

**ENGAGING EXCLUSIONS
A STUDY ON SOCIO-POLITICS OF BODY, SEXUALITY
AND SELFHOOD OF DALIT WOMEN**

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that this dissertation entitled, "Engaging Exclusions: A study on socio-politics of body, sexuality and selfhood of Dalit Women" submitted by Miss. Roma Dey, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this or any other University. To the best of our knowledge this is an original work.

We recommend this Dissertation to be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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For you Baba

and

Your deep faith in human agency

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Roma

Preface

This research started with my quest to understand the discrimination, occasionally “positive” and mostly negative, that being a woman i have always felt and been aware of. Negative discrimination to a woman would not need a description; you have felt it, experienced it, practiced it or ignored it, you have come across it. “Positive” discrimination to a woman, in the sense i am using here would need us to go back in time to a village in Bihar’s flood prone Kosi basin. It was the summer of 2007, interning with PRAXIS-Institute for Participatory Practices, our team visited Kubhol, in Kiratpur block of Darbhanga district. We were a team of six, two female (myself and Raf, who is an Italian) and four male, which was further divided into three team. Each of these three teams was to stay for a period of five days with a marginalized family within the village as part of an immersion programme. The aim was to have a glimpse of the lives of the people by living with them and participating in their daily activities.

Kubhol, like most villages in the Kosi Basin, had a mixed population of Muslims, Musahars, Brahmins, and Yadavs. The Brahmins owned the land but stayed in cities, Yadavs in the absence of the landowners acted on behalf of them, the Musahars provided labour for agriculture, the primary mode of livelihood and Muslims were the local traders. Owing to seasonal distress migration¹ of male members of almost all the Musahar and Muslim families, these households are managed by the women. Women of these families worked as daily wagers in the fields during the agricultural seasons. The choice of our host families were based on the criteria of marginalization² within the village: a woman headed family³, a Musahar family and a Muslim family. my teammate and i stayed with the Musahar family, Daiwati Didi was our host.

It was during the stay in the village that i became very aware of the body language, speech and tenor of the villagers from the different communities talking to me in the presence of different people around me. I also observed a dissonance in their speech and body language while interacting with the other village women. For example, the same Musahar man would be three different self talking to me, my host and the village Mukhiya, a Brahmin woman. Even greater dissonance occurred in the case of a Brahmin man talking to women from the three locations: a

¹ Only male members of the family, both young and old, migrate to neighbouring cities and agricultural areas of Punjab and Haryana, migrated. Sometimes these family members stay in their workplace for years.

² This was also a position we took to interrupt the hegemony of the landed Yadavs.

³ The family was headed by a Muslim widow

Brahmin woman and a Musahar woman from the same village and a woman from outside of an unknown background, in the presence of my team mates and in their absence. The degrees of power over the woman he interacts not only changed with the woman's location but also with the presence or absence of others and their locations.

Was i positively discriminated? Simplistically put and from the view point of the one discriminating and the Musahar, yes, if you compare the discrimination the Musahar woman faced. As a woman and an observer of whom the male is aware I could feel the undercurrents and sexual overtones of the relative discrimination being played out. The performance was meant to exert the site of power within the male.

What was (were) the cause(s) of this differential discrimination? How could it be performed with such an ease? What was its effect on the psyche of those involved?

These are complex questions and i do not expect to find all the answers. However, this is a very small effort to find answers (and raise more questions) to a simple quest of my host, "How can i ensure my children get education and employment?"

The introductory chapter tries to look into the notion of body as a marker of identity, an identity which is a constant negotiation between the self and the social, fixity and flexibility. What is identity, how is it formed and gets gendered? Categorization as a process uses the bodily differences to identify a person which is inculcated in the self-identification process also. The fact that these identities are socially and discursively produced at one level can be a constraint to an individual; at another level identities can be discursively transformed and deconstructed.

Chapter two attempts to understand woman and womanhood as socially and culturally constructed categories. Women's individual and collective struggles, though at many instances fractured, have been an engagement in the politics of representation- of objectification of the other, the different. Both the women's movement and scholarship, in its western as well as the Indian forms, resist this hegemonic representation. In their politics, in their engagement with the notion of corporeal and sexual difference, women have claimed their subjectivity.

The third chapter brings out some of the significant research work and formulations on caste. It builds from the socio-historic concepts to arrive at the ideological construction of the caste system within the framework of Brahminic hegemony. That the caste system, with its

ramifications such as Untouchability, exclusive education, and brahminic patriarchy are inter-related for the Brahminic control of resources is brought out in here.

The colonial rule and democracy are the two important historical moments for both the women's movement and the Dalit movement. From Phuley, Periyar ,Thasser, Ambedkar to Dalit Panthers, writing has played a major role in the Dalit movement. Dalit writing fuels the Dalit movement. The emergence of the Dalit women movement marks a moment of change in the long history of Dalit women's marginalization. And Dalit women's writing is in this context opens their world to us. It is an assertion of the self, many a times inter-changing with the community, beyond the categories of births and bodies.

"Oppressed, ruled, and still being ruled by patriarchy, government, caste, and religion, Dalit women are forced to break all the strictures of society to live"

Bama (Bama, *Sangati Events*, 2005)

Chapter 1: Body, Sexuality and Identity: Towards a Discursive Reality

In the wake of a colonially mediated modernity, the Indian State has come to be the repository of power. The state, representing the citizen and elected by it, is responsible for ensuring the rights of its citizens. It is within the realm of citizenship, where every citizen has a right to life, equality and dignity that the notion of exclusion has gained currency in socio-political discourse. According to Haan (2008), Social exclusion has emerged relatively recently in the western context arising from Rene Lenoir's use of the term in 1974.

Rene, a member of the Jacques Chirac government in France used it to denote socially excluded groups such as the less privileged, differently abled, aged, substance abusers, abused children etc. Rene's use of the term is premised on two distinct frameworks, firstly, the aspiration of the French Republicans for solidarity and social integration. Within this framework, social exclusion was defined as "a rupture of the social fabric" (Haan, 2008: 4). The second was a period of economic, social and political crisis and restructuring in the 1980s. It is in this later framework that the term social exclusion came to be used to refer to newly created social disadvantages such as unemployment, ghettoisation and changes in the family. In this framework social exclusion was used as an analytical category for strengthening welfare policies. The term has come to be used in other countries through the European Union. However, in India, concern for the excluded, has been voiced by M.K. Gandhi in his talisman to think of the "last man" and in the aspirations of the nascent nation as enshrined in the Preamble of the Constitution—Justice, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity.

Exclusion has come to denote a "counter-concept of citizenship" (Powell, 2001), a denial of the rights and participation of the citizen as evident from the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Standards' (1995: 4) definition:

"[T]he process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society within which they live."

Exclusion, thus, implies a relational concept and is imbibed within the social. Social exclusion is not a reality but a theoretical concept to look at reality. The concept examines the social relations, processes and institutions that form the base of deprivation. According to Haan (2008) social exclusion is opposed to social integration or being

included, that is, given significance. It is a multidimensional concept encompassing the social, political, economic and the psychological (ibid.). The concept of social exclusion has been used most widely within the field of economics, where it is intrinsically related to and used to study poverty and relative deprivation. In the above definition and the history of the term the social and political implication and use of the concept is emphasized. The psychological underpinning of exclusion is stressed by Haan (ibid.). According to him exclusion is close to vulnerability—insecurity, defenseless and exposure to shocks and risks, as conceptualized by Robert Chambers' (1989). The psychological aspect of exclusion is also highlighted by Fred Powell (2001). According to him, it is evident in the way people relate to each other, inequalities amongst them, use of violence and in the breakdown in social solidarity. He cites Fr. Sean Healy (Powell, 2001: 91-92) to describe the experience of exclusion:

“Exclusion is experienced in many ways. If you are excluded it means your opinion is not sought and it doesn't count. In fact you are not expected to have an opinion, rather you are encouraged to trust the opinion of the shapers of the society...

When you are one of the excluded, politicians and policy-makers can ignore you without fear of censure or loss of position. If your rights are infringed, the avenues of redress are very few and haphazard. Since society fears excluded groups you are always suspect—guilty until proven innocent...

Generally speaking poverty is the companion of exclusion. People on low incomes have to struggle even to provide the necessary food, clothing and heat. They are not simply 'less comfortable' than everyone else—they have shorter lives, sicker children, babies which are more likely to die in infancy.”

Deprivation faced by Dalit women is multidimensional in nature. They are excluded from proper nutrition, education, property, livelihood, dignity, participation in social activities and are rendered powerless within the complimentary structures of caste, class and patriarchy. The study of their selfhood, sexuality and notions of their body, therefore, requires a framework where the relational aspects of the different axes—caste, class and gender are unfolded within the larger framework of the concept of exclusion.

I intend to problematize the notions of “body”, “sexuality” and “identity” and the power that discourse has in shaping, construing and reifying these notions. These

overlapping and “relational” notions are vital in the formation of the self. Scrutinizing the processes which lead to their formation and reification will help in our analysis of the self.

The body, according to Chris Shilling (Shilling, 2007), has come into serious debates in sociology in the recent past. According to him, broadly six themes or thematic shifts can be noted in the sociological debates in and around body. First, the “rise in treatment of embodiment as both a project and a form of physical capital” (Shilling, 2007: 7) by the consumer culture where the body has become central to idea of the self identity. The second theme revolves around the heightened concern on the awareness of the bodily experience. This was a reaction against the emphasis on consumption and external appearances around the 1960s when movements and groups were started towards “*ecologically balanced mode of living*” and “*meaningful bodily experience*”¹ (ibid.) complemented with green and environmental movements. Third, the second wave feminist have tried to re-explore, reexamine, notions of the “female body” to show that there are variations in the relationships between the body and the sexual identity. Fourth, body has been at the centre of discourse in Michel Foucault’s (1979, 1990) analysis. Here, the changing mode of governmentality positions the thinking body as the object of disciplinary regime, displacing the fleshy body which could be inflicted with pain. In this view, the controlling details of life have displaced the preoccupation with death, and managing differentiated population has displaced controlling anonymous individuals. This was a period of debates around sexuality and body, sex of the body and national population control, policing the flow of migrants and refugees, controlling the spread of HIV/AIDS. Fifth, the concern here revolves around the growing uncertainty about the ‘reality’ of the body and its naturalness as advent of technology such as transplant surgeries, in vitro fertilizations, stem-cell research which showed that bodies can be controlled, parts substituted, its role can be played by science and hence bodies can be replaced. Human beings were reconceptualised as cyborgs². The potential malleability of the body threatened the “existing” materiality. Sixth, body has been discussed as the positive conceptual category for addressing theoretical problems in various disciplines.

In the following pages, I shall discuss some of the discourses on body, sexuality and identity. First, I shall look at the historical moments, starting with the Greco-Roman

¹ Emphasis in the original.

² A reference to Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” (Haraway, 1991).

traditions that look at sexuality and its relationship with the body and note examples of identity being derived from one's body. Then I shall move to the theories of sexuality by Sigmund Freud, particularly those issues relating to the issues of gender and theories of identity formation. Finally, I shall look at the views of Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida in the context of the idea of the discursively produced body.

Indelible Embodied Sexuality and Identity

The origin of human beings is replete with the story of how the sexes have come into being and the relationship between the two. From the Biblical story of Adam and Eve to Darwin's theory of evolution of the *homo sapiens*, such narratives are loaded with descriptive and prescriptive views and have been the themes of much debates. An interesting narrative on the emergence of sexes appeared in Plato's 'Symposium' (Mottier, 2008). In this version, human beings originated from creatures with spherical bodies, genitals on the outside, four hands and feet, two faces each, and were divided into three genders. One group had two male genitals, the second group had two female genitals and the third group, hermaphrodites, had one of each. Over time, these creatures became arrogant and Zeus split them into two to punish them. They could not stay apart and clung to each other. Zeus took pity on them and brought their genitals on the front so that they could be tied to each other through sexual relationship. Each human being thus searches for its other half. The story may be bizarre but makes lot of sense to understand the roots of modern idea of sex, gender and romantic love. That the body has historically been a constant site of thought and critical understanding can be seen from this example.

According to historian Thomas Lacqueur (1990), the classical model of Greco-Roman gender was a single sex model. Gender was understood as fluid and was based on the body heat of the individual. Men and women were the extremes, with men having hot bodies and women cold. The female genitals were thought as internal and inferior versions of the male bodies. Men risked losing body heat through sexual intercourse with cold bodied women and lose of body fluid through ejaculation. Whereas sex was considered good, too much of it could risk men being feminized by losing heat. Women's body was however needed the liquidity of the seed to keep her free-floating womb³ from suffocating her. We instantly see that though gender was fluid, the identity of the women was distinguished from the men. Her identity was marked by her external body.

³ Belief of Hippocratic school of medicine.

Women were seen as inferior to men as they were believed to lack sexual self control and this could be very well seen in the position of women in political and social life: they had no political right; women were minors like children and only a handful of elite adult male made decisions. “Masculinity was identified with the active, penetrative sexual role.... Penetration symbolized male as well as social status, but it mattered little if the penetrated was woman or a boy....’Proper’ objects of penetration were women, boys, foreigners, and slaves, all categories of people who did not enjoy the same political or social citizenship rights as free Athenian male citizens.” (Mottier, 2008: 9) Society valorized sexual renunciation as part of male self-mastery. Early Christianity, by 5th century AD, promoted virginity and sexual abstinence for men and women. Sexual desire and worldly obligations such as spouse and children were seen as reasons limiting the fervor for religion and spirituality. Marriage was seen as acceptable compromise with the material world and procreative motivation as the main purpose of sexual intercourse. By declaring sex as the original sin, Christianity brought it to the heart of Christian morality as exerted by Foucault (Foucault, 1990).

The advent of science and rationality in the eighteenth century turned sex into an object of scientific study. Darwin’s theory of sexual selection and the growing concern of public health due to the rise of venereal diseases gave an impetus to research on sex and human body. This gave birth to ‘sexuality’ which first found its place in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1879 as “possession of sexual powers, or capability of sexual feelings” (Mottier, 2008: 31). Sexual behaviour was conceptualized as natural, biological drives and sexual normalcy and deviancy came to be defined in relation to the assumed biological naturalness of essential human reproductive instincts. With the advanced technologies of the scientific world, it was realized that the male and female bodies were biologically different. However, new theories came up to reason women’s inferiority. Herbert Spencer (Mottier, 2008: 33) claimed that women were inferior as they could not finish their evolution owing to the energy they have to invest in reproduction of the species. The innate biological difference of women’s capacity to reproduce was reason strong enough for reinforcing the existing femininity/masculine dichotomy and discriminatory social roles.

According to Foucault (1990), till the end of the eighteenth century three types of codes regulated sexual practice in the European society: the canonical laws, the Christian pastoral and the civil law. They decided what was legal and what was illegal based on the

“matrimonial relations: the marital obligation, the ability to fulfill it, the manner in which one complied with it, the requirement and the violence that accompanied it, the useless or unwarranted caresses for which it was a pretext. Its fecundity or the way one went about making it sterile, the moments when one demanded it (dangerous periods of pregnancy and breast feeding, forbidden times of lent or abstinence), its frequency or infrequency and so on...The sex of husband and wife was beset by rules and recommendations. The marriage relation was the most intense focus of constraints; it was spoken of more than anything else...it was required to give detailed accounting of itself... (and in that, it) was under constant surveillance” (Foucault, 1990: 37). The state apparatus of pedagogy and medicine were other mechanisms of surveillance. Medicine with its study of the mental pathologies arising out of incomplete sexual practices took control on the “pleasure of the couple”. The brothel and the mental asylum were the only places where sex still remained unrepressed to a certain degree. In the rest of the society, except for the bedroom of the heterosexual legitimate couple, “repression operated as a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and, by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know” (Foucault, 1990: 4).

Modern Nations, Democracy and Citizens

Carole Pateman (1986) argues that the most fundamental abstraction in the concept of the liberal individual is the abstraction of the ‘individual’ from the body. The liberal theory conceptualizes the individual as a universal figure, who represents anyone and everyone. Thus, the modern liberal state disembodies the individual. The concept of the individual had it not been disembodied would have been a male. According to Pateman, the citizen conceptualized by the state is male only that it has not been pronounced such. The idea of the individual and the democratic citizenship contract undermines women as lacking in capacities necessary for participation and civil society and conveniently excludes them.

The institutions and modern state apparatus are not gender neutral. From the very beginning including the founders of the ideals of the modern world, democracy and citizenship, women have been systematically excluded from the three major structures of public power: religion, law and politics (Evans, 1997). The law differentiates between the sexes, from symbolism to the core; from law as the blind folded lady to the absorption of

customary practices which had always been part of the existing patriarchal society as “customary law” when a custom could not necessary be just. Modern scientific medicine itself is largely dominated by male practitioners who view the human subject as the male, derived from the idea of the female body as a less evolved male body. Women got the right to vote only in the end of the nineteenth century and could participate in public world. In fact one can see the true picture of the state only from its policies. The Beveridge Report of 1944 distinguishes between the ‘good’ women which the state has to protect and the ‘bad’ women which falls outside its protective jurisdiction reinforcing the virgin-whore duality of ideological construction of women. It showed men as supporting the families and wives and single women were autonomous individuals (ibid).

