social system based on equality. The denial of a history of the Dalits by the caste elites led to the denial of social justice and fractured the democratic privilege of representation of marginalised voices as envisaged in the constitution. The past is important for building any movement with fractured communities, and the Dalit movement is not an exception to this. In the early twentieth century, the Indian National

³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33, no.9 (1998): 473-479.

⁴ Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (New Delhi: Penguin Publications, 2010), p. 39.

Congress celebrated the glories of the subcontinent's past to inculcate a feeling of association for the making of a national identity. Similarly, Dalit movements imagined overarching umbrella identities to emphasize the common enemy in the brahmanical system, create a shared sense of struggle, and foster a collective among various, often hierarchically placed oppressed communities. In Gramscian terms, the Dalit waged a 'war of position' to challenge the hegemony of the caste Hindus.⁵ Although the hegemony of historical narratives built by the caste Hindus continues to be a major hindrance for the emancipation of Dalits, the modern Dalit movement understood it well and repurposed standardized chronologies of the national movement to chart a history of betrayal, backstabbing and false promises that intended to keep the Dalits in a state of subjugation.

Education played an important role in the development of consciousness among the Dalit masses. With the advent of education, the zeal to know their historical anti-caste pasts was strongly felt among the literate Dalit members, particularly in communities such as the Chamars. This was also aided by the community's direct participation and contribution to the Adi-Hindu movement, the Scheduled Caste Federation, the Republican Party of India, and the later day, Bahujan Samaj movement. Badri Narayan writes that there was a tremendous growth in Dalit literature and histories after the 1960s. Such literature varied from small pamphlets and booklets to complete, encyclopaedic histories with 'dissenting narratives'.⁶ These literatures and histories played a significant role in the formation of a strong socio-political consciousness among the Dalits in Uttar Pradesh and constituted a deconstruction of history by the Dalits. Major historical figures for the Dalits no longer included the standardized lists of Gandhi, Nehru, Subash Bose or Sardar Patel. Instead, Ambedkar became a central figure of heroic proportions within the Dalit movement which steadily included

⁵ Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, eds. *Selections from Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), p. 495.

⁶ Badri Narayan calls Dalit histories as 'dissenting narratives.' See, Badri Narayan, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India: Culture, Identity and Politics* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006), p. 27.

Buddha, Jyotirao Phule, E.V. Ramasamy or 'Periyar', Ravidas, Kabir, Udham Singh and other anti-caste icons from across the length and breadth of the country. Later on, the political success of the Dalit movement, particularly under the leadership of Bahujan Samaj Party strengthened this legacy of historical consciousness in the form of memorialisation and commemoration. Badri Narayan pointed out that, 'With the rise of the Dalit political consciousness in Uttar Pradesh and the emergence of the Bahujan Samaj Party, which has been using cultural resources for the political mobilisation of the Dalits, the heroes of each caste are being converted into political resources by acquiring visual representation in forms that allow the illiterate and the semi-literate Dalits at the grass-roots level to easily visualise and then initialize them as symbols for their identity.'⁷

In independent India, the legacy of a singular national movement helped the Congress appeal to its new citizens, and dominate the politics of the India in its early decades. The Scheduled Caste Federation also contested elections under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar, but failed to win a single seat. In the 1951 Uttar Pradesh assembly election, the SCF contested thirty two seats out of the total 347 seats. However, the SCF failed to find suitable candidates for the rest of the seats. The Congress won by a large majority, and the SCF lost its deposit on twenty seats out of the total 32 seats it contested. In the meantime, internal conflicts within the Federation led to the resignation of several important leaders. N. Sivaraj, the President of the SCF addressed a letter to its executive committee accusing Dr. Ambedkar of making unilateral decisions regarding the organisation and sidestepping the President in the process. That Dr. Ambedkar had prepared a draft of the new constitution for the Federation without consulting the President was a particular cause of strife. Additionally, the charge claimed that copies were not provided to the President, despite members receiving them.⁸ In 1955, P.N.

⁷ Badri Narayan, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India: Culture, Identity and Politics*. (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006), p. 70.

⁸ *Times of India*, 13 April, 1955, p. 7. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper.

Rajbhoj also resigned from his position as the General-secretary after having served the SCF for twelve years. Referring to Ambedkar as an authoritarian who wished to be surrounded by his 'yes-men', Rajbhoj called out his intentions of becoming the sole representative of the Federation.⁹ However, Dr Ambedkar refuted these charges and blamed Rajbhoj for exploiting his position as the General-secretary for personal gains including diverting the organization's funds for his foreign trips.¹⁰

On 3 October 1957, the Scheduled Caste Federation was dissolved and replaced by the Republican Party of India. The date was significant as Dr. Ambedkar had left his Hindu identity behind and embraced Buddhism on the same date in 1956, along with thousands of his followers. This choice symbolically highlighted the Republican Party's commitment towards the cause of conversion of the Scheduled Castes and Backward Castes into Buddhism. The Republican Party of India promised to strive for 'the social, cultural, economic and the political betterment of all Backward and downtrodden people of India.'¹¹ In the 1962 elections, the RPI contested on sixty-eight Lok Sabha and 301 Assembly seats all-over India. However, the party only secured three Lok Sabha seats from Uttar Pradesh, and eleven assembly seats—of which eight seats (3.74 percentage of votes) came from Uttar Pradesh and remaining three seats were won from Maharashtra.¹² In the next assembly election in 1967, the RPI secured ten Assembly seats and a vote percentage of 4.1 but the party was reduced to mere two seats in the 1969 mid-term elections.¹³ It is interesting to note that the RPI's performance was impressive in Agra, Meerut, Rohilkhand and the Allahabad divisions. These areas were also important centres of the Adi-Hindu movement and Jatav assertion. Additionally, a significant numerical presence of the Chamar community in these regions

⁹ *Times of India*, 22 April 1955, p. 9. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper.