Labouring Bodies

“Women without husbands will starve.” Mrs. Bennet (Jane Austine’s Pride and Prejudice)

Mrs. Bennet, the portrayal of the twentieth century white English mother of a four daughters and wife of a landed farmer might be exaggerating a bit, as women indeed did not starve and found some work for sustaining themselves. However, she is upholds the reigning values of her times and society. Women were just daughters, sisters, mothers and wives. They had to depend on their male relatives for their survival and upkeep as working women was an alien concept to the white English mother, while all around her the black women was the farm help, the house-help and the kitchen maid, in odd low paid and often jobs which only provided for maintenance and no pay. Thus, though she is excluding the black women from her category of women, her exclamation rips open the uneasy underbelly of the feudal society, its asymmetric and unequal relations. Not that the following industrialized capitalist society had anything better to offer to women. Women if ever welcome were just labour at cheaper cost owing to her ‘natural’ and ‘physical’ incompetence to work. The subtitle, laboring body itself brings two immediate and distinct images: that of a woman in labour⁴ during childbirth and a man as a labourer. From the very origin of the word labourer or labour it was meant to be the man and the labour for the woman was almost always for childbirth.

In the 1970s Ann Oakley in her work titled *Housewife* showed that women made contribution to the economy in their underpaid work and Christine Delphy demonstrated the contribution made by women in the family business, essentially because they

⁴ The history of the terminology might through some interesting connections.

generally went unrewarded in her work titled *The Main Enemy: A Materialist Analysis of Women's Oppression* (Evans, 1997).

Joan Acker in her aptly titled paper, *Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations* (Acker, 1991) show how the concept of "job" is implicitly a gendered concept, even though the organizational logic presents it as gender neutral. According to her "job" already contains the gender-based division of labour and the separation between the public and the private sphere and clearly distinguished and assumes a gendered organization of domestic life and social production. Although organizational theories depend on the gender neutral assumption of the worker as abstract, disembodied, in reality both the job and the worker are essentially gendered and "bodied". That the body of the individual holds significance for what kind of work s/he wants is further accentuated by these examples.

According to Fenstermarker Berk domestic division of labour supports two production processes: household goods and services such as meals, cleaning the house, feeding and keeping children clean and at the same time producing gender. That the household work is a women's work reproduces the material embodiment of wifely (womanly) and husbandly (manly) roles and hence womanly and manly behaviour (Zimmerman, 1991). Outside the home the new age women are still caught in age old feminine image. Hochschild's (1983) analysis of the work of women flight attendants (ibid) show how they are not simply women in the biological sense but strongly imbibe the middle-class American notions of femininity. They symbolize Woman. She observed that even though the category of the "female" is mentally associated with having less status and authority, female flight attendants are more readily classified as "really" females than other females are.

Body, Gender and Sexuality

Sigmund Freud's (1961) theory of psychosocial development is rooted in the body. According to him all infant's desires are gratified in the womb and once born into the world the infant transfers gratification to the mother's breast from which it derives food. From deriving pleasure from the mother's body⁵ the child transfers its pleasure derivation to its own body through the process of defecation and urination. This development is in stages from the oral to the anal, the child moves to the genital stage

⁵ Care giver's body, as we can assume that the child does not differentiate amongst the bodies it shares intimacy

where the child has to become either feminine or masculine. This is a stage where the role of the 'internalized externality', that is, the super-ego⁶ becomes important as the boy learns to identifying with the father and the girl with the mother. This identification is part of the family's role as a socializing agent and is inbuilt in the subtleties of the behaviour of family members and individuals in the immediate vicinity of the child. According to Freud, the child achieves the gender identity and sexual orientation at the same moment in time. In this conception the gender identity is essentially based on the child's body. Freud explains this identification through the resolution of the oedipal complex in the boy. In the process the boy undergoes a difficult and traumatic process of dis-identifying with the loving figure of the mother and identifying with the authoritarian father. This is induced by the fear of being castrated by the father, who is his competitor for the love of the mother.

This process is far easier for the girl as she retains her identification with the mother and giving up her sexual desire for the mother. According to Freud, she realizes she does not have the biological equipment that would make such a relation possible. This leads to the girl developing what Freud terms 'penis envy' and is not able to resolve it all her life. Initially, the girl assumes that the error will be rectified but as she grows it dawns on her that she has been castrated and blames her mother for it. The mother is abandoned as a love object and the envy for the penis is translated into desire for a child from the father. This is the stage of the oedipal complex in the girl, however, she is never able to fully resolve it as she lacks the castration fear and hence Freud reasons that this difference in experience in both the sexes end in difference in formation of the superego.

To Freud, with his observation and experience in the early twentieth century, women 'remain partially socialized, less divorced from the instinctual "natural" desires than men' (R.A.Sydie, 1987). Not that more than a century later much has changed (we will get into the same debate at a later stage). However, what Freud as a psychoanalyst did to the whole world about bodies-sex-sexuality is far important at this juncture in the debate. What we cannot deny and blame Freud is the way he made sex and the body a much talked about subject. This, as Foucault says was "some progress" made from the Victorian bourgeoisie values and "modern puritanism imposed by the triple edict of taboo, nonexistence and silence" (Foucault, 1990: 5).

⁶ It is an outgrowth of ego's effort to seek socially appropriate outlets of gratification of the id's desire

We see from Freud's theory is essential and the site for an infant to build his identification with one like her or him. The child enters into the realm of the social, where s/he is constantly negotiating with forces beyond her/his body control. How do we define the body apriori? Does the body that we see, that has physicality, the way we perceive and define it changes over time? Does the relationship of the body with ones sexuality and sexual orientation remain static or changes spatially and historically? How the identity of a person is related to his/her body? Are these identities fixed, rigid or malleable, flexible? These are some of the questions that arise in my mind when I connect body with sexuality and identity.

I will bring into the picture now Lawrence Kohlberg's work on acquiring stable gender identity by applying Piaget's model of sequential cognitive development. According to the cognitive development theories children are born gender neutral and as they grow they develop "cognitive filters" from early childhood based on concrete physical cues like dress, hair style, body size and process new information through "cognitive filters". They are, thus, active participants of their socialization and not just passive recipients or Tabula Rasa. To what extent is the child an active participant, what are the choices that the child has and the ways the child can use her choice in her socialization seem relevant question. We accept that the child has agency and is able to make choices but the structure that she has around her cannot be controlled by her.

One of the development tasks of the child is to learn to identify oneself as a male or a female based on such cues, which is most often based on the socialization process. At a later stage by the age of five or six the child sees gender as an attribute of the person and not the result of material props that we use to display gender (S.Kimmel, 2008). The child then sees the world in gendered terms and has acquired an irreversible gender identity, which continues throughout her/his life. According to this model, the child learns that she is a 'girl' or he is a 'boy' early on but the gender socialization continues for the whole life and "we are active agents in our own socialization, not simply passive receptors of cultural blueprints for appropriate gender behaviors". The child observes others around her, who stays home and cooks, who goes out and works and hear what others expect from a 'good girl' or a 'good boy' to learn gendered behavior.

Taking a leaf from this theory, where gender is a role enactment we move into Goffman's concept of 'gender display' which focuses on behaviour rather than biology to

differentiate a man and a woman. According to Goffman, femininity and masculinity are regarded as prototypes of essential expression which can be conveyed fleetingly in any social situation and yet strikes at the most basic characterization of the individual. These differences between men and women presumed to be 'natural' and rooted to biology is in reality a psychological, social and behavioural consequence of the structural arrangements of a society as is evident from Garfinkel's case study of Agnes.

Agnes was born a "male" but felt like a "female" and hence used to cross dress and behave like one. At the age of 17 Agnes adopted a female identity and underwent sex change operations. Agnes developed a number of ways to pass as a female before as well as after her operation as she lacked the cognitive filter as mentioned by Kohlberg and the following everyday experience of filtering her interactions through the gendered filter of a female. One of Agnes's strategies to learn to behave like a woman was through the "secret apprenticeship" of her fiancé to acquire the needed skill to pass as a woman. It is through her interaction with her fiancé and her fiancé's criticism of other women that she learnt means to cover her inadequacies and that she was not supposed to sunbath in the front lawn of her apartment as she would then be displaying herself to men. This case study brings to forefront one important aspect, around a women's body much like a man's body their lies set behaviour, patterned roles that have to be 'done', 'accomplished' ,i.e., gender has to be done and accomplished.

Body, Gender, Sexuality and Identity

Identity

Identity of humans has an inbuilt duality as put in by Durkheim, elaborating Pascal's work, in his concept of the homo duplex (Collins, 1985). According to which humans have dual identity which is a split between angel and beast, between mind and body, between the intellectual and moral life and sensations and the sensual appetites. Thus, the individual had double existence: one purely individual and rooted in our organisms and the other social and an extension of society.

Mead (1967) considers the self under to different names, 'I' and 'me'. 'Me' is the part of the self that is composed of the attitudes and ideas of other people which forms our conscious experience and from which we choose roles to represent our ideas of ourselves. Many of these roles are what the community expects of us. 'I' as the actor or

initiator is the agent of change. While 'me' depends on our social and cultural training and particular configuration of time and space, 'I' is the sense of self identity in the possessor of experiences. (Mead, 1967)

As we saw in the previous discussion the identity of a person is beyond the self and very much a social categorization in which we get entrapped as a result of our social interactions (we refer back to this in the section on discourse) which most often are most often patterned. "Fundamentally Social Identity is a critical link between the psychology of the individual and the structure and functions of social groups. Theories of social identity in different fields try to, as Hogg says, "address the structure and function of the socially construed self...as a dynamic construct that mediates the relationship between social structure or society and individual behavior" (Brewer, March 2001). According to Tajfel (Brewer, March 2001) an individual's self concept is derived to some extent from the social relationships and social groups s/he participates in.

This duality and the need to live up to social expectations have been further supported by Freud's psychoanalytical concept of struggle between the id and superego and the emergence of the balancing Ego. This social aspect, the superego which is a social construct, restricts the way we see ourselves, makes us myopic. The burden of our lineage cowers and restricts us. These invisible chains, which are echoed in Durkheim's 'social facts', are coercive and restraining. What are these and how do they affect an individual? Is it my gender that makes it necessary for me to dress in a certain fashion, talk and walk in a certain manner, have a certain degree of ambition optimal to be subdued and complimented with the domestic roles said to be 'natural', perform certain dependent-roles despite my own wish to do so? Is it the caste that I belong to that inhibits my passage to a certain class and level of education? Is it my place of birth that limits the life choices and life style I have? Is it my ethnicity that rules how I will be received in a mixed group? Is it my nationality that controls the way people perceive me?

The Social in the Individual

Our next step is to see how these identities are built and what the role of factors outside the individual and others is in building these identities. The process of formation of the identity is social and through discourse. It is not possible without the 'other', a standard for comparisons; it is the shank for the individual in a sea of humanity, a mark for recognition.

William James observed that a man's social self was made up of recognition which he got from his mates. Humans, according to him are gregarious animals who like to near his fellow human beings and be assertive. Humans have a deep seated desire to be noticed in a favourable and approving manner. A man, according to him, has as many social selves as there are fellow human beings who recognize him, and all these social selves are discrete in the sense these are mental images others have of him.

For Mead the self has a development, which forms within the social experiences and activity, rather than being given at birth. In 'habitual action' that is seen in lower animals there is no self since there is no thinking involved. The self is not the body but the thinking that helps the body to act in an intelligent fashion. There are two stages of the self's development as evident from this description. First, the individual's self is constituted simply by an organization of the particular attitude of other individuals toward himself and towards one another is specific social acts in which he participates with them. At the second stage the self is constituted not only by an organization of these particular individual attitudes, but also by an organization of the social attitudes of the generalized other or the social group as a whole to which he belongs.

Mead's self is reflexive, both object and subject. Thus, it is an object different from other objects. The origins of the thinking, objective, reflexive self is social. Individuals experience self when he becomes an object to himself just as others are objects to him or in his experience. They become objects to themselves by taking the attitudes of others towards themselves within a shared context and experience.

Mead says that a child is not with a given self but it emerges out of the child's social experiences. A child learns to control and direct his behavior in terms of what others expect of him through role play and game. The child begins to assume an organized role where he plays his part as the mother plays her part, which he has learnt through prior experience through interactions. Thus the self emerges out of interactions with others through the ability to perceive others and the relationships with others, which control actions and behavior.

As the child grows and accumulates experience through his interactions with the community, he begins to build the generalized other or the integrated role, which emerges as the moral expectations of the community and the individual choice of the child.

We now look in Goffman's (1971) concept of the dramaturgical self, where life is a theatre and individuals give a performance according to a script which can be edited and delivered to portray a particular self-image they wish to be accepted as. This portrayal has to be done taking into consideration the audience for whom this act of impression management is being carried out by the team of actors. The actor may seek to show a seemingly 'essential' self to the others rather than certain other aspects, at the same time a particular aspect of the character may have to be given to a different group who would respond in a different way to the performance. Thus, the actor has to recognize that an audience may have a certain expectation from the actor.

Further, the performance of an individual has to be 'promissory' and pass the test of the 'others'. The 'others' must accept the performance through faith, signifying the importance of the others. The essential element in the presentation of the self is a consensus when individuals give their feelings honestly and agree with those of others. The idea of self here is more public than private, a social production or institution (Goffman E., 1971).

Categorization and Stereotyping

In continuation to the above discussion, we will try and locate the social processes that work in the process of identifying people in a certain category and the effects. Once categorized an individual can either be given a positive or a negative treatment, mostly the prerogative of the individual's social position and status. And these negative or positive attributes persuade the social opinion about an individual. The process discussed here are both for the modern and traditional societies, on the verge of negating any such division.

Social categorization is a system of orientation that helps us create and define an individual's place in society. The categories such as Jews, Blacks, Whites or Women are created to systemize and simplify information from the social environment to make sense of the complex social world. It is the cognitive process in stereotyping, an exaggerated belief associated with a category to justify our conduct towards the category.

Stereotyping is the cognitive or conceptual aspect of prejudice that is an unsubstantiated prejudgment of an individual or group, favourable or unfavourable in character, tending to action in a consonant direction. The resulting action is varying

degree of discrimination, the behavioural or cognitive aspect of prejudice. These are commonly used processes in for identification of individuals in society and by the very nature has a stigmatizing component in them.

Two important social functions of social stereotyping are: first, creation and maintenance of group ideologies explaining or justifying a variety of social actions. The ruthless and barbaric killing of the Jews in the Nazi concentration camps based on the ideology of a racial supremacy, and incidents of witch hunting in the sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe are exemplify the use of stereotyping. The second function is creation and preservation of positively valued differentiations between one's own and other social groups (Tajfel, 1981).

Body as the Marker

The Coloured Body

Franz Fanon (1999), writes how wherever he goes, in the public transport on the street, whichever identity of his multiple identities he takes on what is very visible and dominates is his blackness. From a child recognising him as a black and hence frightening (through the way a black individual has been portrayed to him by parents, friends, television) to his own analysis that the body- his black body is historical produced through legends, stories and it has historicity which can not be denied.

The Gendered Body

"Anatomy is destiny." Sigmund Freud

The body is the primary site for identification. As we see in Lacan's example child, at the age of about six months who recognizes itself in a mirror. The child at that moment is aware of his/ her image in the mirror as the "I", the body that is visible to others. At this very moment the child becomes aware of the deception to the outer world as the image in the mirror is more complete than the baby feels. Not just the child but the others identify the child from the body, from its corporeality. The body is the child.

According to Lacquer (Holmes, 2007), the two-sex model of sexual difference produced by the Enlightenment worldview defined women by their bodies. Man's body (especially the white man's) was "normal" while woman's body was "abnormal" making

women deviant and problematic. Modern medicine was put to cure women's problems from hysteria to childbirth. The relationship of body, sexuality and identity are viewed from different perspectives. The essentialists believe that there is "some essence (usually with a bodily basis) which is what makes a woman a woman. This might be potential to bear children, a more caring attitude, or having a female body". Essentialists believe that the body is the basis onto which the social and cultural ideas of masculinity and femininity are imposed.

Motherhood becomes a social construct as the 'natural' body processes such as childbirth and rearing are dictated by men. Constructionists believe that "gender is about conforming to social expectations" (ibid). Goffman in his work *Stigma* (1963) show how bodies are distinguished as 'normal' and 'deviant'. Woman's deviant body made her "naturally" inferior. Gender, a social construct much like the body, is a form or tribal stigma, according to him. This view opened opposed the idea that the difference between men and women was biological and cannot be changed. Anna Oakley called for "a way of separating the bodies of human beings from their social fates" (ibid). Gender according to them focused on social factors and not bodies and it is social context that produces gendered bodies.

The next feminist perspective focus on the idea that bodies are not naturally given but socially constructed and the woman's body is the reason for her oppression within patriarchy. According to Kate Millet (Holmes, 2007) socially constructed power relationships based on myths of bodily weakness of women oppress women. This school of thought also believes in the agency of men and women in resisting the gendered construction of their bodies. According to Shulamath Firestone the portrayal of women as bodies (which can reproduce) and not as individuals causes their oppression and artificial reproduction is the way out. Following Simon de Beauvoir (1974), she argues that the male point of view is the universal viewpoint which sees women as bodies, only their physicality and not their whole individuality and hence mere sexualized bodies. She insists that only a revolution can free humanity from the tyranny of its biology.