¹⁰ Rajbhoj later joined the Congress and was elected as a Rajya Sabha member from 1957 to 1962.

¹¹ *Times of India*, 5 October 1957. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper.

¹² *Statistical Report on General Election, 1962 to the legislative assembly of Uttar Pradesh* (New Delhi: Election commission of India, 1962), p. 15.

¹³ *Ibid.*

contributed to the successful electoral performance of the RPI. The success of the RPI in 1960s lies with the charismatic leadership of Buddha Priya Maurya, the President of the RPI and the party broadening its base among Muslims. Maurya, came from the chamar community and was known for his vociferous and powerful speeches. Having himself converted to Buddhism, he emphasized the larger political need for the same as an important strategy of Dalit emancipation.

However, by the 1970s, the RPI was completely crippled in the face of the then Congress-chief Indira Gandhi's populist politics. The appeal of Gandhi's *Garibi Hatao/ Eliminate Poverty* program, and the defection of important leaders including B.P. Maurya led to the decline of the RPI in Uttar Pradesh. This created a political vacuum within the Dalit politics in Uttar Pradesh, until the formation of the Bahujan Samaj Party in 1984. During these years, local activists of the BAMCEF (All India Backward and Mintoity Community Employees' Federation) spearheaded a powerful literary movement, fostering a political and cultural awareness among the Dalit community, particularly among the Chamars. This prepared the ground for the later rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party in the initial years of its formation.

As I discussed in the last chapter, the question of representation became a crucial political tool to secure a dignified identity for the Dalits after the Poona Pact. During the Adi Hindu movement, the narrative of a glorified past performed this political function for the Dalits. A poem by Swami Acchutanand reads,

*Aaye the yahan Arya aye, Tumko Das ban aabad ho;
Vo jeet 'Hari' Malik huye, tum Das ban aabad ho.
Purkhe tumhare the Baadshah¹⁴*

Your ancestors were rulers once, whether you remember or not.

Aryans came here from outside [the land],

¹⁴ Swami Acchutanand, *Harihar Bhajan Mala* (Hindi) (Agra), 1913.

and they made you slaves and settled here.

The legacy of the theory of *mulnivasi* or original inhabitant was carried forward by local Dalit activists. In the 1960s, the Republican Party and Buddh Mahasabha activists such as Buddha Sangh Premi campaigned extensively to spread the concept of the Dalit as a *mulnivasi*. In his poem on the Dalit claim for the original inhabitant of the land, Premi wrote,

*Hum mulnivasi bharat ke they,
Hume sataya logo ne,
Khud to unche ban baithe,
Acchut bataya hum logo ko.*¹⁵

We were the original habitants of India,
we were oppressed by the people,
and they (Aryans) made themselves superior and treated us as
untouchables.

Although Ambedkar had rejected the notion of the Dalit as a *mulnivasi*, the identity held great sway among the activists working in Uttar Pradesh, linking the Dalit movement in independent India with the narratives popularized by the earlier Adi-Hindu movement. With Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism in 1956, the identity did not fade away, and instead assumed a new shape in the claims of Dalit-Buddhists being the original inhabitants of the land. Songs, poetry and plays became a powerful tool to mobilize a population devoid of basic education. Banarsi Das, an activist of the Buddhist Society of India, argued that the culture of performative songs and theatre were very prevalent in Dalit community for a long time.¹⁶ In Kabir *satsangs* people sang anti-caste songs and *dohas* although caste Hindus have

¹⁵ Buddha Sangh Premi, *Apman ka Badla* (Hindi) (New Delhi: Panchsheel Lok Sahitya Prakshan, 1979), p. 3.

¹⁶ Banarsi Das, born in 1946, is an Ambedkarite Activist and lawyer in Munirka, Delhi. He is associated with the anti-caste movement since 1962 and became a member of the Buddhist Society of India. With his efforts, a branch of the Buddhist Society was opened in Munirka on 12 October 1967. He later became the president of this Buddhist society.

attempted to mould the teachings of Kabir and Ravidas for their political gains.¹⁷ According to him, the *bijaks* performed by the *Kabirpanthis* in their localities were very different from the Brahmanical interpretations of Kabir, which identified ‘Ram’ as a divine entity as opposed to the *kabirpanthi*’s denial of a God.¹⁸ He quoted a *kabirpanthi* couplet,

*Tum jago mulnivasi ghar mei thare chor base,
char chor paschim se aaye brahma vishnu Mahesh.*¹⁹

Beware, original habitants of this land, your home is invaded by thieves
they came from the west (Aryans), claimed themselves as Brahma, Vishnu
and Mahesh.

Here, Kabir warns *mulnivasis* about the exploitative Aryans and refers to them as *chor* (*thief*). Nandini Gooptu argues that the untouchable communities attacked caste inequalities through an assertion of bhakti devotionalism, a rejection of vedic Hinduism and the construction of a pre-Aryan identity of the untouchables as the original inhabitants, Adi Hindu of India.²⁰ Das’s experience about cultural movement among the Dalits reverberates with Gooptu’s argument regarding the bhakti devotionalism among the Dalits.

Buddha Sangh Premi, reached the heights of his popularity in the 1970s in the Uttar Pradesh. Born as Balwant Singh on 15 March 1933, in small village named Jadoda in Meerut, he went on to become a mason by profession. After hearing Dr. Ambedkar speak in 1953, Premi was motivated to work as an activist and began his career as a political poet in the service of a Dalit movement.²¹ As a *Prachar Mantri* or campaign minister of the Shahdara (Delhi) branch of the Bharatiya Buddha Mahasabha in the 1970s, he penned poems depicting the pain,

¹⁷ Personal Interview with Mr. Banarsi Das in Munirka, New Delhi (7 February 2021).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Nandini Gooptu, *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.144.

²¹ Buddha Sangh Premi wrote a collection of 22 books, as *Apman ka badla*, *Premi ki Dristi*, *Barrister Dr*, *Buddha or Krishna*, *social revolution*, *Krantidoot Ambedkar*, *Chandal kanya*, *sambhook vadh*, *premi ki ladiya* were very popular.

sufferings, assertion, and historical narratives of the Dalit movement. His poems inculcated a sense of hope and aspiration among the Dalits to find their way out of social subjugation. His criticisms of the Hindu religion in his powerful poetic works, appealed enormously to the Dalit community and encourage them to convert to Buddhism. He later moved to Seelampur Delhi. He left the Hindu religion officially on 14 April 1965 and embraced Buddhism at Ambedkar Bhavan in New Delhi.²² During his times as an activist in the Republican Party of India, Premi toured the villages of Uttar Pradesh and procured a projector to broadcast slides demonstrating the life and views of Ambedkar. Premi's biography of Dr. Ambedkar documents the significant incidents in the latter's life in the form of poetry. One such poems reads,

*'Brahman na varn banaya hota, Jati ka na jahar falaya haota
Lakhko logo ke sang, Bhim ne Buddha dharm na apnaya hota.'*²³

Had Brahmins not constructed the Varna system, or had caste not oppressed people, millions would not have followed in the path of Ambedkar when he converted to Buddhism.

Another one of Premi's doha reads,

*Agar chahta desh mei soshit apni shan,
karna usko chahiye Bhimrao ka gyan.*²⁴

If Dalits want to get honour,
they must learn about Bhimrao's life and movement.

Dalits who left the country and settled in foreign countries also contributed to this flourishing literary movement. B. R Sampla wrote *Bhagwan Buddha ka Amar Sandesh* or The Message of Lord Buddha, in 1975 which was published in New Delhi. Sampla had migrated to England after independence and settled at Aldershot with his family. The book appealed to

²² Ibid.

²³ Buddha Sangh Premi, *Barristor Dr. Ambedkar (Hindi)* (New Delhi: Panchsheel Lok Sahitya Prakshan, 1979), p. 6.

²⁴ Buddha Sangh Premi, *Soshit Jan Jagriti (Hindi)* (New Delhi: Panchsheel Lok Sahitya Prakshan, 1985), p. 16.

his Dalit readers to seriously consider the path of conversion into Buddhism. Women writers such as Prem Lata Gautam and Shoba Boddh were also prominent figures in the movement. Shoba Boddh hailed from Kavi Nagar in Ghaziabad. In the introduction to her book *Buddha Mahila Geet Mala* (Songs of Buddhist Women) that was published in the 1982, she asks her readers to imagine her work as an alternative to the folk songs immensely popular among the women in the Dalit community. She envisioned her collection of poetry and songs as a direct replacement to those based on Hindu gods and goddesses that were sung during child births, marriages, and other family and communitarian occasions.²⁵ In *Baba ka yeh tha kehna*, she wrote,

*Baba ka tha yeh kehna, Ab Buddha dharm mei rehna,
Hinduon mei hai jaati pati, ab hindu na rehna
Sobha ne aapnaya hai, auro ko bhi batlana hai.*²⁶

Baba Saheb Ambedkar told us to convert to Buddhism, leave Hinduism that is based on caste. Sobha has followed, others should also follow the same.

Premlata Gautam hailed from Shahdara in Delhi and wrote *Buddha Mahila Geet Manjari* (A Collection of Songs by Buddhist Women) in 1974. The aim of this work, Gautam claimed was to popularize *Buddha geet* (songs) as an alternative among Dalit women. In *aaj tumhari Dalito hoti nahi kahani* (Your story would be different) she wrote,

*Gandhi ji agar baba se, kar jate na beimani,
to aaj tumari Dalito, hoti kuch aur kahani.*²⁷

If Gandhiji had not betrayed Babasahib Ambedkar,
then your (Dalit) story would be different.

²⁵ Shobha Buddha, *Buddha Mahila Geet (Hindi)* (New Delhi: Panchsheel Lok Sahitya Prakashan, 1982), i.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 16.

²⁷ Prem Lata Gautam, *Buddha Mahila Geet Manjari (Hindi)* (New Delhi: Panchsheel Lok Sahitya Prakashan, 1974), p. 27.