The Deformed Body

In fact, Goffman (1963) makes significant contribution to the above value-attached choice of identity. He explains how individuals with a physical or functional

deformity that can be made out by people around them or some deviant angle of their identity, say the ex-mentally disturbed person or the person in conflict with law are always in a constant act of management of their identity, trying to conceal the chinks in the armour. According to him, a stigmatized individual tends to hold the same belief about identity that others do. Shame arises as the individual perceives his/her own attributes as a defiling possession while not possessing other attributes. This feeling of shame is reinforced in the immediate presence of "normal's" as if the "normal's" act as a mirror. The central feature here is 'acceptance' by the others, failure of others to respect and regard him/her. The individual gets into a sort of insecurity and low self-esteem, where he feels inferior to others. The best way to achieve acceptance for a stigmatized individual is to 'cheerfully and unselfconsciously accept himself as essentially the same as "normal's" while tolerating the failure of others to accept him. This conditional acceptance which is called 'phantom acceptance', according to Goffman (ibid.), will then form the base for 'phantom normalcy'. Thus, for the stigmatized individual, the social circumstances and the acceptance by the others are significant aspects for the formation and maintenance of self identity.

Flexibility and Fluidity of Cultural Identities

Stuart Hall, who has been prominent in the discourse of cultural identity say that cultural identity is not fixed and absolute. It is constructed across differences through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth, within the framework and across time and place. Identity in the sense of migration needs to be conceived as a search in terms of fluidity of time as well as space. Identity is not a finished product; rather, it is a social construction, hence always fabricated. The representation of identity is thereof their everyday and ongoing process and immigrant identities are continually transformed by the journey.

Cultural identities, as observed by Hall and quoted by Naficy (Thapan, 2005), are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made within the discourses of history and culture. There is an effect of the past in the construction and experience of identity but this is not a fixed, 'factual' past. Immigrant women, as Thapan observes negotiate with the past constantly to reconstruct a cultural identity in the host city.

The individual's experience in the host country is through the native culture. The immigrant's native categories of perception, i.e. habitus (in Bourdieu's term) determine

the manner in which one orients oneself in reaction to specific social fields. These categories, while being socially produced within a specific context continues to mediate the experience and understanding of changing objective conditions. Thus, the native paradigm predefines one's interpretation of the new situations in the host country, one tends to use the same tools and resources to think and analyze in a changed world. This residual native aspect of a person identity tends to remain with the immigrant Asian women, limiting the possibility of 'choosing' one's identity.

Thus, in the context of the immigrant we see that their past experience have an unconscious control over their present. This past is 'factual' and not simply a myth or fantasy. Even after the immigrants have moved out of their native place, it still plays a significant role in the way others perceive them and hence forms a part of their identity. The immigrant women, as has been observed by Thapan (Thapan, 2005), constantly needs to change and adept to the shifting 'other' (people at home and in the host country). It is in relation to 'other' that the individual constructs and experiences her subjectivity.

Moving Towards a More Fluid World

Are these patterns unalterable, unchanging and fixed? How can a change in these patterns, behaviour, roles be registered? To understand this we will have to look into the ways these patterns, behaviour and roles came into being and what are the processes that brought them into parlance. We have to understand how the body and based on its biological differences gender has been discursively produced, how the concept of sexuality has undergone changes discursively over the last few centuries in different parts of the civilized human society and how these insights will help us understand if body-sexuality-identity can be fluid or are these fixed.

Jacques Lacan's re-reading of Freud in relation to contributions of Ferdinand de Saussure and Levi-Straus in linguistic. He connects psychoanalysis with linguistics and anthropological semiotics to bring into focus the role of discourses in psychoanalysis and the realm of desire and fear. Lacan's theory starts with birth, moves to territorialization of the body, the mirror stage, access to language and the Oedipus complex. The last to events are called the symbolic order and mark's the individual's coming of age with culture. The concept of lack comes again and again in Lacan's theory, which derives from the story told by Aristophanes in Plato's Symposium as discussed earlier. According to Lacan the individual can compensate this only by living out in the most

complete sense its own 'maleness' or 'femaleness' and forming union with the opposite sex to recover its lost wholeness (Silverman,1999).

The basic premise of the body and sexuality being discursively produced is based on Foucault's understanding of power as distributed rather than concentrated in one group or structure. In *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (1990) he shows through the historical study of European Sexuality that in an environment of repression and social censorship, the family rather than being a monogamous conjugal cell was a network of pleasures and powers linked together at multiple points and according to transformable relationships with complicated network, saturated with multiple , fragmentary and mobile sexualities. Prohibition of consanguinity and incest, controlling of Onanism through medicalization of the sexually peculiar led to exchange of discourses, "sensualization" of power and a gain in pleasure. These multiple points of pleasure and power do not cancel or turn back against one another. Rather, they seek out, overlap, and reinforce one another. They are linked together by complex mechanisms and devices of excitation and incitement.

Power according to him omnipresent and is everywhere as it comes from everywhere. It is not an institution, neither a structure. It is the name one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society and it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together. By discourse he means a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable. We must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted and excluded discourse, or between dominant discourse and the dominated one, yet multiple discursive elements can come into play in various strategies. Discourses of power are not dialectical running counter to each other but are tactical elements of blocks operating in the field of force relations, contradictory discourses can exist within the same strategy and can also circulate without change in form from one strategy to another.

This brings us to a new concept of sexuality, away from fixity, "Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold on check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is a name given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the enticement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of

controls and resistance, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few strategies of knowledge and power” (Foucault, 1990: 105).

Sexuality is intrinsically linked to the effects of polarization and differentiation (Doane, 1999) and structures of power and domination (Foucault, 1990). Sexuality is pivotal in the psychoanalytical understanding of racism, according to Fanon (1999). The blacks are portrayed as hypersexual. This, according to psychoanalysis, is because sexuality is the realm where fear and desire find their most intimate connection, where notions of otherness and the exotic/erotic are often conflated” (ibid).

Derrida’s conceptualization of language and deconstructions have been of immensely useful for feminist. He says that mostly western thinkers have assumed structures to be natural and inevitable. Radical thinkers such as Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger have always criticized structures by reducing or deriving the signifier, that is to say, ultimately in submitting the sign to thought. According to him they have accepted the very structure they have criticized by denouncing them in the discourse. Derrida’s way consists of putting into question the system in which the preceding reduction functioned and this is what Derrida has done with language and discourse.

He studies the structurality of these structures and finds out that language is the structure of all existence. In his study of language the centre is an essential notion as “the center, which is by definition unique, constituted the very thing within a structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurality” (Derrida, 1966). While within classical thought, the center is, paradoxically, within the structure and outside it in the totality *has its center elsewhere*. The center is not the center. This notion of the center stands destabilized bringing in a point of a “rupture” in the history of thought on structurality. It makes it necessary to begin thinking that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play (ibid). This rupture, this deconstruction of the center thus created a world where the absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely. Thus, what is laid bare to us is a world where structures are questionable, can be destabilized and deconstructed to open newer avenues of immense possibilities.

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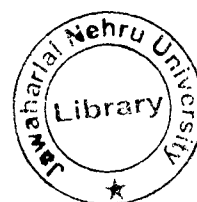
Derrida explains three key concepts that he uses in his deconstruction of the structure of discourse: bricolage, play, and supplementary. Bricolage is a technique that “uses ‘the means at hand’, that is, the instruments he finds at his disposition around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which that are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appear necessary, or to try several of them at once, even if their form and their origin are heterogeneous – and so forth” One can chose to take up any tool or Bricolage because of ‘play’ which he explains as the condition of possibility of infinite range of deconstruction as no information is complete and ultimate.

According to Derrida, if totalization no longer has any meaning, it is not because the infiniteness of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite discourse, but because the nature of the field, that is, language and a finite language, excludes totalization. The field is in effect that of *play*, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions only because it is finite. Instead of being too large, there is something missing from it: a center which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions. This leads to the notion of the supplementary which he defines as the *overabundance* of the signifier, its *supplementary* character, is thus the result of a finitude, that is to say, the result of a lack which must be *supplemented*. Since no information in complete and always need support of other information or supplementary to be understood and there are infinite supplementary supplementing other supplements. Thus for any existing term, definition or discourse there is a web of infinite bricolage-play-supplement all around it.

Being Beyond Bodies

The question that springs in our mind all through the discussion is whether it is possible to be an individual, have an identity beyond our bodies, is it possible just to have a world devoid of discriminations based on our socially constructed bodily differences of sex, race, caste, disabilities. Is it possible to have a more equal world?

There can be many answers to the question, some despairing, some debunking it to be utopian. There are innumerable possibilities and one amongst them is the possibility of a more equal, say, a genderless society as put by Judith Lorber (1991) in her intense and interestingly titled write-up, *Dismantling Noah's Ark*, where she puts in this highly



rational argument that gender is essentially a social construct, and the relation between women and men are essentially social relations. Thus, what is socially constructed can be reconstructed and social relations can be rearranged.

In similar veins is Nancy Fraser's critical theory of recognition (Powell, 2001) which is built on the notions of identity, difference, cultural domination and recognition. Through her theory Fraser tries to assert that a combination of transformative politics of recognition and a transformative politics of redistribution, based on the principles of socialist solidarity, to blur and destabilize group differences and to help redress some forms of misrecognition. This would lead to an environment of inclusion.

Chapter 2: Shifting Politics of Representation: Discourses “about” to “of” Women

“Women could be saints but not popes, queens but not legislators, angels of mercy but not warriors of death.” — Jean Bethke Elshtain (1992)

Just as the body, the idea that woman can also be seen as a social construct, which then becomes the justification for differentiating women through a set of values that are marked with “feminine” qualities of the “heart” as opposed to the manly qualities of “mind”. These values form the defense for creation of the private world outside the realm of the public, which is what is deemed the women’s space. A space where she “exists” to play her familial roles of the obedient daughter, the chaste and available wife, the self-sacrificing and caring mother; to be amongst her kind and children cooking, cleaning, looking after the sick and managing house; to be outside the realm of the polluting “other”: men and cultures; to be confined to the hearth away from the worldly chaos, a chaos where she is defined and decisions are taken for her.

It was Kate Millets’ “Sexual Politics” in 1969 which critiqued the images of women in mainstream literature. It was this moment of realization⁷ that led feminist critics to look for alternative images of women and re-read the classics and the finest literary achievements. In the anthology, “Images of Women in Literature”, Mary Anne Ferguson shows that literary texts commonly cast women in sexually defined roles” as “mothers, good submissive wives or bad dominating ones, seductresses, betrayers, prim single women, or the inspiration for male artists (Ferguson, 1986/1973). Ferguson regarded these as false images of women and counterpoised these with “Woman Becoming”, “fictional accounts, by women writers, of women’s working lives, their relationships with each other, their struggles, and their aspirations” in the concluding section of her work. In her work “Literary Women”, Ellen Moers speaks of the practice of unknowingly segregation of the women writers which is a part of larger politics of subsuming women into the category of human, but restricting at the same time their importance within it (Lalita, 1991).

In such a situation, the question that emerges is what leads to the formation and continuation of popular feminine images such as the eternal maternal, the immoral ‘whore’, the ‘*pativrata nari*’ or chaste wife? How repressive can these cultural images be? Are there ways of

⁷ This is not a moment in isolation but a part of the larger feminist movement and theorization that we briefly trace in the last section of the chapter.

defying or circumventing these? How are these images affected by the emergence of a new creed of educated and working women, working mothers, single mothers and single women?

Theories of Representation

According to Stuart Hall (1997), there are three theories of representation: the reflective approach in which meaning is thought to lie in the object, person, idea or event in the real world, and language functions like a mirror, to reflect the true meaning as it already exists in the world, the second approach, intentional approach is opposite to the first. The intentional approach holds that it is the speaker, the author, who imposes his or her unique meaning on the world through language. Words mean what the author intends them to mean. Both these approaches have been proved faulty and replaced by the third approach, the constructionist approach. This approach believes it is not the material world which convey meaning, it is the language system, the symbolic practices and processes through which representation, meaning and language operate.

According to the constructionist view there is no natural relationship between the sign and its meaning or concept. The example that is oft given is that of the traffic light where the colours red, green and yellow signifying stop, go and get ready where it is not the colour itself that carries the meaning but the difference between red and green which signifies and can be replaced by any two colours or another system of signs (critic of the reflective approach). Another example is the meaning of sign “father”, which makes sense only in relation to other members of the sign system such as “mother” “daughter” etc. The constructionist approach was influenced greatly by the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). He divided language into two parts: the langue, which is the underlying rule-governed structure of language, which enables us to produce well-formed sentences (Hall, 1997) and the parole, the actual speech or writing or drawing produced by the speaker or author. According to him, Langue, the underlying rules and codes, was the social part of a language and could be studied. This linguistic model was applied to a larger set of cultural objects and practices, which evolved into the semiotic method.

In the semiotic approach not only words and images but objects also act as signifiers in the production of meaning. For example, a car has a function of transportation, but it can also be a sign of affluence or the model as a sports car can signify a certain kind of personality to the owner. Roland Barthes in his work, *Mythologies* use this concept to advertising, photography and other modes of signs and representations. Foucault, whose concept of discourse as the medium of producing the meaning of bodies, we used in the first chapter differed from both Saussure and Barthes. He was concerned with knowledge production rather than production of meaning

through what he called discourse rather than just language. For him Discourse was not just writing or speech but “a way of representing knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment” and there “nothing has meaning outside of discourse”. For example, according to Foucault, mental illness was not seen the same way in all times in all societies in history. It was only within a definitive discursive formation that the object, ‘madness’, could appear at all as a meaningful or intelligible construct (Hall, 1997). This, Foucault believed, was possible due to the relationship of knowledge and power. Power is at the base of knowledge production and it operated within institutional “apparatus” and its “technologies”. The apparatus consisted of apparatus of punishment, for example, discourse, institutions, architectural arrangements, regulations, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophic propositions, morality, philanthropy etc. The apparatus is, thus, always inscribed in a play of power.

To understand these I propose that the cultural image of Womanhood in the Indian society is largely depended on socio-cultural constructs such as "Natural" Roles (daughter, mother, wife), "Feminine" values (compassion, love, purity), and Ideals (one's own mother, sister, grandmother). The concepts such as nation as ‘bharat mata’, rivers such as the ganga as ‘ganga mata’ and the cow as ‘gao mata’ endow women with purity and honour and at the same time make them and their honour and purity property to some male as well as give an image of their vulnerability of desecration.

As has been the case with other theorizing on women, it would be a major lapse if gender is seen in isolation, non-intersecting with other issues of discrimination such as race, class, ethnicity and caste (in the Indian perspective), which are again ideological constructs. According to Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis “‘ethnic’ phenomena in all their diversity are as various forms of ideological construct which divide people into different collectives or communities. This will involve exclusionary/inclusionary boundaries which form the collectivity. In other words although the constructs are ideological, they involve real material practices and therefore origins and effects” (Yuval-Davis, 1983).

They show a how the three “divisions” gender, ethnicity and class are intermeshed and each of them presents ideological and organizational principles within which the other operates. For example there would be ethnically specific and class roles for women and men: mothering, housework, sexual obligations, obedience and submissiveness to male commands will differ according to one's location in a class and an ethnic group. “In patriarchal white societies, it is

perceived as 'natural' that men will occupy a higher economic position in the labour market than women and white people than black people. For example notions of sexual difference (more 'submissive', 'feminine', 'intuitive', 'expressive', 'dexterous') and their 'essential mothering role' are used and are often manipulated for economically justifying (explaining) women's position (at times women by themselves). Racism and ethnicity also have a role in justifying the economic/class subordination of black people." (Yuval-Davis, 1983)

This assortment of roles, values and ideals are produced and reified through forms of folktales, folklores, myths, literature, media, which uses various means of representation- images, language and discourse. Fundamental to the idea of representation is the power to create a form of representation that is accepted or can exert itself as accepted. For example, the acceptance of the working woman and working mother was a need for Europe and America in the wake of the World Wars to support the dwindling economy and the war ravaged work force and country. One can read into it Marx's concept of "dominant ideology" or the "ruling ideology", which he believed was those of the ruling class which governs the capitalist economy and hence is in the interest of the economy (Hall, 1997). It finds an echo in Braidotti's words:

"The symbolic changes and the transformations in the system of representation of women are linked to concrete social realities: modernity needs women. They are needed as a labor-force reservoir, as untapped potentialities in a culture that for centuries disqualified them. In our times modernization and emancipation walk hand in hand." (Braidotti, 1991)

However, Foucault's idea of ideology was closer to Antonio Gramsci's idea of hegemony, which is not dominant but "a kind of ascendancy in thought and practice" over others. It is not permanent and can be overthrown. Every culture has its ways of conforming to these ideologies from social pressure to government policies which are aimed at controlling women. For individual women, families and peers can be controlling agents. There are positive and negative reinforcements in terms of glorification and punishment. There are however resistance to these by individual women and women as a solidarity. It is through their negotiations in their personal lives that women have resisted these dominant ideological representations.

These theories give us an understanding to the complex ways of creating stereotypical images of women. What we need to know is the purpose of such images? Why have women been confined to the hearth and home? Why is her "natural" place defined within the private (a social construct and unnatural!)? Why does her image of the eternal mother overshadow her existence as a human?