H.C. Joshi, the general secretary of the Buddhist Society of India argued that cultural propagation in the form of folksongs, poems, plays and *nautanki* among a largely illiterate public helped increase the rise and pace of a Buddhist movement in India.²⁸ Badri Narayan held that with the success of these programs, Ambedkar became part of the people's collective psyche. The image carved in the mind of the common Dalit was that of a superhuman (*maha manav*), the messiah of the Dalits, that would lead them towards enlightenment through education and development.²⁹ A vibrant literary movement aided this process directly and its immense popularity in western parts of Uttar Pradesh also led to incidents of clashes between caste Hindus and Chamars at several places.³⁰

The formation of the Bahujan Samaj party on 14 April 1984 gave a new lease to the socio-political and cultural movements among Dalits in India, particularly in Uttar Pradesh. Even before the formation of BSP, Kanshiram began his social and political experiment with the formation of the All India Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation or BAMCEF. It was an organization of educated, SC/ST/OBC employees, and was envisioned as a 'think tank' and a major source of revenue for the BSP. Kanshiram said that 'BAMCEF is a social organization, whose objective is to instil a social awakening among the members of the backward castes and to prepare them to fight for their rights.'³¹ Later, Kanshiram constituted the DS 4 (*Dalit Shoshit Samajik Sangharsh Samiti*), which is the first political organization formed by him on 6 December 1981.

Kanshiram, was of the opinion that '*Jis samaj ki gair rajneetik jade kamjoor hoti hai, us samaj ki rajneeti kabhi kamyab nahi ho sakti* (those societies that have weak or non-political

²⁸ Prem Lata Gautam, *Buddha Mahila Geet Manjari* (Hindi) (New Delhi: Panchsheel Lok Sahitya Prakashan, 1974), i.

Nautanki is a form of India popular theatre, performed majorly in Northern Indian states, depicting the mythical stories and social issues.

²⁹ Badri Narayan, *Kanshiram: Leader of the Dalits*. (Gurgaon: Penguin Publication, 2014), p. 130.

³⁰ Personal Interview with Mr. Banarsi Das in Munirka, New Delhi (7 February 2021).

³¹ *Indian Express*, 16 October 1978. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper.

roots will never be successful politically).³² Under the leadership of Kanshiram, the BAMCEF took on this task of preparing the ground for the historical and the cultural consciousness among the Dalits. This included an active promotion of anti-caste histories in public meetings and cadre camps. Commemorative acts in the form of memorials, statues and parks were a significant part of the cultural agenda of the BSP since its foundation. In 2009, while inaugurating the Dalit 'Prerna Kendra' in Noida, Mayawati, the then Chief Minister of UP and the chief of the BSP said, 'Had memorials for eminent persons belonging to the Dalit community and OBCs (Other Backward Classes) been built by the governments that ruled the country after Independence, the BSP government would not have felt the need for the task.'³³

Casting of characters in these memorial and sculptural programs featured historical and ideological icons of the anti-caste movement including Gautama Buddha whose Buddhism is revered amongst the Dalit communities as a revolutionary path of equality against the brahmanical social order of caste hierarchy in India's ancient past. On the historical contestation in the country's past, Dr Ambedkar had argued that Indian history is nothing but the moral conflict between the Brahmanism and Buddhism.³⁴ He further asserted that this conflict remained in every sphere from political to the social, from religious to the cultural in India's postcolonial history. Other commemorative icons include saint-poets Ravidas and Kabir, who challenged the brahmanical social order and caste system to establish *nirguna* (formless god) path of salvation for the marginalized sections; Jotiba Phule and Savitribai Phule who, from 1848, imparted education to Untouchables in Pune and helped Dalit leaders to launch their independent movements; Shahuji Maharaj of Kolhapur, known as the father of reservation policy who introduced them in his princely state in 1902; Narayana Guru, an Ezhava (an ex-untouchable community); EV Ramasamy Naicker (Periyar), who launched the

³² R.S. Gautam, *Bahujan Nayak Manywar Kanshiram Smirit Granth* (Delhi: Gautam Book Centre, 2006), p. 44.

³³ *Times of India*, 27 June 2009. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper.

³⁴ Vasnat Moon, ed. *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches (Volume No. 7)* (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar foundation, 2014), p. 345

self-respect movement in the Madras Presidency in the 1920s after resigning from the Congress and castigating the Brahmin domination in that organisation and discriminatory practices against the shudras and Dalits; and B.R.Ambedkar who led social, political, educational, and religious movements for the emancipation of Dalits.

Manuela Ciotti argues that the memorials aim to empower Dalits through twin strategies of “presence in space,” and “presence in time,” both of which have been denied to the Dalit community for centuries.³⁵ While the former offers visibility, the latter presents an illustrious Dalit history, in which its members may take pride and aspire to a better future. When criticized for such flagrant expenditures, Mayawati consistently asserted that the memorials fulfil a vital social role and give hope and pride to her community. In an interview with *India Today* in 1997, Mayawati reiterated that,

The people who wrote our history wiped out all the traces of our leaders. So, I am not inventing histories. I am only highlighting that has been consciously suppressed.³⁶

The practise of installing the portraits of Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar in Chamar households in UP harked back to the times of the activities of the Republican Party of India during the 1960s. The party cadre under the leadership of the B.P Maurya encouraged Chamars to convert to Buddhism in public meetings held across the state. They also initiated programs celebrating anti-caste cultures in the form of songs and literature, and distributed portraits of Ambedkar and Buddha. Between 1960s and 1980s, the RPI, Dalit Panthers and the BAMCEF creating the grounds for cultural assertion, in which installing statues of Ambedkar in Dalit dominated localities was a primary program. The BSP project of the commemoration and

³⁵ Manuela Ciotti, “Futurity in Words: Low-Caste Women Politicians Self-Representation and Post-Dalit Scenarios in North India,” *Contemporary South Asia* 18, no. 1 (2010), 44–45.

³⁶ *India Today*, 11 August 1997.

memorialisation integrated many strands of local assertions among the Dalits. Statue-making fulfilled twin objectives of these organisations: first, it raised the historical consciousness among the Dalit community towards the anti-caste movement. Second, such a space became the locational centre of public gatherings and political mobilisation and a range of other socio-political activities for the Dalit community.

In the initial days of the BSP's formation, 'Ambedkar committees' were formed in villages, constituting members of all the lower castes, Chamars played a leading role for social awareness programs in these committees. These committees propagated the struggles of anti-caste icons and foster a sense of the 'Bahujan' identity among the rural population. Nicholas Jaoul argued that "the icon was a suitable pedagogic tool to convey Ambedkar's message to their un-educated Dalit Brethren."³⁷ The scale of BSP's iconographic mission was unprecedented. Statistics record the installation of almost 15,000 statues of Ambedkar across the state during the first tenure of Mayawati as a chief minister of Uttar Pradesh in 1995, when she held office for a brief period of four months.³⁸ The foundation of the *Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar Samajik Parivartan Stahl* (Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar Memorial of Social Transformation) in Lucknow was laid down in the BSP government's first tenure, on 15 August 1995. Later, *Kanshi Ram Smarak Stahl* and Green (Eco) Garden, Buddha Vihar Shanti Upavan, Ramabai Ambedkar Maidan, and Dalit Prerna Kendra were constructed in the third (2002 to 2003) and the fourth term (from 2007 to 2012) of the BSP government under the leadership of Mayawati. The BSP laid the foundation of the *Parivartan chowk* (the

³⁷ Nicholas Jaoul, "Learning the Use of Symbolic Means: Dalits, Ambedkar Statues, and the State in Uttar Pradesh", in *Dalit visuals and imaginary*, ed. Gail Michael Taratkov (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 194.

³⁸ Sudha Pai, *Dalit Assertion and Unfinished Democratic Revolution* (New Delhi: Sage Publication, 2002), p. 201.

intersection/roundabout of social transformation) in Lucknow that symbolised its politics of socio-economic and political transformation.³⁹

Further, the BSP government built and named hospitals, universities, schools, roads in major cities of the state after anti-caste leaders and icons. New districts such as Gautam Buddha Nagar, Ambedkar Nagar, Mahamaya Nagar and Jyotiba Phule Nagar were carved out. In Agra, the Agra University was renamed as the Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar University, in Kanpur, Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj University was set up, and the Babasaheb Bhimrao University set up in Lucknow, Gautam Buddha University in Gautam Buddha Nagar, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule University in Bareilly among many others. This was the unique case of successful Dalit cultural representation through the exercise of political will and power in independent India. In a parallel case, the state of Maharashtra then ruled by Sharad Pawar's Progressive Democratic Front stalled the Dalit community's demand for renaming the Marathwada University as Babasaheb Ambedkar University. The community's demonstrations were met with violent resistance from the dominant Maratha community and cost several Dalit lives before it was reluctantly fulfilled in 1978.

Kanshiram emphasized that 'BSP is not only a party but a movement, a mission.'⁴⁰ In the etymological sense, the word mission emerges from the word 'message.' He described his mission as 150 years old, started by Mahatma Phule and nurtured by Shahuji Maharaj and Baba Saheb Ambedkar.⁴¹ Kanshiram argued that political parties dominated by caste Hindu leadership were often status quoist and the anti-caste movement needed to political contest the socio-political and the cultural dominance of the caste Hindu symbols and rituals. The BSP's dramatic alteration of a casteist status quo and the building of counter-hegemony was thus part of its core mission.

³⁹ *Bahujan Sangthak*, 3 June 1996.

⁴⁰ *Bahujan Sangthak*, 22 August 1994.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Kashiram also organized *melas* on the birth anniversaries of anti-caste icons. On 17 May 1980 in Shahdara, New Delhi, BAMCEF meetings with the public were themed as *Chalta Firta Ambedkar Mela*.⁴² It displayed an art gallery of Dr Ambedker's life and his major works. A Periyar *mela* was organized on 18-19 September in 1995. These *melas* became a visual and archival exhibition of anti-caste histories. Pamphlets and literatures on the anti-caste movements from different parts of the country were also available in the *mela*, while Bahujan leaders popularised the ideas of the activities of the BSP as well. The Periyar *mela* was organized by the Bahujan Samaj Party when they were in an alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party. The BJP, which has consistently claimed that Periyar was antithetical to the idea of a Hindu India, publicly opposed the unilateral decision of the BSP to hold the Periyar *mela* but failed to convince the BSP to halt the event.⁴³