The Politics of Representation

“Difference is a mark of inferiority.” Rosi Bradotti (Bradotti, 1991)

Citing the works of Rousseau, Hegel, and Freud, Carole Pateman in her essay the “The Disorder of Women” (1994) tries to unearth why and how politics has been shut out to women and has been dominated by men. According her, these stalwarts in their works have categorically shut out women from politics. For Rousseau, “never has a people perished from the excess of wine; all perish from the disorder of women...[d]runkenness is not the worst of the vices since it makes men stupid rather than evil...so it poses no danger to the polity” (Pateman, 1994) In contrast, the ‘disorder of women’ engenders all the vices and can bring the state to ruin”, Rousseau insisted (cited by Pateman, *ibid.*). In a similar tone, while Freud argues that women are ‘hostile to’ and ‘in opposition to’ civilization and Hegel holds that the community ‘creates its enemy for itself within its own gates’ in ‘womankind in general’ (*Ibid.* p.X). Women are ‘the everlasting irony in the life of the community’, and when ‘women hold the helm of government, the state is at once in jeopardy’” (*ibid.*).

According to Pateman (*ibid.*), nature and culture were part of a whole and any social hierarchy was based on “natural” difference of age, sex and strength till the Enlightenment around the seventeenth century. The ideal of the new Enlightened world were free, equal and rational individuals endowed with agency to create their social relationships and institutions. It also advocated that political institutions are based on conventions- on contract, consent and agreement which were against the basic “nature” of women, who have a “disorder at their very centres- in their morality- which can bring about the destruction of the state” (*Ibid.*). Women “naturally” fit in the family, “the most natural of all human associations” as they cannot transcend their nature to suit the civil forms of life. “The distinction between and separation of the private and the public, or particularistic and universal, spheres of association is a fundamental structural principle of the modern, liberal conception of social life. The natural, particularistic family nestles at the centre of the private sphere, and it throws into prominence and stands opposed to the impersonal, universal, ‘conventional’ bonds of public life.” The source of this disorder according to Rousseau and Freud is “incompatibility of womankind with a fundamental bond of civil (public) society, that is, justice”. Also for both of them anatomy is destiny, which influence women’s moral character: unlike men who can subdue and sublimate their sexual desires women are slaves to their “boundless sexual passion”. Around their natural capacity to reproduce, women’s “natural” capacity to care was structured and the “development of civilization was a

work of men alone because it requires the ‘instinctual sublimation of which women are little capable’” (ibid.). Women could not transcend their naturalness of their being according to Rousseau, Hegel and Freud. Freud was the first to explain women’s deficiency in a sense of justice in the inability of women to overcome the Oedipus complex unlike men and hence the stunted growth of their super-ego.

Early liberal feminists Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill agreed with women’s lack of justice and were of the view that this could be rectified by extending freedom, equality and rationality to women through education. Wollstonecraft claim rights of citizenship to be extended to women as reason has no sex while Mill argues that women cannot be claimed to be “naturally” fit only for subordination as it is not known what they might achieve if the principles of freedom and equality are extended to sexual relations. Mills also argue that women have to be liberated from the confines of the family, which is a “school of despotism” (Mill, 1869) and develop a sense of justice by participating in a variety of public institutions.

Politics is defined in Chamber’s dictionary as the art or science of government: management of a political party: political affairs or opinions. It captures the regular sense of politics, which is largely about political institutions such as the state, government, political parties, interest groups and other such groups involved in policy making. However, politics also happens outside formal institutions. The fault lies in endowing all power exclusively in the formal institutions and their activities. Power also lies outside the formal decision making political system, for example in business groups in a capitalist system (Scott, 2009/1994). Power also lies in the act of writing and theorizing and more so if the subject and style of writing and theorizing defies the existing subjects and style. Just as Jean Bethke Elshtain in her essay “The Power and the Powerlessness of Women” argues that abstract academic debates also have “real effects on the lives of real people, given the power to ‘name’ and to define that we lodge in experts” (Elshtain, 1992). She further argues that the very act of defining what politics is and what participation is creating institutional barriers for groups such as women and working class men to enter into “politics”. It also justifies the existing social order while claiming to merely describe it. In the beginning of the same essay titled “Defining Power: Why Political Scientists have missed so much” she categorically mentions her preference to describe herself as ‘a political theorist, not a political scientist’. In view of the existing structures and system of a ‘science’, power, as already discussed above, comes to be defined and reduced to the formula “X has power over Y if he can get Y to do something Y would not otherwise do.” The study of the same by political scientist would be within the ambit of “‘decision making’, political

institutions...organized associations...[t]here is no room in this discourse for moral debate and judgment....Within the larger political view presumed by this one-dimensional view of power, women got construed as apolitical beings by definition.” However, some “rebellious” analysts as she calls them broadened the scope of analysis by expanding the dimensions of power. One such argument is that power is not limited to X compelling Y but also to X limiting the scope of political decision making to the issues non-threatening to him, thus, he uses his official power to “preclude action and forestall decision” to keep these issues outside politics and public policy in the guise of the private(Ibid).

What we see is a use of the power of theorizing by some “rebellious” theorist to bring into light a tacitly hidden part of the picture. Feminist theorist with the use of their scholarship brought forth issues close to the feminist movement⁸ that have been historically been categorized “private” , “personal”, “natural” and “womanly”. They have questioned these beliefs and myths, created space and structures within the existing “malestream” academic stronghold, defied set structures and systems of theoretizing : broadened its scope and have disrupted the status quo in the “private” “personal” lives as much as the “political” and the “public”.

From the above discussion, it is evident that this particular framing, imagination of the women as the sexualized “other” by the canonical writing of the great “fathers” of knowledge production is a political act to keep the women out of the “public” realm. We quickly look into some of the major moves by women to break this faulty representation in the next section.

Claiming Subjectivity: Feminist Movement and Feminist Theorization

“In my opinion, feminism is the question—the empowerment of female subjectivity in political epistemological and experiential sense is the answer. By empowerment I mean both positive affirmation (theoretical) and concrete enactment (social, juridical, political). Rosi Bradotti (Bradotti, 1991)

In the beginning of the 20th century the feminist movement was referred to as suffragettes and women’s access to education and professions. After women received the right to vote in 1920 in the US and in 1928 in Britain (the first wave feminism), the second wave of active feminism came up in the late 1960s across North America and Europe. It was more than a century after Mary Wollstonecraft appealed for equal education for women in (Vindication of the Rights of the

⁸The Oxford dictionary of Sociology describes Feminism as:A social movement, combining theory with political practice, which seeks to achieve equality between men and women. Its origins in 18th century England are associated with Mary Wollstonecraft’s plea for the rights of the women.

Woman, 1972) in 1920s when Virginia Woolf stands outside Cambridge University and laments that she being a woman is not able to enroll there and goes on to fight for women's right to vote and exert her political capacities to elect (Bradotti, 1991). She becomes a name to reckon in the literary world, her works including "A Room of One's Own" and "Three Guineas" pioneers the tradition of feminist literature along with a group of friends called the Bloomsbury Group.

Simon de Beauvoir's "The Second Sex" published in French in 1949 and translated into English later become a foundational feminist text and had a deep impact on feminist activities and theory all over the world. In a bold style of writing, Beauvoir, who could not go to the most prestigious higher education institution in humanities in her country as it still kept women out, challenged the idea of "woman". She argued that idea of "woman" was discursively produced and as the "other", the negation of man. Her work still provokes and engages feminist from all sections and ideologies and read and re-read for new conceptualization.

The second wave of feminism is the period after 1960s, in the wake of student movements, civil rights and anti-imperialist movements, which saw a spurt in theorization. The non-fiction writings of Kate Millet (*Sexual Politics*), Germaine Greer's (*The Female Eunuch*), Betty Friedan (*The Feminine Mystic*), Shulamith Firestone (*The Dialectic of Sex*, 1972), Valeria Solanas and Juliet Mitchell, along with fictional writings such as Erica Jong's (*Fear of Flying*) tried to bring out and break the stronghold of patriarchy and craved for female sexual liberation. Kate Millet raised her voice against socially constructed power relationships based on myths of bodily weakness of women to oppress women. According to Shulamith Firestone (1972), the portrayal of women as bodies (which can reproduce) and not as individuals causes their oppression and artificial reproduction is the way out. Following Simon de Beauvoir (1974), she argues that the male point of view is the universal viewpoint which sees women as bodies, only their physicality and not their whole individuality and hence mere sexualized bodies. She insists that only a revolution can "free humanity from the tyranny of its biology". This school of thought also believes in the agency of men and women in resisting the gendered construction of their bodies.

It came to be known as the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) during this period and was a united movement of many small grass-roots movements. In the first national conference in 1970, the movement drafted four demands: equal pay, equal education and equal opportunity, 24- hours nursery and free contraception and abortion on demand, which was later

rephrased as women's right to control their bodies along with the addition of the fifth demand: financial independence (Scott, 2009/1994).

Most of the women's movement activists were young and well educated, who had been promised equality by their education and had faced discrimination in real life. They campaigned for rape victims, for workers, in solidarity with women in other countries. They distributed pamphlets and published newsletters and magazines to discuss issues that were earlier seen as personal and individual as political and social. It was in this period that the two powerful slogans "The Personal is Political" and "Sisterhood is Powerful" emerged to endorse the idea of universal oppression of women as a group and the need to recognize and unite against their common enemy: the oppressive structures that oppressed them (Evans, 1997).

Although these are various small movements in different locations, there were various ideological inclinations influencing the theory and politics of each such group. There was a primary distinction between those who demanded emancipation and equal rights within the existing system (reformist) and those who wanted a transformation of the existing gender system (revolutionary). There were other differences such as patriarchy or capitalism as the cause of women's subordination and the question of difference and equality of women. Radical feminist such as Shulamith Firestone and Christine Delphy held that patriarchy and men were the enemies and they could not collaborate with men at any level, while Socialist feminist collaborated with trade unions of men for their common causes.

In the 1970s writings such as Jill Johnston's "Lesbian Nation" rejected heterosexuality in which women succumbed to "natural male desire". Ann Oakley demonstrated that women made contribution to economics in their underpaid work (housewife) and Christine Delphy demonstrated contribution of women to family business essential as it was generally unrewarded (The main enemy: a materialist analysis of women's oppression) (Evans, 1997). It was also the time when working class feminism in Canada became a part of women's movement in contrast to the university based feminism (Maroney, 1986). In her work, *The trouble with Patriarchy*, Sheila Rowbotham conceptualized the universal system of patriarchy that oppressed all women. Against this backdrop, Hazel Carby wrote against being grafted into Feminism of the white women in her 1982 work, *The Empire Strikes Back* (Evans, 1997). There is a tide of black feminist writing challenging the "credibility and the intentions of those posing power to define" (the white feminist) (Collins, 2004). This is a moment of self assertion, a moment of self definition which

validates the black women's power as human subjects. It is also a moment of questioning the larger politics of knowledge creation within a society of skewed power relations where it is the powerful who has the opportunity and the means to "create" knowledge about and define others. In the period of late 1970s and 1980s many such work, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Ntozake Shange's chore poem *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide* stated the necessity for black women's self-definition and self valuation. This is a turning point for the movement when black feminist such as bell hooks bring in the concept of "location" of the theorist, or what she calls "that space of my theorizing" "of not just who I am in the present but where I am coming from" (hooks, 2004).

Within the mainstream western feminism, the period on 1970s onwards is also of self reflections and theoritisation on myriad areas: questioning the basis of the belief of women as natural and men as cultured, organization of reproductive work, sex at the very core of women's oppression, women have been structurally barred from politics. The eighties saw the rise in work on the concept of sex, gender and doing or performativity of gender. These brought to fore critical questions for the feminist movement—they brought back the body and sexuality back into the debate and questioned the homogenous categorization of women as the "subject" of feminism.

Feminist theorist from different disciplines—from literature, history, science, sociology and philosophy, started critically asking the women question, and analyzed the space of women and gender in their disciplines, in their mode of knowledge production. What they produced was a huge literature for on the systemic and structural barriers in their disciplines, in the way these were taught and the way the women were missing in their subjects. Sociologists from Durkheim, Marx to Weber have categorically remained silent on the question of the women. Sciences have used their biased experiments to prove women were inferior to men physically and mentally and more liable to physical and psychological disease. Psychoanalysis and psychiatry has categorically portrayed women as vulnerable to hysteria. Modern medicine claimed menstruation, pregnancy and lactation as sickness. In history women were missing, they were ahistorical not unless they were important in someone else's story. Politics debunked women as naïve and incapable of politics. Women existed either as sexualized or desired bodies in literature and art. It is this period that saw a spurt in feminist analysis and theoritization in economics, history, psychoanalysis, medicine and health.

These theories fit in well and fed the fire of the feminist movement, providing the theoretical base and understanding to oppose the patriarchal-capitalist system and the equally

patriarchal structures and mindsets of the policy maker, service providers (doctors, lawyers) and to overcome the daily fights with people around them. The changes we have seen in the opening up of spaces, professions (also a need of the capitalist system), education opportunities, increased national spending on women's health, education and gender budgeting. These policies are also a result of the nations being signatory of International treaties and conventions. These theories have fed into the United Nation Conferences for mobilizing women in 1975 (Mexico City) where women collectively articulated their concerns and crafted a World Plan of Action spearheading the UN decade for the Advancement of Women (1976-85), in 1980 (Copenhagen), in 1985 (Nairobi) and in 1995 (Beijing). The understanding developed through these theories along with the experiences of the movement activists feed into the plans for the UN Development Decade (1980- 1990).

It was in the late 1980s and early 1990s that women from the third world, from the erstwhile colonized world claim for their own political subjectivity. Through works such as Chandra Talpade's "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" (1988), Aihwa Ong "Colonialism and Modernity: Feminist Representation of Women in the Non-Western Societies" (1988) that the "muted, politically naïve third world women" enter the political discourse and chooses to speak for themselves. They defy the western feminism's global hegemony and faulty construction of a "homogenized", "monolithic" "third world women". They claim to break out of the unitary western humanist mode of knowledge production where third world is the object of study and prove their political sophistication by articulating there stand against the backdrop of flow of funds in the newly freed, "underdeveloped" (in terms of President Truman) colonized countries which had the possibility of turning to communism.

Two very significant indicator for the link of feminist theory and politics lie in the publishing of women's resistance literature and the opening up and growth of Women studies as a distinct academic discipline in Universities initially in the west, particularly in North America and then in the other parts of the world. According to Mary Evans it was difficult to introduce women studies an academic discipline in the Mecca's of modern education Cambridge and Oxford. In fact even practitioners of a "humanitarian" and modern subject such as sociology ridiculed the idea of feminist perspective. Women studies classes were mostly taken up by young scholars against the chagrin of others who belittled the whole idea. As for the publication of women's literature, it was late in 1978 when the Virago classics series opened up to women writers who have been ignored in the mainstream male traditional setup. Such was the historical situation at the moment that an analysis of the publication at the time show how white male

writers fought to maintain the form of 'masculinity' deemed appropriate: a form that marginalized relations with women, was deeply involved in yet denied emotional relationship with men and gave an absolute priority to objective, rather than subjective reality of experience (Evans, 1997).

Indian Feminist Theory and Politics

It is a genuine problem to locate the body of Indian Feminist theory, for one, a large body of literature is available on the various women's movements but the style of their theorization do not comply with that of the west. Secondly, the history of action and the history of idea of the feminist movement is the same, that is, "the conceptual debates themselves embodied the history of doing, and vice versa" (Chaudhuri, 2004). These are read in the debates of the women organizations whether they should join the national movement or not, debates in the Constituent Assembly on the possibility of conflict between freedom of religion and freedom of women etc. Indian Feminist theory is read within its colonial mediated history and in the available literature on the women's movement which breaks the western philosophical dichotomy of activism and theorization and in a context, language and style very different from that of the west. This is evident in Meera Kosambi's retelling the story and feminism of Ramabai, in the writings of the colonial India where the ripe political imagination of the nation was the mother, who has to be protected and not an inch of her territory given up (Ibid.)

In her work on the women's movement in India during 1800 to 1990, Radha Kumar brings home the change in nature of literature in the women's movement, from autobiographies, biographies, memoirs, collection of speeches and writings in the early twentieth century to the contemporary women's movement literature documenting mainly the struggle of the landless labourers and working class. While the biographical literature gives detailed information on the leaders of the movement, largely nationalist, contemporary literature goes beyond the leaders as "amongst large sections of the contemporary movement there is a feeling that singling out individual women not only leads to a biased and partial view of the movement they were or are engaged in, but also reaffirms hierarchical leadership structures and hides from history the majority which makes up any movement" (Kumar, 2002/1993).

The very first strain of what we may call an indigenous women's movement could be said to be the reform movements in nineteenth century Bengal and Maharashtra. These reforms such as abolition of the practice of sati in 1830s, widow remarriage in 1850s, the age of consent act in 1860s against the practice of child marriage and girls' education were brought about largely

by educated Indian men who had been deeply influenced by the ideals of equality, liberty and fraternity of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment. Their locations in the historical moment and their personal experiences such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy who saw his sister-in-law forced to commit sati on his brother's funeral pyre, made them instrumental for these reforms supported by the colonial government. The strategy used by the reformers was to show that the traditional Hindu *shastras* or texts supported their cause. Works such as "A conference Between an Advocate for and an Opponent to the Practice of Burning Widows Alive" by Ram Mohan in 1815, Bills for the reforms drafted by the petitioners, Dayanand Saraswati's "*Satyarth Prakash*" and "*Tattvabodhini Patrika* published by the group Tattvabodhini Sabha were re-reading of the *shashtras* to reform Hinduism could be claimed as the first theoretical base for the social reform movement which concentrated in uplifting the deplorable conditions of Indian women.

It was a result of these reforms that Indian women such as Pandita Ramabai (who wrote an autobiographical account), Sarojini Naidu (both educated in foreign), Kashibai Kanitkar (who started writing in 1890s), Anandibai Joshi (the first women doctor), Tarabai Shinde (wrote *Stree Purush Tulana*) Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya (a child widow who remarried and actively participated in politics) became the face of the women's movement by educating and organizing women for better education, social standing and political participation. As a result of the specific condition of colonial rule and the ongoing struggle for self rule, the women's movement intermingled with it at various points. It is within the self rule movement that the consciousness deepened amongst the women activists (Aruna Asaf Ali, Basanti Devi, Durgabai Desmukh, Annei Besant) who tried to exert their space and identity.

Colonial rule could be seen as a formative influence on the movement and had a deep impact on it. Women's autonomous organizations were formed in the early twentieth century and "women's activism" came to be recognized by nineteen thirties. The movement for women's emancipation and reform in the patriarchal system grew alongside the larger movement for self rule and became a strong part of the nationalist movement with its call for use of *Khadi*. Gandhi is seen by many as the parent of the Indian women's movement for his feminization of his self and his politics with the ideals of silent protest, *satyagraha* (which he said he learnt from Kasturba Gandhi and Indian women who used it for protest within the family), values such as peace and non-violence attributed to women. However, Indian nationalist history also claims radical militant activist such as Durga Bhabhi, a contemporary of Bhagat Singh who helped him escape Lahore, Bina Das, who tried to shoot the Governor of Bengal, Shanti Ghosh and Suniti Choudhary who were sentenced by the colonial government for 'terrorist' activities.

However, after independence there was a “comparative lull” till the nineteen seventies as the Constitutional seed of equality failed to germinate. By the nineteen eighties the old organizations were revitalized and a number of new organizations came up. The movement situated itself to the needs of the time, while in the early nineteenth century reformers claimed that difference between women and men was no ground for discrimination and hence the constitutional guarantee of equality of the sexes was seen as a victory. However, by the nineteen eighties and after half a century of democracy, the movement has grown up to question the rights of citizenship and the failures of the Indian Democracy. Women activist claim that the difference between women and men, that women can give birth, is “socially useful....hence proper care for their conditions of being was socially necessary”

Some of the major agitation and outcome of the Indian Women’s Movement have been the campaign against dowry⁹, agitation against rape¹⁰, right to divorce and maintenance¹¹, equal pay and maternity benefits¹², protection against harassment in workplace¹³, protest against immoral trafficking, girl child’s right to property, protest against female feticide¹⁴, domestic violence act¹⁵ and the ongoing women’s reservation bill¹⁶.

As is visible from the collage above, the Indian women’s movement (with all its fractures and differences) is an intensely dynamic, political movement. It’s a conglomeration of various other movements, the movement of the working class woman (Mill workers, tea plantation workers, rubber cultivators), the movement of the peasant women (Chipko, Naxal and Telengana), the movement of self employed women of the unorganized sector (SEWA), the Dalit Feminist movement which have at the crux of their being a struggle for their rights and agency. The doing of these movements, in the acts, in the politics exists the ideational and theorization which gets communicated through meetings, pamphlets, posters, plays and written documents.

“Woman is no longer different from but different so as to bring about new values.” Rosi Bradotti (Bradotti, Summer, 1991)

⁹ Prohibition of dowry act came into being as a result of this, present day campaigning is to get this law implement, cases where women have walked out of weddings against dowry demands are a victory to this cause, dowry deaths, however, continue

¹⁰ Although the law of the country sees the accused as the culprit and he has to prove himself not guilty, cases of rape are being filed, however, the rate of conviction is very low owing to a system which ducks from its responsibilities by questioning the women’s morality

¹¹ The Shah Bano case brought into conflict religious beliefs and women’s right, it was a moment challenge in the history of Indian Politics as it hit the very heart of the rights of an Indian Women as a citizen

¹² Being signatory to ILO conventions, these are laws that were effects of the larger women’s struggle

¹³ The Vishakha Judgement was monumental in this cause

¹⁴ Drawing from international law and pressure

¹⁵ Which gives the same security to live in partners as married couples

¹⁶ Which many see as revolutionary for Indian women and the nation

We see the flashes of resistance against the moves of the larger “malestream” academic community to contain and appropriate feminist theory into its one fold and break its innovativeness. In an interview to Vikki Bell (Bell, 1999), Judith Butler, explains why in “Gender Trouble”, she does not specify how to deploy performative and parodic modes of gender,

I think what’s really funny -- and this probably seems really odd considering the level of abstraction at which I work -- is that I actually believe that politics has a character of contingency and context to it that cannot be predicted at the level of theory. And when theory starts becoming programmatic, such as ‘here are my five prescriptions’, and I set up my typology, and my final chapter is called ‘What is to be Done?’, it pre-empts the whole problem of context and contingency, and I do think that political decisions are made in that lived moment and they can’t be predicted from the level of theory.

It is also a “strategic resistance to the demand to specify or to prescribe effective political practices” (Salih, 2002) and to foreclose innovation in not only in feminist and queer political practices but also in its rich history of theoritization. What her statement amplifies is the need to go beyond easy given solutions and be bound in definitions and theory, to transcend the basic lacunae of the western theoretical tradition of exactness to a new theoretical “undefining”, boundless fuzziness. It is a urge not only defy and remold the existing theoretical tradition but unearth and destroy its faulty base (which may lead to its collapse!), something that is at the very crux and base of feminist theory.

Chapter Three: Polluted Body and Excluded World

Great Britain takes pride in having ruled the subordinate races of the Empire to their contentment for nearly 100 years. But Brahmin community in India today can proudly say that they have exercised more comprehensive, more real power among the Hindu population of India for over 3,000 years, and that often despite the loss of apparent political power. In fact, caste is social Imperialism, perfected by experience and maintained by religious sanction. K.M. Panikkar (1933)

The aim of this chapter is to briefly understand the caste system- its ideology, ways of acting, its extent and the effects through the study of works of various Indian and foreign theorists. We will also try and analyze through these works, how the body, one's descent and gender gets related to and affected by one's caste. At the heart of our discussion is the Dalit women, therefore our perspective and view are focused on Dalits and the Dalit women rather than the upper caste as is the trend on many works. Also, we try and build up the image and the patriarchal gaze bestowed on Dalits and the specifically, Dalit women.

Unfortunately, very few disciplines have opened up to the study of caste or have applied caste as a variable. Gopal Guru in an article mentions that it is only in few disciplines such as Sociology, Social Anthropology, History and Literature, that untouchability¹⁷, one of the major discriminatory practices of the caste system, has been studied while "influential" disciplines such as Political Science marginally touches it, and Economics and Philosophy have no engagements with it (Guru, 2009). As in all other aspects, the sociological and historical studies on untouchability as well as caste has been mostly done by the upper castes and other castes who had the privilege of getting educated and trained in a particular discipline as a researcher. This finds an echo in Yogendra Singh's work, "Indian Sociology: Social Conditioning and Emerging Concerns" (Singh, 1986). In this text he takes a look into the developments in the field of Indian Sociology during the period of 1970 to 1985, after laying down the historical journey of knowledge production in Indian sociology starting from the colonial period. At this point it will be important for us to get a grasp of the way the study of Indian society in its modern form developed. This is important to understand the effects of the colonial rule, the harbinger of

¹⁷ Although untouchability has been abolished by the Abolition of Untouchability Act, 1955, it still exists in many parts of the country, as has been shown by the documentary, India Untouched, discussed earlier. It also exists in people's psyche. Many refer to the Dalits as Ex-untouchables. In this chapter the researcher has used the term Dalit as well as other terms used by the individual researchers themselves wherever their work has been discussed. In a few places the phrases 'lower ranked caste' and 'upper ranked castes' are used to instead of lower caste and upper caste as used by researchers.

modernity in India¹⁸, on the ways of knowledge production and dissemination and its impact on the lives of ordinary people.

It is the colonial “administrators-cum-sociologists” who according to Singh began the systematic study of various aspects of Indian culture and society. Anthropologist Gloria Goodwin Raheja also talks of British administrators who doubled up as anthropologists to understand the colonized people for better administration. She mentions that early anthropological work were by these administrators; some of them are H.H. Risley, who began his career as assistant collector in Midnapore in 1873, William Crooke, magistrate and collector in four districts of United provinces of Agra and Oudh and Richard Carnac Temple who served in the Indian Army in different parts of India (Raheja, 1999). In her work Raheja shows how the 1857 uprising and loss of control of the British over the situation led the administration to understand the social structure of the Indian society. The colonial administration seized upon the caste identity as a way to understand and control the colonized in the wake of the rebellion¹⁹. She notes that post uprising, the colonizers began “carefully recording caste identities in the decennial census, commissioning the publication of region-by-region caste compendiums for the use of colonial administrators, relying more heavily on caste identities in formulating land revenue policy, and more frequently disciplining certain groups as “criminal” castes and tribes or as caste prone to rebellion” (ibid).

According to Raheja, it was hierarchy amongst the castes and barbarism against women that made the British claim was reason of the inability of the Indians to rule stronger. These anthropologists attempted to construct a discourse about the consensual nature of caste ideology (informed by their higher caste assistance) and to create an illusion that the disciplining of specific castes and the Indian population as a whole was done under the consent of the colonized. Thus, we see the use of contrasting arguments by colonizers for continuing their rule. According to Singh the conceptual categories used by these anthropologists for the study of the Indian society were loaded with Eurocentric cognitive and value terms. Some of them also distorted historical fact and reproduced the Indian reality as a-historical in order to prove Indians incapable of self rule and hence perpetuate the colonial rule. This textual view of the Indian society as static, timeless and a-historical is a major point of contention of most communities as the colonial orientalist robbed them of their rich histories and categorized them as barbaric, backward and

¹⁸ Though the effects of the modernity, often imposed on the colonized communities, were strongly contested by communities and are till date refuted by many, one cannot deny the effect of the period of colonial rule on the social and political life of communities.

¹⁹ The reason for this could be the support for the uprising from people grouped under their communal and caste identities within a geographical location as these have been traditional identities for mobilizing of the masses.

incapable of self rule. Historians and postcolonial scholars have given substantial evidence to expose the motives of the colonial rule behind such categorization as extending their rule and continued imperialist exploitation.

Thus, the stage for India sociology was set by the colonial rulers and administrators categorizing communities for their better administrations. The pioneers of Indian sociology in an independent India were influenced by the worldview of western sociologists such as Comte, Marx and Weber as well as the Indian nationalist and reformists such as Rammohun Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Lala Lajpat Rai, Phule and Ranade²⁰. According to Singh, these sociologists were mostly male, middle class urban and upper caste and many were educated from European universities. Singh mentions B.N. Seal, B.K. Sarkar, G.S. Ghurye, Radhakamal Mukherjee, S.V. Ketkar etc. These pioneers were followed by the modernizers (the terms pioneers and modernizers was used first by Ramkrishna Mukherjee) in the 1950s and 60s when the centre of sociology shifted from Europe to the United States in the wake of the Second World War. This period saw a series of empirical studies and increased American influence in the national project of socio-economic and political reconstruction. This was due to the pressure of the US to safeguard the newly independent states including India, falling in line with the communist republic of China and taking the revolutionary communist path of development (Singh, 1986).

It is evident even from the discussion above that caste is an important element in the study of Indian communities and hence social life. However, the question that Gopal Guru prompts us to ask is the dearth of studies on untouchability in the “influential” disciplines such as economics and political science which can lead to subsequent nuanced understanding of the relationship of untouchability and other disabilities maintained by the caste system as poverty, disempowerment and backwardness. Development of other modern disciplines within the historical context of Indian colonial experience would have been similar. It would be based on the vested interest of the colonizers and the educated resourceful castes in knowledge production which would be more profits in economics, retaining power in political science.

Gopal Guru’s own reflection on the issue brings him to another strong acknowledgement: the inability of even sociology and anthropological descriptions to exhaust all the reference points, that is, “untouchability as a dynamic reality tends to produce experience, which is always in excess of these textualised sociological and anthropological descriptions”. He recommends the use of philosophical and archaeological frameworks rather than empirical/descriptive framework

²⁰ We will come back to the writings and works of reformist at a later stage where it is more relevant.

to tap the “excess meaning embedded in untouchability as a dynamic practice” (Guru, 2009). At the crux of his reflection is the need to capture the “experience” through a perspective that has the capacity to accommodate it. Somewhere underlying “experience” is the Dalit perspective within the realm of these disciplines which is missing even after decades of reservation in the educational sector²¹.

What is it that is “polluting” in a person belonging to a certain caste? Why is a person born to a certain set of parents considered “untouchable”? What is it that the new born child receives from the parents that make her/him “polluted”? How is it that this “untouchability” one ascribes at birth tends to close certain avenues of growth and prosperity to a person that are open to others? Answers to these questions can be diverse depending on the perspective of different sources: from the texts that are read and reread over the years to maintain the status quo of the caste system, the believers and strong vanguards of the caste system (mostly caste hindu’s who benefit from the system²²), researchers who would tend to fall for either of the above two perspectives, those who try to or chose to listen to the least heard opinions and voices, and that of Dalits’ and by Dalits themselves encompassing at least in part the Dalit experience. It is indeed an irony that most of the studies on caste system have been based on reading the Hindu texts that propagate and perpetuate it or by having people from the higher castes as informants. This has been the same ever since the days of colonial administrator-cum-anthropologists (Raheja, 1999). Not that one denies or suspects the intellect of the caste groups, who had monopoly over traditional learning, but the perspective best to understand an oppressive system such as the caste system is that of the oppressed, the Dalits:

“ In a society where power is organized hierarchically-for example by class or race or gender-there is no possibility of an Archimedean perspective, one that is disinterested, impartial, value-free, or detached from the particular, historical social relations in which everyone participates. Instead, each person can achieve only a partial view of reality from the perspective of his or her own position in the social hierarchy. And such a view is not only partial but distorted by the way relations of domination are organized. Further, the view from the perspective of the powerful is far more partial and distorted than that available from the perspective of the dominated;....the powerful

²¹ View expressed by Prof.Guru in an informal chat.

²² The benefits that the caste hindus reap from the caste system are manifold: economic, social and psychological. The caste system prohibits the Dalits from getting education and they are forced to continue their ancestral occupation which is mostly menial works for the comfort and provision of hygiene to the caste hindus. This keeps cheap labour available for the landed caste hindus. Also since they remain uneducated, Dalits cannot take up better jobs or live without dependence on the caste hindus for livelihood. Psychologically, the caste hindus get a high by rebuking and humiliating a Dalit in everyday transaction, a feeling of being master. This feeling of high is not on the basis of comparison but a given right of being over and above the Dalits. It is the same feeling of unchallengeable superiority that a patriarchal man feels over women. It is also the same patriarchal feeling of superiority that is shaken and needs to be remedied when Dalits’ or women’s position becomes comparable to them. For example, the case of Bawana violence where upwardly moving Dalit houses were burnt down by caste hindus or the innumerable cases of honour killing by relatives were the female victim takes on herself to defy family and Khap Panchayats.

have far more interests in obscuring the unjust conditions that produce their unearned privileges and authority than do the dominated groups in hiding the conditions that produce their situations” (Harding, 1991).

Systematizing Corporeal Existence

To understand the base of the caste system, the concepts of purity-pollution, untouchability and the perpetuation of the caste system even after abolition of untouchability and ensuring equality to the citizens by the Constitution of Republic of India, one has to understand the connections of the caste and body, that lies at the crux of the caste system. The Hindu scriptures contain in them the basis of many myths about the caste system and its relations with the body. Since it is difficult to analyse the scriptures themselves at this stage, we look into the various interpretations of the same and sociological writings of these.

In his much read work, “Mistaken Modernity: India Between Worlds”, Dipankar Gupta points out that caste is not limited to the hierarchy of varna or jati systems but there is a world-view²³ that persons belonging to different castes are made of different substances which are invisible but can enter others body through various orifices. That is why according to this world-view “it is important to eat separately, for through saliva substances are easily transmitted, to live and breathe separately, and, of course, to observe strict sexual taboos” (Ibid). Thus, we see how the theory of different body substances and mixing of the body substance of one with the other can cause a kind of impurity of the body. According to Gupta, the caste theory of personhood is extremely biological which is further strengthened by the view that the body is a fortress constantly under siege from forces without and hence all openings should be carefully monitored.

Somewhat similar explanation are to be found in the works of McKim Marriot, an anthropologist and Ronald B. Inden, a historian, who try to give the emic²⁴ view on the reason on pollution (Kolenda, 1985). According to them the hindus believe that a person inherits a “unitary coded substance” which relates to his *varna*, *jati*, sex and personality. Thus, one’s *jatidharma* (duty of one’s *jati*) is encoded into his or her bodily substance which is made of coded-particles or *pindas* which forms one’s hair, saliva, sweat and can be transmitted to others through contact, hence untouchability, food and sexual intercourse, and prohibition of inter-dinning and inter-marriage. This theory of pollution contagion assert the monistic Hindu view which does not

²³ Though the author does not mentions who’s world-view it is, from the substance and body of the world-view it seems to be the world-view of the caste hindu groups.

²⁴ Even though in the text the author mentions that the emic view expressed are those of people and not that of the Hindu sacred text, however, one can still read in the emic version the Brahminical view. It is obvious that the views expressed are those of Hindus from the upper ranks of the caste system.

separate substance from code, that is, the body from morality, unlike western duality of the body and the mind.