The BSP also has a separate wing for cultural programs known as *Jagriti Jatha* (Cultural Squads). These cultural squads toured from village to village, organizing programs to mark important days like the birth and death anniversaries (*jayantis*) of anti-caste icons and other special occasions. The *Jagriti Jatha* performed in all the BSP rallies and programmes, but its role was made sharper during the election campaign. The cultural squads not only comprised of artists and singers but also included Dalit intelligentsia from the BAMCEF who wrote songs and plays for the *Jagriti Jatha*. The *jathas* also played an important role in organizing large-scale events like the Periyar *mela* in Lucknow and the all-India cycle rally. The wing helped the BSP in two ways. First, it helped to spread the political message, and increased the visibility of the BSP among the Bahujan community.⁴⁴ Second, it also provided platforms for young and the innovative artists among the Bahujan community to come together, fostering a

⁴² *Bahujan Sangthak*, 18 May 1980.

⁴³ *Times of India*, 16 September 1995. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper.

⁴⁴ Badri Narayan, *Kanshiram: Leader of the Dalits* (Gurgaon: Penguin Publication, 2014), p. 132.

new generation of politically conscious activists.⁴⁵ In a BAMCEF meeting, Kanshiram celebrated the significance of these cultural squads,

Jagriti jatha have done a splendid work, under the supervision of Mr. Patil. The huge murals prepared by the wing has been admired by all the members...The dance, drama and the other performing presented has been appreciated by the huge crowd. The members of the wing also made the films that would present the legacy for the future generations.⁴⁶

Political parties in India run on finances powered by big capital and thus have secured the ability to project their ideologies through the television, print media and even academic discourse. On the other hand, Dalit activists have always relied on cultural programs which managed to successfully transfer the popularity onto the political party and the later day, formation of the state government by the Bahujan Samaj Party. Inderbali, a *Jagriti Jatha* member and teacher by profession, argued that the cultural movement was a strategic tool to capture political power and was enormously significant in dismantling the casteist structures in place.⁴⁷ Inderbali recalled that in the initial days of his activism, the cadre was trained to formulate history curriculums to educate and inculcate a historical consciousness among the Dalit communities. Programs like *Periyar mela*, *Bhim mela* and *Phule mela* were organized periodically to build an ideological mindfulness. Inderbali said,

Our people were not given space in history. If you go through the books of history, you would not find any space for our leaders. The caste question is completely neglected in these texts. The entire history is dominated by the caste Hindu leaders. So BSP took the initiative to create space for our history and bring the glorious past of our leaders in the public sphere.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ A.R.Akela, ed. *The Oppressed India: Maninya Kanshiram Saheb ke Sampadkiya Lekh* (Aligarh: Anand Sahitya Sadan, 2012), p. 83.

⁴⁷ Personal Interview with Mr. Inderbali in Ashok Vihar, Wazirabad, New Delhi (6 February 2021).

Master Inderbali is a singer and teacher by profession. He was an important member in the *Jagriti Jatha* formed by Kanshiram in 1990s and performed at several places. He currently lives in Wazirabad, Delhi.

⁴⁸ Personal Interview with Mr. Inderbali in Ashok Vihar, Wazirabad, New Delhi (6 February 2021)

Kanshiram also established a Buddhist Research Centre to ideate and theorize on the religious claims and identities of the Dalits. Aware that movement did not uniformly and systematically follow Ambedkar's call for Dalit conversion to Buddhism, Kanshiram pointed out that earlier programs had limited reach since they lacked research. The Buddhist Research Centre's work was based on three parameters that would evaluate the 'need,' 'determination' and the promise of 'equality'.⁴⁹ In 2003, Mayawati along with Kanshiram decided to embrace Buddhism and marked the golden jubilee of Ambedkar's conversion in 2006 for the act.⁵⁰ He was confident that around three crore Chamar community members from Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh alone would join his call for conversion into Buddhism.⁵¹ However, this decision remained unfulfilled due to his untimely demise on 9 October 2006.

Oral history interviews help to understand how the aims and objective of the memorials and museums were received by the members of the Dalits community. In a personal interview with district-level office bearers of the BSP, I enquired into cadre narratives regarding the party's commemorative mission. Uday Singh Jayant, a former Ghaziabad district president of the BSP remarked,

Our people were not given space in history. If you go through the books of history from class sixth to class twelfth you would not find any space for our leaders. The caste question is completely neglected in these texts. The entire history is dominated by the National movement and Mahatma Gandhi. So our party took the initiative to create space for our history.⁵²

Sohanpal Pradhan, the BSP's representative for the assembly constituency of Hapur argued that commemorative structures staked a claim on India's mainstream and popular culture:

Dalits, are nowhere in the major public discourse such as cinema, television and media. It is said that if you wanted to

⁴⁹ *Bahujan Sangthak*, 3 October 1971.

⁵⁰ *Times of India*, 15 April 2003. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper.

⁵¹ *Bahujan Sangthak*, 3 October 2003.