The hindus believe that one should try to gain better coded particles coming from gods or higher ranked castes and avoid worse particles by avoiding contact with castes ranked lower (ibid). According to this theory heat is catalytic for separation and combination of coded substance and hence cooked food has to be avoided. Brahmins, however, could take food cooked in *ghee* (pakka) from certain caste while avoiding food cooked in other ways (kachha) from the same caste (C.Bougle, 1958). At the same time certain food such as meat and liquor was prohibited for the Brahmins. The point to be noted is that the body (and going by the body-morality unity, the morality) of the person who ingests these article is at the risk of being polluted. However, the coded particle theory or bodily substance theory does not hold true unless these articles of food themselves are to be classified as polluting (meat and liquor)and pollution absorbing (food cooked in ghee by a person of a caste made of inferior particle/bodily substance). Also this theory fails to qualify and explain the sight and wearing of a particular article of clothing by a person belonging to a lower ranked class as polluting. We look into Bougle's explanation for the same later.

The theory of bodily substance addressed above is part of a discussion on the continuing tradition and need for modernization in the concept of hygiene in the Indian psyche²⁵. What is interesting is the concept of dirt and impurity in the Indian psyche. The author mentions that dirt is not something that is dirty in them but "matter out of place" as has been quoted by Mary Douglas. Thus, a shoe in the rack is not dirty but on the table it is, dirt therefore, is largely a cultural construction (Gupta,2000). Following the same concept of dirt, substances routinely expelled from bodies are dirty and polluting even to the person. These are to Hindus inferior particle which has to be disposed (Kolenda, 1985). The caste system recommends specialized functionaries to absorb these pollutants such as the barber, the sweeper who are ritual specialists because they take care of what leaves the body by absorbing the pollution (Gupta,2000). According to Hocart and Gould also people from lower ranked caste absorb pollution (Kolenda, 1985).The same is for household dirt and garbage, it has to be removed from the household but what happens to the garbage and dirt once it is outside one's sight and household is not the concern of the person owning the body and the household from which it has been removed.

²⁵ Though this may read as the psyche of the hindu caste groups, the author mentions that the Dalits, muslims and other minority religious groups in the whole of South Asia has the same psyche. We come back to this point later in the chapter and in the concluding chapter also.

Two more important points have been mentioned by Gupta. One, that the Hindu house is an extension of the Hindu body. One has to be careful of what is put inside the body as well as the house and that the dirt has to be thrown out. The kitchen is thus a space of cleanliness. The second point is a derivation of the first, that is, traditionally, there are no arrangements of bodily excretion within the household and one had to relieve oneself in the open away from the main dwelling area.

The removal of human excreta from the traditional pot toilets created the system of carrying night soil and manual scavenging which exploited the most deprived and dependent lot of the Dalits as they had very little option. Though very few there has been some research work on the conditions and humiliation that these groups have to suffer such as Bindeshwar Pathak's work on its sources, history and geographical spread (Pathak, 1991) and Mari Marcel Thekaekara's book "Endless Filth" (Thekaekara, 1999) which contains an extensive narrative and visual presentation of the kinds and conditions of scavenging. There has been national and worldwide recognition to Bindeshwari Pathak's and Mari Marcel Thekaekara's endeavour to liberate scavengers of their traditional humiliation by promoting and campaigning for total liquidation of the toilet system and rehabilitation of scavengers.

Even though manual scavenging was banned through the enactment of the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993, it is still rampant in many parts of India as reported in Thekaekara's work on *balmikis*, the caste condemned to clean filthy toilets all over the country. Both these works show how caste system has condemned *balmikis* to a profession of filth and humiliation. The ugly face of the dehumanizing caste system is visible in the fact that manual scavenging does not exist only in rural India or has been abolished by a legal act, as many from the higher caste and class would confer. A comparative study of manual scavenging in Delhi by Pamela Singla shows a marked decline of manual scavengers in Delhi from 1992 to 2008 (from 8,000 to 1,282), it also shows the presence and immunity. According to the study "scavenging is a women dominated profession", who considers it filthy but continue it in the absence of an alternative means of employment. These women consider their illiteracy as their bane and aspire for education and better lives for their children (Sharma, 2008).

The Spirit of Caste: Repulsion

"When we say that the spirit of caste reigns in a society, we mean that the different groups of which that society is composed, repel each other rather than attract, that each retires within itself, isolates itself,

makes every effort to prevent its members from contracting alliances or even from entering into relations with neighboring groups.” C. Bougle (1958)

According to Bougle, the spirit of caste unites the three tendencies of repulsion, hierarchy and hereditary specialization and “tolerates neither the *parvenu*, nor miscegenation, nor change of profession”. Bougle’s work is a critical reflection in retrospect on the caste system as professed by the classical texts both brahminical and Buddhist and as it existed in India at the concerned time and as observed by anthropologists as the title of his work suggests: “The Essence and Reality of the Caste System”. He begins by trying to define the caste system. His work on the existing reality of caste is based on secondary sources. He observes that the repugnance shown by a Brahmin towards a Pariah²⁶ in India is nothing different from the repugnance shown by a lord to a road-sweeper in Europe (Wilkins) or that between a Saxon and a Celt (Max Muller). Evidence should show that the caste was peculiar to India (Abbe Dubois, W.Crooke) and essentially a Hindu phenomena (Senart, Risley) where it consisted of hereditary specialization of occupation which were already based on hierarchy and unequal rights. He observes that caste is not just monopoly but also privilege as it professed different taxes, worth, dress and comfort for the different caste.

Caste realities are, however, much more complicated. The artisans, laboring class is seen to strictly adhere to their traditional functions, so much so that 30% of Bengal weavers died in dearth of subsistence due to English imports before others could decide to search other means of subsistence as late as the 19th century (Bhattacharya as cited in C.Bougle (1958)). However, “at all times the Brahmans have kept all kinds of occupations open for themselves...ploughmen, soldiers, tradesmen and cooks... Their superiority opens greater possibilities to them than the common run of mortality enjoy” (Ibid). The rank of a caste within the hierarchy of castes is gauged against the relation it has with the Brahman caste, that is, the estimation of the caste by the Brahman caste.

Although marriage outside the caste is forbidden, Rajput and Jat men reportedly married women from caste ranked lower than theirs. Senart criticizes the Brahminic theory of caste masking and falsifying the reality. The theory of mixed castes, Bougle observes, was used to explain the illicit union of pure caste in retrospect falling in line with the rest of the Brahmin theory of falsification and concealment.

The most striking feature of caste, the force that “animates the whole system of the Hindu world”, as Bougle puts it, is “the force of repulsion which keeps the various bodies separate and

²⁶ An untouchable caste

drives each one to retire within itself” (C.Bougle, 1958). This is further qualified by him with a description of the caste realities of that time:

“In Calcutta great difficulty was experienced over the establishment of a water system: how could people of different castes use the same tap? The contact of a Pariah inspires such horror that they are obliged, as their name implies, to carry warning bells which announce their presence. On the Malabar coast there are people who are forced to go almost naked for fear that others may be touched by the billowing of their clothes. The fear of impure atmosphere is from all time, one of the dominating traits of the Hindu soul” (Ibid).

Hierarchy Based on Purity and Pollution

The most noted and quoted work on caste happens to be that of French sociologist Louis Dumont, who in his work, “Homo hierarchicus” (1966) laid out that the caste system based on the ideological principle of purity and each caste is located in a hierarchical gradation of purity. However, according to Dumont this hierarchy is divorced from power.

Dumont criticises the limiting view of the caste system as a ‘social stratification’, very often used by sociologists leading to the “arbitrary judgement” of caste and class as phenomena of the same nature. He premises his own study on the basis of the ideology, which he defines as “ideas, beliefs and values”, of caste system. According to Dumont, the ideology of caste and hierarchy, is directly contradictory to the egalitarian theory of the west. However, he erroneously judges that there is “absolute distinction between power and hierarchical status” (Dumont, 1988) undermining the ideology of caste itself. He identifies the purity of the Brahman and impurity of the Untouchables as the ideology and basis of this hierarchy devoid of power and identifies power invested exclusively with the princely caste, the Kshatriyas. This division corresponds, according to Dumont, not as a linear order but as a series of successive dichotomies or inclusions as given by Hocart and Dumézil. In the block of the four varnas, the Shudras, the last, is opposed to the block of the first three, who are twice-born, who again are divided into two blocks, the Vaishyas given the dominion over animals and the first two varnas are given the dominion over ‘all creatures’ by the religious. At the last stage only the Brahmins can perform a sacrifice, differentiating them from the Kshatriyas. While the tripartition of social function as given by Dumézil and the Rig Veda: the Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vis explains their presence. The Shudras are explained as the “aborigines (like the *dasa*, *dasyu*) integrated into the society on the pain of servitude. The presence of the untouchables or *asparishya* is explained on the basis ‘mixing of varnas’ or result of unions of two varnas. This theory was also used to refer real *jati* to the *varnas*.

They are referred as the 'last' the 'outsider' and compelled the recognition of religious rights of the Shudras to exclude the Untouchables (Dumont, 1988)

His claim that the caste hierarchy is devoid of power is based on the observation that the "supremacy of the spiritual was never expressed politically", as the statecraft was handled by the Kshatriyas, while the religious superiority remained with the Brahmins. This according to him was the ideology-to have a pure hierarchy power was established as absolutely inferior to status. While the separation of ruling power from hierarchy explains the dominance of the Brahmins over the Kshatriya it overlooks the function of hierarchy (status) as power and undermines the socio-economic and socio-political ideology of caste hierarchy.

Dumont's work has undergone intensive analysis and criticism. Patrick Olivelle (Olivelle) examined the ancient texts on dharma relating to purity and social hierarchy and found out that the dharmashastras do not establish any link between the two. The study of the terms pertaining to purity showed that they make a distinction between persons and things. The focus of the texts is not on any permanent or transitory impurity but on the ritualistic process of transition from impurity to purity. Her study show that the preoccupation with the body stands out in the dharma texts.

Berremen critiques the work of Dumont for relying on Sanskrit texts as his source of information. Dumont's view of the caste status as ritual hierarchy independent of power, denying the obvious links of political and economic power with caste hierarchy is attacked by Berremen. Dumont's theory conforms to the "artificial, stiff, stereotypical and idealized" view of the high caste. Dumont, according to Berremen, is doing an injustice to the people of India, that is, the Dalits by underplaying their "struggle to escape the oppression of their status" imposed on them by the caste system.

According to him, Dumont 'fails almost totally to recognize caste for what it is on an empirical level: **institutionalized inequality**; guaranteed differential access to the valued things in life... The human meaning of caste for those who live its power and vulnerability, privilege and oppression, honour and denigration, plenty and want, reward and deprivation, security and anxiety. As an anthropological document, a description of the caste which fails to convey this is a travesty in the world today'.

Brahminical Dominance in Knowledge Production

There has been several critic of Dumont's work, Berreman critics him for relying heavily on some classical Sanskrit texts while ignoring the realities of caste system. Nicholas Dirks criticizes the use of classical text rather than ethnographic data to arrive at the connection between caste and purity. What lies at the base of these critics are the fact that classical Sanskrit texts were written, propagated and maintained by only the section of Indian society that had a privilege to learn Sanskrit and writing , majorly the Brahmins and sometimes the Kshatriyas and Vaishyas in the Varna system. We come across prohibitions for the Shudras to learning Sanskrit in the following verses:

“If a Shudra intentionally listens to memory the Veda, then his ears should be filled with (molten) lead and if he utters the Veda, then his tongue should be cut off, if he has mastered the Veda his body should be cut to pieces.” (Thorat, 2004) Manusmriti also prohibits the Brahmin from teaching Shudras: “A Brahmin must never read the Veda in the presence of a Shudra....He who instructs shudra pupils shall become disqualified for being invited to a shradha.” (Ibid.)

Coming back to our earlier discussion on the prohibition of learning and the use of classical texts by Dumont for his study, we find that the content that the critic are pointing at is that his version of the caste ideology is that of the people favoured by the caste system and also the people who have devised the system²⁷ “...But it bears little relationship to the experience of caste in the lives of the many millions who live it in India” (Berreman, 1971). Leaving apart the methodological errors, Dumont's work give us a view of the Brahminical ideology and its mode of operation through texts branded as sacred to justify the inhumane and discriminatory practices of the caste system. Dumont's work, therefore, is important to understand the caste ideology, its construction and the way it functions. It further provokes us to be alert in our methodological and informant selection when working with a contentious issue such as caste. In retrospect, one is able to see Dumont's assumption of the caste as a non-contentious system which he must have come up from his reading of classical texts which does not speak explicitly of the power within the caste hierarchy. One cannot but agree with Berreman that the textual understanding of caste from classical texts and the reality of caste lived by people are very different. According to Uma Chakravarti certain sociological theories of caste have helped in the prevalence of the Brahminical view of caste in the society as a result of the Brahminical monopoly over

²⁷ According to T.N.Madan, the traditional caste ideology is a brainchild of the Brahmins who rank groups according to ritual purity (T.N.Madan, 1989).

knowledge²⁸. T.K. Oommen voices a similar concern when he talks of a view from below, that is, the Dalit perspective and knowledge production by Dalits.

The effect of the choice and selection of the informant, along with the disposition of the researcher towards the caste system and its various actors is significant to the research as we see in the various theories and propositions. Raheja also mentions that the work of colonial anthropologists were at times colored by the bias of the Brahmin assistants and informants they had (Raheja, 1999). Mencher notes that during her fieldwork in villages of Tamil Nadu untouchables would avoid talking about beef-eating and opened up only after being convinced that she ate beef herself and that it was common in Europe where she belongs to. However, she was cautioned not to talk about it to caste Hindus and her Brahmin assistant was jibed: “I suppose you think we are bad, but see—she also eats it”. This signifies not just the importance of the value system to judge an act but the subjectivity of the research subject (Mencher, 1974).

Another anecdote shared by Berreman to signify the importance of the source of a research’s information while critiquing Dumont’s work is his experience in a village with “low caste” (term as used by Berreman). When he recounted to them an explanation of the caste almost identical to Dumont’s they laughed and commented: “You have been talking to Brahmins” (Berreman, 1971).

We see in the above discussion a similarity with the feminist perspective that the dominant system of knowledge production, which they term as malestream, is gender biased. It is in the same vein of thoughts that Laura Mulvey criticises the perspective of traditional Hollywood films.

Caste and Varna: Origin and Distinction

It is crucial at this stage to grasp the difference between the caste system that is the *Jati Vavastha* and the *Varna Bheda*, a point that is stressed by M.N. Srinivas in his work “Varna and Caste” (Srinivas, 1991) following Ghurye discussed this elaborately. At the crux of their quest is to understand the present day caste system with its regional variations and innumerable *jatis* as compared to the version of the varna system professing that there are only four *varnas* and “there is no fifth”²⁹ in the *Purushasukta*. *Purushasukta* is a hymn which says that the four orders of the society have come out of the various parts of the Creator: Brahman, Rajanya(Kshatriya), Vaishya and Shudra from the mouth, arms, thighs and the feet respectively. According to Uma

²⁸ In an earlier section we have seen similar observation of Yogendra Singh.

²⁹ As asserted by Manusmriti (Dumont, 1988).

Chakravarti in *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* (2003), there is no birth based distinction in the Early Vedic period and it is only in the *Purushasukta*, which appears in the Tenth Mandala of the Rig Veda, which has been regarded as an interpolation it appears first. K.M. Panikkar debunks the *Purushasukta* as an allegorical interpretation of the various functions performed by the castes at the very onset. According to him, in the Vedic period, fair-skinned Aryans entered India by the North-West side and settled in Punjab. The pre-Aryan inhabitants lived apart as groups without the communal unity and cohesion of the invading Aryans. The pre-Aryan inhabitants were defeated by the invaders and the primary difference and dominance based on the skin colour was established as the *Varna* (colour) *Bheda* (difference). The vital line of difference is not between the four varnas³⁰ but between the Aryans and the pre-Aryan Dravidian inhabitants who came to be further distinguished by a *rite de passage*, that of the second birth. Panikkar cites M. Van Gennepp who has explained the *rite de passage* as “the ritual initiation which alone can give a man his rights in the society” (K.M. Panikkar, 1933). The Dravidians were kept out of this rite as the original inhabitants of Melanesia were also kept out of the rites of the invading Kava people. The Aryans thus came to be known as the *Dwijas*, the twice born. Thus, we see the initial division was based only of colour and ritual as is evident from accounts of the Rig Veda.

This historical analysis is supported by Romila Thapar who states that, “When the Aryans first came to India, they were divided into three social classes, the warriors or aristocracy, the priests and the common people. There was no consciousness of caste...Professions were not hereditary...The three divisions merely facilitated political and economic organization. The first step in the direction of caste (as distinct from class) was taken when the Aryans treated Dasas as beyond the social pale, probably owing to fear of the Dasas and even the greater fear that assimilation with them would lead to a loss of Aryan identity. Ostensibly the distinction was largely that of colour, the Dasas being darker and of alien culture” (Thapar, 1986). Here, we see the way a community reacts to the presence of an “other”, an outsider. The outsider becomes the reference point for the identification of the community and its individual members. A similar process to the “othering” of women, has been analyzed and attacked by feminists. As Rosi Bradotti states, “The difference, or “otherness,” that woman embody is necessary to uphold the prestige of the “one,” of the male sex as sole possessor of subjectivity meant as the *entitlement* to active participation in all these (educational, civic life, politics, management, church, army, competitive sports identified as fields excluded from women by Simon de Beauvoir) fields...the

³⁰ Similar arguments are given by M.N. Srinivas to distinguish *varna* and *jati*.

disqualifications of the female subject is assessed by Beauvoir as a structural necessity of a system that constructs differences as oppositions, the better to affirm the norms, the normal standards: the masculine” (Braidotti, 1991).