⁵² Personal interview with Mr. Uday Singh Jayant in Hapur, Uttar Pradesh (16 March 2019).

know about any country culture or society then you should watch the cinema of that country, but In case of Hindi cinema, it is dominated by the ‘Hindu’ tradition. The *Dalit* and their socio-cultural question is completely neglected. A similar case in point is the knowledge production system in India.⁵³

During a visit to the *Rashtriya Dalit Prerna Sthal* in Gautam Buddha Nagar district, on the outskirts of Delhi, I spoke to many visitors belonging to Dalit communities. Sudhir Kumar, a primary-school teacher and resident of Bulandshahr came to pay homage to Dr Ambedkar on his birth anniversary. Kumar told me that it is through these ‘cultural assertions that our leaders, Jyotiba Phule, Savitri Bai Phule, Shahu Maharaj, Birsa Munda and Babasaheb Ambedkar have become visible in India’s national history.’⁵⁴ ‘The BSP he argued, ‘has completed the unfinished work, which was supposed to be done by the political and intellectual classes of the country that was in power since independence.’⁵⁵ Priyanka, a twelfth standard student from Ghaziabad referred to the *sthal* as an ‘exhibition of our past’ and as a motivational space that encourages her to ‘follow the path laid down by these great leaders.’⁵⁶ For others like Ravindra Kumar, the *sthal* is ‘a gift to a community which was denied access to the major public space.’⁵⁷ It embodied the very first examples of a state institution that exclusively marks the public presence of the Dalit with dignity and respectability.

On the birth anniversaries and *parinirvan divas* (death anniversary) of Ambedkar and Kanshi Ram huge crowds visit and gather in these memorials. During these grand *melas* (fairs), book stalls featuring Dalit-bahujan literatures and collections from local Dalit publishing houses are set up outside the park. At the main entrance, a structure inspired by the Ashokan stupa stands tall with a message engraved on the both sides in Hindi and English. It reads,

⁵³ Interview with Mr. Sohanpal Pradhan in Hapur, Uttar Pradesh (18 March 2019).

⁵⁴ Interview with Mr. Sudhir Kumar at *Dalit Prerna Sthal*, Noida Uttar Pradesh (14 April 2019).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Interview with Priyanka at *Dalit Prerna Sthal*, Noida, Uttar Pradesh (14 April 2019).

⁵⁷ Interview with Ravindra Kumar at *Dalit Prerna Sthal*, Noida (14 April 2018).

For over a millennium, a substantial mass of this Nation's population belonging to the Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and the Other Backward Castes have been the victim of an iniquitous social order based on the *varna* and caste that has heeded them in its thrall and blighted every aspect of existence. Over the ages, a number of Saints, Gurus and *Mahapurush* have made great sacrifices in the course of the righteous struggle for the transformation of the unjust and inhumane social order. The main objective of constructing this grand '*Rashtriya Dalit Prerna Sthal*' is to represent the process of social transformation in a concrete shape and to convey this message to coming generations.

Ravindra's observations of the *sthal* as a marker of a distinctly Dalit public space reverberates with Vivek Kumar's interpretation of these memorials as tools of democratizing public space that was deliberately denied to Dalit communities in the past. In *Dalit Assertion and Bahujan Samaj Party*, Kumar argued that the 'BSP intended to perpetuate the memory of those heroes revolutionists and epoch making parsonages, who waged an historic struggle to throw away the yoke of social slavery around the neck of *Dalits*.'⁵⁸ For Kumar, Dr. Ambedkar Park and *Parivartan Chowk* in the state capital of Lucknow are 'symbols of that very intention.'⁵⁹ Not only did these physical symbols contribute towards raising the self-esteem and self-respect of Dalits, they also unravel the role of unsung heroes for the very first time.'⁶⁰

This chapter delineates the efforts of the Dalit activists and writers to reclaim a past and examines the role of Dalit literary movement of the 70s, 80s and 90s in the building of the counter cultural hegemony under the leadership of the Republican Party of India. It traces the efforts of the literary movement in laying the groundwork for the Bahujan Samaj Party. It also traces the cultural and commemorative politics of the BSP and its role in shaping the Dalit consciousness among the Chamars. As we shall see, new notions of the Dalit past once

⁵⁸ Vivek Kumar, *Dalit Assertion and Bahujan Samaj Party: A Perspective from Below* (New Delhi: Bahujan Sahitya Sansthan, 2001), p. 99

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

again became an important medium to propagate the ideas of the party and its movement.

Dalit activists have tried to construct a new imagination of a Dalit identity derived from a longer history of the anti-caste movement. They have produced the new meanings, symbols and icons to challenge the established brahmanical hegemony.

Conclusion

At the constituent assembly debates in 1949, Dr. Ambedkar posed serious question about the contradictions situated at the centre of democracy in India,

On 26 January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and the economic life we will have inequality... We must reduce this contradiction at the earliest possible moment or else those suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy which we have laboriously built up.¹

Ambedkar's words ring true even today as the constitutional protections and political equality granted to the Scheduled Castes are constantly violated. The Prevention of Atrocities (Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes) Act of 1989, aimed at countering caste discrimination and atrocities against the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes is at the risk of being watered down and has largely failed to fulfil its purpose. Casteism continues, in old and new ways, uncontrolled by any force. The National Dalit Movement for Justice (NDMJ) and the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) in their report titled 'Quest for Justice' highlighted a six percent increase in crimes against Dalits from 2009 to 2018 and reported more than 3.91 lakh cases of atrocity.²

The demand for equality has remained central to every Dalit political movement in colonial and independent India. Histories of commemoration and literary movements have played a very important role in creating a public and community archive as an intergenerational fight continues against an unyielding and unjust caste system. Both of these strategies have not only challenged the hegemonic brahmanical structure but also aided the political mobilization of Dalit communities. Social exclusion, humiliation, and the continued denial of power have

¹ B.R. Ambedkar, *Speeches in the Constituent Assembly* (New Delhi: Gautam Book Centre, 2016), p. 54.