As has been the characteristic of all primitive societies a process of increasing differentiation starts between the Aryans and the Dravidians. Panikkar cites James Frazer’s Golden Bough which shows evolution of magicians as a supreme authority in religious matters as an inevitable stage of social evolution. He also cites the increasing complication of the religion as evident from the complicated sacrificial rites and ceremonies in the Yajur and Athrava Veda in place of the earlier animism as an evidence of the increasing power of religion and the priestly class, the Brahmins. Ghurye (G.S.Ghurye, 1969), and M.N.Srinivas (M.N.Srinivas, 1962) support this theory of the evolution of the caste system from the *varna* system and differentiation of the *varna* and the caste system, however, they are not able to put forward the moment in history and the way the caste system developed from the *varna* system. Panikkar, on the other hand, uses historical evidences, theories and historical writings on social evolution and observable principles of the caste system to fill this gap of information. Panikkar is conscious of the fact that the Sanskrit text of the concerned period will not give the true picture and hence his reading of such texts is nuanced unlike Dumont. Panikkar’s scholarship is based on a wider reading and deeper understanding of caste as an ideology and hence he is able “to make connections between seemingly disparate phenomena” (Billig, 2004).

His scholarship is based on the reasoning that “once the Brahmins were differentiated as a class, they soon came to develop a group consciousness which operated against the other Dwija castes no less that against the Shudras. The perpetuation of class predominance became the Brahmins’ main concern. The rules of caste, which gave the Brahmins unquestioned supremacy, were consciously evolved and worked out and their enforcement was given a religious sanction” (K.M.Panikkar, 1933). He cites the work of French scholar, Senart, who compared the caste system in India with Aryan institutions in Greece and Rome to show elements of caste system such as “pride of blood, the distinction between the conqueror and the conquered, the formation of different groups owing to geographical conditions” (ibid) even in these societies. According to Senart, the system of caste is the Aryan solution of the problem of racial contact (ibid).

Panikkar goes on to explain two of the cardinal points in the caste system, that is, the ascendancy of Brahmins over the other Aryans and the importance of Shudras in Southern India. He acknowledge that the origin of caste system in Southern India is different from that of the

north as by the time it crossed the Vindhyas, the caste system has taken its final shape. The invasion in south was not military. There are evidences that Dravidian communities in the south lived in groups like Reddies, Vellalas and Nayars and had considerable tribal military power. The imposition of Hindu culture was slow and in many cases it was never complete or effective. Instead those reluctant to accept it were declared Shudras even though they maintained high position and refused to accept Brahmin supremacy.

A System for Descent based Inequality

"In India, the stigma of a man's caste sticks to him for ever." K.M.Panikar (1933)

We had earlier seen Berreman referring to caste as "institutionalized inequality" and Panikkar's historical rendition of its origin. Our inquiry now turned towards questions such as how did this institutionalization take place and what was its mechanism. According to Panikkar the social structure of the caste system is not a 'spontaneous outcome of a historical evolution" rather in "all through its history a conscious purpose of a group at work can be observed", that of "an oligarchy of priests intent on preserving its own power, and, secondly, in keeping down forever the Shudra and aboriginal castes over whom their sway had extended'. To continue their supremacy, the Brahmins became group conscious and 'an inelastic and privileged oligarchy' and to maintain the same they developed like all oligarchies a code of honour, conduct and morality. This was done through religious sanctions and prohibitions. Panikkar urges that to understand the way the caste system came into being one has to examine not only texts by Manu and other ancient writers but also the way it is practiced today, in both its static and dynamic aspects.

The first and basic principle of the caste system is the inequality based on birth and descent. He gives an example of the everyday relations of castes existence during the time of writing, that, even if a person of Shudra descent employs a Brahmin servant in Southern India he is addressed as Swami and in North India as Maharaj.

The second basic principle of the caste system was the inequality of professions. The professions were graded in terms of merit to deprive all except the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas social and political influence. The system is marked by its rigidity and immobility in ranks as one born in one profession had no chance to take up another. One comes across cases of exceptions in later texts such as the Mahabharata where the character of Karna and Dronacharya are ridiculed for taking up a profession they are not born into. Interlinks of social ranks, dignity and economic gains of the professions are obvious and one need to think hard to see who benefits from such a

principle. It is worthwhile to keep in mind at this juncture that the Brahmins formed only a minority in terms of population while the majority of the population consisted of the shudras, who were denied both education and freedom from servitude³¹ and the untouchables, “who were outside the pale of caste, were treated as a conquered slave community without even ordinary human rights” (K.M.Panikkar, 1933).

The third principle of the caste system is the absolute and rigid social exclusion between the four main castes³² and equal rigidity and exclusion amongst their many subdivisions. Failing to adhere to the prohibitions could lead to excommunication from the caste. Thus, we see the use of untouchability and varna to check mingling of the Dravidians with the Aryans. But the prohibition of marriage even between the Kshatriya and the Brahmin directs our attention to a greater goal of the Brahmins, that of retaining their purity, sacredness and supremacy over the Kshatriyas and the Vashyas. The policy that they used to maintain Brahmin supremacy is political, religious and educational. They devised two kinds of education, two kinds of literature, two codes of morality and two codes of law one to rule them and the other to rule the others. As we have seen earlier only the Dwija varnas had right to education, while the shudras and those outside the varnas—the untouchable and tribals were not allowed to learn. Brahmins had monopoly over knowledge production and knowledge dissemination. This was further facilitated by using Sanskrit, the language of the learnt Brahmins, for writing texts. Buddhism, is the first ideology that attacked Brahmin supremacy and monopoly in religion and knowledge production by teaching in Prakrit, the language of the masses and welcoming people of all varnas to the democratic universities of Nalanda, Taxila and Patliputra (ibid.) It is to fight the growing popularity of Buddhism that the growth of popular literature in the form of the Puranas were allowed (ibid.).

Brahmins were above the law and exempt from corporal punishment as they were incarnates of God on earth. They could take away the property of the shudra if they wanted. The

³¹ The Manusmriti (Thorat, 2004) assigns the following occupational status to the four varnas:

To Brahmins he (Swayambhu Manu) assigned the duties of reading the Veda, of teaching it, of sacrificing, of assisting others to sacrifice, of giving alms if they be rich, and if indigent of receiving gifts. To defend the people, to give alms, to sacrifice, to read the Veda, to shun the allurements of sensual gratification, are in a few words, the Kshatriya. To keep herds of cattle, to bestow largesse, to sacrifice, to read the scriptures, to carry trade, to lend at interest, and to cultivate land are prescribed or permitted to a Vaishya. One principle duty the Supreme Ruler assigns to Shudra, namely to serve the before mentioned classes, without depreciating their worth.” There are further prohibitions for the Shudras: “But let the Shudra serve Brahmins, either for the sake of the heaven or with a view to both (this life and next life) for he who is called the servant of Brahmins thereby meets all his ends....They may allot him out of their own family (property) a suitable maintenance, after considering his ability, industry and the number of those whom he is bound to support. The remnants of their food must be given to him as well as old household furniture ...No superfluous collection of wealth must be made by a Shudra, even though he has a power to make it, since a servile man who has amassed riches, become proud and by his insolence or neglect gives to Brahmins....A brahman may seize without hesitation, if he be in distress for subsistence, the goods of a Shudra.

³² Panikkar uses main castes for the *varnas* and subdivisions of caste for the *jatis* or what is identified as caste by sociologists such as M.N Srinivas, Andre Beteille, and Dipankar Gupta.

punishment for the same crime was greater for a person belonging to a lower ranked varna. Thus, the Hindu law was based on the same system of caste inequality and deprived justice to the non-brahmins. As the name exemplifies, the Hindu law was an extension of the Hindu religious beliefs and sanctified unjust and illogical institutions such as untouchability, unapproachability and denial of use of public wells, roads, right to worship in Hindu temples etc. Thus, we see how the Brahmins kept the shudras ignorant, powerless and economically weak to keep them in eternal servitude. The strongest role for the justification of the caste system was played by superstition and belief in the fatalistic philosophy of Karma and transmigration of soul. According to the Karmic theory, the birth of a person in a caste or Varna is not an accident but something that person himself is responsible for in his past life through the balance of his deeds. Good deeds in the past life are sowed by birth in a higher ranked varna and bad deeds by birth in a lower ranked varna. Thus, birth in a particular caste is seen as Gods way of reinforcement of our actions. However, there is no reprieve for the actions of the past life in the present life and the conditions can change only on rebirth and balancing the previous births bad Karma with good Karma. The theory is complete with prescriptions on how to attain good karma: by accepting the Brahmins now and here as superior and sole repositories of human wisdom to be worshipped and obeyed (Panikkar, 1933). It was through the internalization of the Karmic philosophy which is an easy escape route for all social ills and which is a psychological vent for agreeing with and accepting harsh life conditions that the hindu social structure of inequality and oppression was able to maintain itself.

The vitality of the body in the dharma discourse cannot be denied. A common saying in Hindu households “Karma is Dharma” encapsulates the religious and philosophical essence. While karma is action, dharma is duty. There could be two readings of this philosophy: one’s action should be good as s/he will be judged by the actions and the other, one’s action should act according to one’s dharma, that is follow one’ ancestral calling or dharma. In Krishna’s invocation to Arjuna to fight his own kins in a battle, he uses Karma in the second sense, implying and provoking Arjuna, to act according to his Kshatriya Dharma and fight. In his sermon to Arjun , Krishna reveals the Karma Theory, according to which it is the soul which is born as different species of animals based on its actions before it has a birth as a human, the highest species. On Arjun’s quest as to why some humans are born with disabilities, Krishna’s explanation is that it is because of their Karma in the last birth. The theory thus divides humans in a scale of differential status based on one’s karma in the previous births and perceptible in the human society through the descent and bodily functions.

All the three principles feed into one another and complement each other. The above principles enumerated by Panikkar are also echoed in the features of caste system in the work of Bougle, Dumont (above) and Ghurye, who identified the features of the caste system as segmental division of society, hierarchy, civil and religious disabilities and privileges of the different sections, restricted choice of occupation and restriction on marriage.

The Economics and Politics of Caste

We now look into the ethnographic work of Joan P. Mencher to complement our theoretical rumblings in the ideological and principle base of caste. Mencher's arguments are based on her fieldwork in Chingleput district of Tamil Nadu in the 1970s. Her vantage point, bottom up, she clarifies is different from the top down view of most sociological and anthropological work on caste, exemplifying her bias at the very onset³³. Her arguments are:

“First from the view of the people at the lowest end of the scale, caste has functioned (and continues to function) as a very effective system of economic exploitation. Second, one of the functions of the system has been to prevent the formation of social classes with any commonality of interest or unity of purpose³⁴ (Mencher, 1974).

She critiques the notion that the caste system allows for every group “security”, as a view of the man on the top. She questions the high-caste perception that the low-caste people have accepted their position expressed in their belief in the theory of Karma and hence a lowly birth. According to her, it is the “superior economic and political power of the upper castes that kept the lower one suppressed” (Ibid.). She observes that the caste system created hierarchies within the untouchables based on their ancestral professions and kept them separated from one another so that they do not own land. This is supported by facts that in most villages it is rare to find more than one subcaste of the untouchables. Thus, different tasks are performed by the members of the same subcaste while where there are more than one caste the work is divided amongst them. The major function of the untouchables is to provide agricultural labour, thus, the largest population of untouchables is found in the Indo-Gangetic plains and costal belt of south.

In her present study area of Tamil Nadu, the highest percentage of untouchables is found in the biggest rice producing areas as the majority of them are paddy field labourers. According to Census of India, 1961, she quotes, out of every 10,000 paraiyans in Tamil Nadu 6,551 live in the

³³ Unlike many works which speaks from a particular vantage point although they claim to be objective and unbiased.

³⁴ This has been a strong concern and reason for protest and call for social reform in the wake of independence by leaders such as Ambedkar. The work of Panikkar, discussed later in the chapter, also highlight similar concerns.

four major rice producing districts. Paraiyans³⁵, Pallans and Chakkilis form the bulk of Tamil Nadu's untouchable population. Her study basically is focused on the Paraiyans.

In a village the untouchable population is located separately in the Untouchable *Cheri*. Even if the population of Paraiyans is the highest it doesn't change their social position. Mencher gives reasons for the same, these are other factors such as the land owned by Paraiyans, the degree of unity amongst Paraiyans, the political position of the leading caste-Hindu landlords, the degree of unity amongst the dominant caste villagers as compared to the Paraiyans, the support of leftist political parties to the Paraiyans, the relationship of the Paraiyans with other untouchable castes.

Most paraiyans are daily labourers or sharecroppers as they do not own land for cultivation. Even though they directly deal with members of the higher castes, except the Brahmins³⁶, they have to observe caste prohibitions owing to their "untouchability". There have been changes due to political affiliation and consciousness, such as a landlord cannot dismiss his *padiyal* or labourer without reasons, however, it has also made the caste system stronger. Mencher notes that as a result of government policies, as observed by Beteille and Srinivas, Paraiyan children do not sit separately in schools even though children of other caste do not play with them. Changes have been observed such as Paraiyans and other village members sitting together in school festivals, however this is not true for all villages. She also observes that in the villages they studied, paraiyans did not enter any of the upper caste temples except for once during the election campaign in 1967 to hear the speech of a Congress Party candidate. This according to the paraiyans can happen again only during the next election campaign!! However, paraiyans reported to have entered urban temples, signifying the invisibility of caste identity in an urban location.

She observes the common expression of the lowly position of the paraiyans as *dharma* and *karma* (duty and fate based on action) to rationalize the caste system by the upper caste as well as the paraiyans, however, she mentions that it is "important to distinguish between the overt acceptance of such values and the holding of other values usually unexpressed to outsiders" (Mencher, December 1974). Mencher observes that food is another area of the paraiyans overt and covert values. Although beef-eating is relished and part of their lives paraiyans, they did not want to talk about it initially (as we have seen earlier) as the practice of eating beef is considered

³⁵ Mencher mentions that Paraiyans is the source of the English word Pariah, which refers to an exile or outsider.

³⁶ In many cases the Brahmin Zamindar or landlord, who lives away from the village, controlled it by proxy through other upper castes such as Mudaliar and Naicker (S. Anandhi J. J., 2002).

the main reason for the stigmatization of the paraiyans. There is also a discontinuation of the practice in upwardly mobile paraiyans as an overt sanctioning of the upper caste values.

As expressed by the paraiyans themselves, if they complained about the upper castes, they prohibit them from working on their land. Thus, to save themselves from starving, the paraiyans have outwardly accepted the domination of the upper castes. Mencher observes that looked from bottom up, the caste system works as primarily a system of economic exploitation unlike Dumont's utopian insistence that "every caste has its special privileges". There were also attempts in the village to keep the paraiyans to have political power even though they are majority by dividing them and creating differences between the paraiyans and economically disadvantaged upper caste population like the Naicker based on caste.

A look back into the politics during the second half of the colonial rule will show a very strong caste based politics. From the inception of the modern political system in colonial India, the Indian National Congress has been reportedly a party of upper caste men. History shows that the inclusion of women, muslims and Dalits has been at contingent political junctures for the first national party. Even today most political parties have women, minorities and Dalits as a special cell of the party denoting their marginalization in mainstream (Chakravarti, 2003).

According to Ranadive, "Nationalist tradition in India looked upon the struggle of the lower castes against the domination of the upper castes as a diversion from the general anti-imperialist struggle. The caste question was considered to be an internal affair of the Indians who, in spite of all the differences and inequalities among them, were expected to first fight for the freedom of the country, under the leadership of the bourgeoisie". Even the upper castes social reformers, whose bourgeois democratic consciousness revolted against the atrocities of the caste system, "sought to circumscribe the anti-caste struggle" (Ranadive, 1979) for the "national" cause. The "national" cause however was a nightmare for the outcaste and minority communities who saw in the exploitative British Government a secular ruler unlike the caste Hindus. Even though the colonial government had little interest in the social lives of the people and their primary interest was economic gain, they had brought in judicial and social changes for administration purposes. Many of these communities such as the Namasudra refused to participate in the national movement, which tried "social ostracism" on them to observe swadeshi, part of the national movement which was identified with the high caste zamindars. It failed as untouchable castes had no social rights. This was followed by cajoling and sometimes the use of force and violence. The Namasudra movement like other non-brahmin movements

marked a “protest” against the oppressive domination of the high caste-landowning indigenous elite by securing a better social and political position through “unflinching allegiance to the patronizing colonial elite” (Bandyopadhyay, (2005/1989).