² The Hindu, September 12, 2020.

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/report-flags-increase-in-crimes-against-dalits/article32584803.ece>.

Retrieved on 15 June 2021.

motivated the Dalits to create their own autonomous organizations and movements, marking a long history of assertion in the contemporary political movement among the Chamars.

This thesis traces the making of Dalit consciousness among the Chamars in the United Provinces from the late 19th century to the later decades of the 20th century India. The thesis has focussed on the ways in which histories were reimagined and deployed in Dalit political assertions in their struggle against subjugation and to lay claim to the new visions and promises of a democracy. Certain episodes in the history of the subcontinent were specifically read as instances of betrayal by caste Hindus and reiterated the Dalit position that the community have repeatedly thwarted from achieving true emancipation. Such a pedagogy not only helped in the emergence of identity consciousness among various Dalit communities but also lent itself to an articulation of a collective identity among the Chamars. The thesis further examined the interventions of various movements and organisations like the Adi Hindu Mahasabha, the Scheduled Caste Federation, the Republican Party of India, and the Bahujan Samaj Party in the formation of such collective identities.

The thesis charts the multiple, often conflicting strands of identifications among the Chamar community. Far from claiming that these identities were static and singular in nature, the thesis looks at ways in which new identities took shape, even while certain older assertions persisted. The tenacity of the notion of the dalit as '*mulnivasi*' well into the final decades of the twentieth century highlights the processes through which communities influenced and were influenced by the politics and visions behind these efforts. This thesis highlights the contradictions and ambivalences by looking at the diverse ways in which two major movements in the form of the Jatav Mahasabha and the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha envisaged the past and the future of the Chamars. While the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha posited an identity of Adi-Hindus based on the theory of 'original inhabitants', the Jatav Mahasabha identified their history with the Hindu mythical past through claims of a Kshatriya identity. The later day politics of the Scheduled

Caste Federation attempted to paper over these contradictions and shifted its might towards demanding separate settlements for scheduled caste communities. This initiated an unravelling of the 'Jatav' identity as new aspirations for social and economic mobility and a realisation that a Kshatriya identity did not fulfil their political agendas gave way. On the other hand, the idea of *mulnivasi* was transformed to include Buddhist claims under the RPI and later in the concept of the 'Bahujan' under the BSP.

New histories of Dalit pasts also shaped the demands for constitutional representation. The Poona Pact of 1932 helped Caste Hindus retain control and choose the representation of the Dalit communities in the reserved constituencies. It not only stalled the political progress but also affected the social movement of the Dalits in independent India. It also led to political contestations between the different sub-castes within the scheduled caste category. Intensive mobilisation and politicization among the Dalits meant that no political groups could ignore the communities any longer. However, this led to an appropriation of the movement and a co-option and silencing of its more radical strands. The system of political reservation resulting from the Poona pact has continued to hurt the fortunes of the autonomous Dalit movement. As Valerian Rodrigues pointed out, the system of joint electorates under the Poona Pact gave a 'virtual veto' to the caste Hindus to decide, who could represent the untouchables.³

As democratization allowed marginalised groups to lay claims to its institutions and spaces, Dalit communities participated in the making of their historical symbols, and icons in public. The thesis highlighted the manifestation of Dalit histories in the commemoration of anti-caste icons under the Republican Party of India and the Bahujan Samaj Party. The success of this public assertion is reflected in how parties across the spectrum of contemporary political ideologies use anti-caste icons popularized by the Dalit movement. Such successful

³ Valerian Rodrigues, "Dalits and Cultural Identity: Ambedkar's Prevarications on the Question of Culture." *Social Action-New Delhi*- 50, no. 1 (2000): 1-15.

commemorative acts were inaugurated by the Dalit literary movement in the 1950s and not only produced pedagogic tools for the community but also claimed power on behalf of its future generations. These commemorative acts also produced narratives of glory, actively shedding histories of deprivation and oppression.

The union government led by Bharatiya Janata Party's Narendra Modi inaugurated the Dr. Ambedkar National Memorial in Delhi on 14 April 2018. They also announced the development of five places significant in Dr. Ambedkar's life. The '*Panchteerth*,' as it would be called, included his birthplace in Mhow, his boarding in London, the '*Deeksha Bhoomi*' (the place of his conversion to Buddhism) in Nagpur, '*Mahaparinirvan Sthal*' in Delhi, and '*Chaitya Bhoomi*' in Mumbai. Various shades of Left parties and the Congress have also attempted to co-opt the history and the struggle of the Dalits in the past without resolving how these caste Hindu-led political parties have historically branded anti-caste struggle as antithetical to the interests of the nation. Such phenomena demonstrate the progressive and radical challenge posited by the anti-caste movements even today.

For want of time, this thesis is limited in several ways. In my future works, I would like to broaden the scope of this thesis and study the rich histories of identity formations among and between the various Dalit sub-castes in Uttar Pradesh to help understand the multifaceted views and aspirations of the different communities for the ongoing social and the political Dalit movement.

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