Prior to the Namasudra movement, a large number of people from the “Chandala” caste had embraced Islam and Christianity to avoid the stigma and disability of Untouchability and Vaishnavism, which theoretically, did not differentiate between castes. It was the effect of all these religion that preached equality of man that made at least the richer section of the community “conscious of their social disabilities” under the Hindu society which lead to the Chandala Movement of 1872-73. It later developed into a widespread agitation in the early twentieth century, which was catalyzed at many junctures by the colonial rule. For example, the Census, as Bondyopadhyay says, the constant tendency of using the primordial categories in the census reports led to a reinforced caste consciousness and caste. Census for the outcastes was an opportunity to get formal recognition of their higher social status which was denied under the historical caste domination, as was visible amongst during the Namasudra Movement (Bandyopadhyay, 2005/1989). There were representations to the colonial government for designating names chosen by the communities instead of the ones they have been traditionally denoted with. In the case of the Namasudras they despised the name “Chandala” imposed on them by the upper castes and stigmatized them. The “small” wins, such as the inclusion of the name Namsudra along with Chandal in the 1901 census and the complete omission of the name chandal in the 1911 census, gave impetus to the anti-brahmin movement.

The system of education introduced by British was open to all as the Court of Directors’ order prohibiting refusal of admission on class grounds proves: “all schools maintained at the sole cost of the Government shall be open to all classes of its subjects without distinction” (Kumar, 2008). According to Thorat and Kumar, the Woods’ Despatch of 1854 was the first of British efforts to impart education among the socially discriminated sections. It was however, Phuley, in 1848, who first opened a school for the untouchables, without distinction of sex. In the case of Indian provinces, the Maharaja of Baroda, Sayajirao Gaekwad, started the first schools for educating the discriminated population and he had to depend on educated Muslims as caste-Hindu teachers refused to teach in such schools. It was in 1885 that Sir Richard Temple, governor of Bombay, reserved 50% scholarships for Muslims and backward Hindus as it was realized that the criterion of merit perpetuated the Brahmin monopoly in education. The rulers of Indian provinces such as Kohlapur, Baroda, Travancore and Cochin had introduced economical and

educational rights for the non-Brahmins in the nineteenth and twentieth century along with the changes brought about by the British Government and missionaries.

There was a demand for representation in Public Services of backward caste by the non-Brahmin movements in Bombay, Madras, Mysore and Travancore. The Bombay government recognized the need for backward representation but it did not work on it. In Madras, a system of communal rotation of representation of all backward groups was introduced. The government of Mysore evolved a more effective policy of backward representation by according representation to the un-represented before the under-represented and the represented in the respective order. The Travancore and Cochin states implemented representation of several communities in proportion to their population (as per the First Backward Class Commission Report of 1955) (Ibid.).

In Kohlapur, the Maharaja, Shahuji, inspired by Phuley's effort founded boarding houses for the backward castes and in 1902 reserved 50% seats in the administration for the backward communities. He established free and compulsory education for the non-Brahmins including the Untouchables in 1917 and in 1919 issued the "Hujur" order stating that if any man³⁷ of the state education having an objection in having Untouchable in schools must send his resignation. Under the chairmanship of Sir Leslie Miller, the Chief Justice, in 1918, a committee of the British government recommended that the proportion of backward communities officials in all district and headquarters should be increased to 50% of the total strength through preference for qualified members of backward communities as per the First Backward Class Commission Report of 1955 (ibid.).

Owing to the devolution of power to Indians with the Indian Councils Act 1861, through the system of nomination of Indians in the Legislative Council and the subsequent Indian Councils Act, 1892, increasing the numbers of Indian members and empowering them to ask questions, the Muslim community under the leadership of Aga Khan, demanded special representation in 1906. This led to the Minto-Morley reforms or the Government of India Act 1909, which introduced the Separate Electorates or representation based on different communities, classes etc.

As we see from the above discussion on the efforts for the educational and economic upliftment for the backward communities, most of these targeted communities on the whole and not specifically the women of the community or internal gradation within such communities. It

³⁷ The use of the word in the order signifies that official posts were held by men, women were not part of the official system.

was only Phuley who had a vision and plan of upliftment of the women. Also the areas of involvement of the governments, both the princely provinces and the British, was restricted to the predominantly male areas complying with the dominant ideology of the intervention/involvement of the government only in the “public” male dominated areas of polity, education and job leaving the “private” domain, which comprised mostly of rights and duties of the female, to the control of the community and the male members of the family. Thus, we see the rulers, both foreign and indigenous were blind to the existing inequalities, the non-presence of the women in the public arena and subtly complicit with the patriarchic ideals.

Caste and Democracy: India in the wake of Independence

“Caste is not merely a principle of social division, but a comprehensive system of life, dealing with food, marriage, education, association and worship. It is a religion rather than a changing social order. Its non-observance is met with condign punishment and the rigidity with which it rules are enforced could put to shame even the Grand Inquisition.” K. M. Panikkar (Caste and Democracy, 1933)

In his 1933 work, “Caste and Democracy”³⁸, historian K.M.Panikkar talks about the unparalleled crisis that Hindu society faced: the challenge to the basic principles of Hindu social structure, the caste systems with its pillars of untouchability and inequality by the political ideas of democracy, liberty and equality which awaited India in the wake of Independence. He acknowledges the fact that an outsider only gets to see glimpses of this challenge in the form of Gandhi’s fast to arouse the conscience of the caste Hindu to the conditions of the untouchable, but a true index of the challenge and the progress being made was the legislative proposals being made at the Central and provincial councils such as the Hindu Civil Marriage Bill which attacks the caste systems basic principle of marriage within ones caste, the Endowment Act of Madras which places the authority of Hindu Temples under the authority of a Board not confined to the priestly class.

At the heart of this work is the question whether a democratic state can co-exist with the caste system, which he endeavors to deal with an analysis of the principles and assumptions of both the institutions. He gives a historical analysis of the origin and development of caste dwelling on its *principles*, ideology and ramifications at different stages of its development.

The first postulate of Democracy is that the State represents the whole community—the people. Political power and social authority does not rest in an individual, a family or a group but

³⁸ It was first published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf in London in 1933. At the time of its publication, Panikkar, a trained historian from Oxford, was a distinguished historian, editor of newspaper and administrator. He founded the Hindustan Times in the year 1924.

in the community as whole. The base of this postulate is the idea of human equality: equality of rights, privileges and opportunities. It opposes the arrangement of human life in various ranks or grades, which demoralizes those whose lives are considered to be of less value. "It only insists that the subjective valuations of each man (read human) is the same or ought to be the same if human society is to attain the fullest development" (Panikkar, 1933). It leads to development of feeling of self-respect and responsibility among the entire population. According to Panikkar, democracy in India would make each individual regardless of her/his caste, gender, community equal before the law, would allow equal opportunity, equal rights including right to education for all. It would make distance pollution and untouchability redundant as one could not profess or follow them in government offices, courtrooms, public thoroughfares. It would lead to the breakdown of traditional forms of caste and village governments by transferring authorities to elected representatives. He shows caste and democracy to be fundamentally opposed and incompatible at their very base. However, he also foresees the dangers of having a democratic set up with the caste system still strong. According to him, this will be a social tyranny and another weapon in the hands of the higher castes for perpetuating their authority: "representative institutions would only mean unlimited power to those who, standing on the top of ladder of caste, can utilize its own enormous power and that of many other institutions with which it is intertwined, for political purpose" (ibid). To prevent this catastrophe he recommends the breaking down the authority of caste over the masses.

Similar concerns were raised by Dalit-Bahujan leaders and philosophers in the pre-independence and post independence period. In a speech after a couple of decades from the writings of Panikkar, Ambedkar voices similar concerns in an independent India. He claims that caste is everywhere in India: in the field of politics as people vote only for candidate of their caste and political parties support candidates depending on the social composition of the constituency; in the field of industry one finds the top level posts occupied by people belonging to the same caste as the owner of the industry; in commerce the whole commercial house employees people of one caste only; even in the field of charity dying people donate money only for people of their own caste. "An Indian cannot eat with an Indian simply because he or she does not belong to his or her caste. An Indian cannot touch an Indian because he or she does not belong to his or her caste" says B.R. Ambedkar in *Prospects of Democracy in India* (1956). Thus caste system in India with its descent based (ascriptive) prohibitions, inequalities and stratifications is opposed to the ideals of a democratic society, that of "associated living", "unity", desire for welfare, loyalty to public and not personal ends, mutuality of sympathy and co-operation. He emphasizes on

education for the lower strata of India to raise their “spirit of rebellion” and to end the caste system (ibid).

According to S.K. Chaube caste as a political factor in free India was first used by the Congress strategist S K Patil in the 1957 elections in Andhra Pradesh. He matched the community “caste by caste” in allotting seats of the election and succeeded. Communists had in the earlier phase been apprehensive on using caste as a form of mobilization but in 1958 at its Amritsar Congress, based on the Andhra experience, the CPI decided to launch a massive movement against casteism, communalism and untouchability. One can see a pattern of the use of caste as a tool after the Congress party had set the example. In 1959 the Nair Service Society and similar caste based organisations led the movement against the communist government in Kerala. In June 1961 E M S Namboodiripad wrote in the monthly New Age that even if caste as a social disability has weakened it has made its dent in the political sphere. Namboodiripad also says that caste has in many cases decided the fate of elections and even selection of ministers. In 1964 at the Vijaywada Congress of the CPI its general secretary Ajoy Ghosh reported that caste sentiments instead of loosening have grown tremendously (Bhowmik, 1992).

Deconstructing Untouchability

“Under the rule of the Peshwa in the Maratha country the untouchable was not allowed to use the public streets if a Hindu³⁹ was coming along, lest he should pollute the Hindu by his shadow. The untouchable was required to have a black threaf either on his wrist or in his neck as a sign or mark to prevent the Hindus from getting themselves polluted by his touch through mistake. In Poona, the capital of the Peshwa, the untouchable was required to carry, strung from his waist, a broom to sweep away from behind the dust he treaded on, lest a Hindu walking on the same should be polluted.” (Ambedkar, (1936), 2007)

In this 1936 speech Ambedkar shows how historically the untouchables have been humiliated and mistreated by the Hindu society. He also explained how Untouchability was evident in the form of caste Hindus regulating the daily lives of the so called Untouchables by violently enforcing on them restrictions of clothes (that they must not wear dhotis with coloured borders or gold bordered puggies, women must not wear gold or silver ornaments or fancy gowns or jackets), of food (should not consume ghee which is a mark of high social class, that is the caste Hindus), of education (should not send their children to the Government school used by caste Hindus), and of household articles (metal pots which is not consistent with their indignity).

³⁹ Ambedkar regarded the untouchables outside the folds of Hinduism, a religion that created this division. Hence his reference Hindu is to what we refer to as the caste Hindus, the privileged in the varna hierarchy.

While Ambedkar sees it as a tyranny, Gandhi called it a “sin against God and man... a poison slowly eating into the very vitals of Hinduism” keeping a fifth of India “under perpetual subjection” (M.K.Gandhi, 1947).

Even after abolition of untouchability over five decades it exists in visible and invisible forms. It has been a dynamic reality with changing forms and effects. Studied on untouchability as we saw earlier has been rare and confined within the sociological, literature, anthropological realm which limits in its nature and instances. In his work on and titled as “Phenomenology of Untouchability”, Sundar Sarukkai tries to understand to Untouchability by analyzing the phenomenology of “touch” using Indian and Western philosophical traditions.

Susruta, an ancient Indian surgeon divided the body into seven layers of skin unlike the modern western concept of a single layer of skin. However, in both the traditional Indian and western concept the skin is the organ of touch and has the function of “encompassing and enclosing”. Glucklich, according to Sarrukai, makes an insightful reading of the scripture and finds that both the skin and the dharma are symbolically conceived as boundary. He also finds that in Hindu mythology the seven layers of skin are said to be the seven layers of the earth, implying one important metaphor for the skin, the “microcosmic reflection of the world” (*Susrutasamhita*). Glucklich, who was studying traditional Indian medicine systems, derives from the above findings that “skin is a primary register of the fruition of sins committed in the previous births”.

Further, the Sankhya and Advaita Vedanta describe the body in terms of both gross (sthula sharira) and subtle (sukhma sharira) where the sense organs including the skin are part of the subtle body. Thus, death of the subtle body, including the sense organs, leaves the gross material of the body to decompose. This also implies that the qualities attached to the sense organs are not restricted to the gross body but continue with the subtle body. This could be a probable explanation for the hereditary continuation of untouchability in the scriptures.

Untouchability as the invocation of dharma is possible from the above interpretation of dharma as boundary. The central link to untouchability and dharma is the skin as a ‘map of character and moral disposition’, signifying the skin of the untouchable embodies certain moral properties. Applying the concept of continuation of the subtle body, once untouchability is inscribed on an individual, it is impossible to cross the boundary of untouchability. Thus, a person whose skin is untouchable is an Untouchable.

Sarukkai also brings in the Buddhist view of the body. We come across the metaphor of body for the world again as the Buddha believed that the world begins and ceases in the body. The Buddha believed the body to be the site of various kinds of impurities and it was all pervading. The five impurities of the body are the womb, seed, body's nature, body's characteristics and corpse signifying its impurity from birth to death. Thus, according to Buddha all bodies were impure.

According to Sarukkai, Glucklich states that the natural⁴⁰ and moral concepts are interrelated such that natural "dirt" gets related to moral "dirt" and those who are morally "impure" embodies impurity in their natural body. He further tries to deconstruct the term untouchability to "touch un-ability" that is the inability of the toucher rather than any inability of the touched. Hence, it is the person who refuses to touch the untouchable who is the real site of untouchability. This deconstruction yields us the subject of untouchability. The phenomenological affects of untouchability is power, revulsion and shame and humiliation for the person who practices and one who is at the receiving end of untouchability. The former also denies him/herself a part of his/her ability, the ability to engage with his own sense as in touching and tactile experience of the other is simultaneously self experiencing. Thus, the person is also practicing untouchability against himself/herself. Sarukkai also invokes Gopal Guru's "folded body" of the brahmin as an illustration of the same.

His next proposition is the illusion of touch. He compares the sense of touching with that of seeing. Unlike other senses, touching is an act. It requires the person to act. We automatically reach towards an object to touch it, however, conditioned to untouchability we become cautious of touching. Thus, touching is no more automatic, but reflective. It gets modeled on vision, which is also a reflective process associated with perception⁴¹. Thus, touch is no more about facts, the actual existence of the body but it is based on the moral code of touchability and untouchability. "The Untouchable is real but through the denial of touch he is made into a mirage—this is illusion of touch" (Sarukkai, September 12, 2009). While in an optical illusion, a mirage, an object is visible but is not present in actual and hence cannot be touched, in case of the illusion of the touch, the body is visible but cannot be touched. This untouchability is about *touching oneself* and *not touching another*, and if we bring in the earlier position of *touching another* to touch

⁴⁰ Term used by Sarukkai, it is used in the sense of material as opposed to moral

⁴¹ Sarukkai's explanation of vision as a reflective process associated with perception seems to be based on the primary mode of perception of the larger population. For the differently abled, the visually challenged, the reflective process of perception is based on the other senses. However, an inclusion of the differently abled in the argument here will take it to more complex plane.

oneself, we come to a position where *not touching another* is a manifestation of *not touching oneself*, that is the “potential untouchability not of another but of oneself” (ibid.)

That Brahmins “can be Untouchables”, that is they can be impure is supported by Quigley’s work. According to him, there are various ways in which they can be impure such as accepting gifts, or when they “digest the sin, evil and death of others” (D.Quigley (1993) as quoted in Sarukkai (2009)). He argues that the pure-impure axis used by Dumont fails to explain the existence of such impurity within Brahmins. At the same time Ambedkar notes that there is temporality in the notion of “untouchability” in the case of impurity of the Brahmin which can be get rid of by acts of propitiation unavailable to the untouchable. This “untouchability is not a permanent state of being. What Quigley calls untouchability in the Brahmin is called the impure by Ambedkar. Ambedkar’s argument which is a critique of Brahminism goes to show that the untouchability is not about impurity and consequently impurity is not untouchability.

The notion of “untouchability” among Brahmins also includes daily acts and the scriptures enforce rituals for purifications. Sarukkai explains the state of *madi* which is a state of untouchability during the performance of certain rituals and an individual is not to be touched even by children and family members during this state.

However, Sarukkai brings in the example of Acharya Brahmins who are “permanent untouchables” but their untouchability is “inscribed within the notion of superior untouchability”. This untouchability, according to Sarukkai, is not about purity-impurity but about the state of being. Though a superior untouchability, this untouchability cannot be come out of and is hereditary. This notion of superior untouchability implies that a superior Brahmin is one who is untouchable, as in this case even by other Brahmins. This untouchability is a marker of superiority and it is valorized. It is in this state of permanent untouchability that the most exalted state of brahminhood is attained.

At the crux of Sarukkai’s work is the logic of Derridian supplementation. Derrida in his analysis of writing, critiques the binary of writing and speech in western thought. According to western thought, writing which is derivative of speech which is itself a derivative of originary thought, is inferior to speech. According to Derrida writing is not a mere “supplement” to speech suggesting that “the supplemented is incomplete and necessarily depends of the supplement” (Ibid). How the supplement is related to the supplemented is suggested by Barbara Johnson (Johnson, 1990) as adding to, substituting, making up for the absence, usurping the place of the original, corrupting the purity of, is a danger to, is a remedy to, etc. (Sarukkai,2009). It is in this

essence that the untouchable is the supplement to the Brahmin, “a danger” to the Brahmin, “corrupts the purity” of Brahmin. Following Derrida: “The supplement is always the supplement of a supplement. One wishes to go back from the supplement to the source: one must recognize that there is a supplement at the source (Derrida, 1976), one can argue that the notion of untouchability is the supplement to the notion of superior untouchability of the Brahmins. Thus, the notion of untouchability is intrinsic to the source, the Brahmins. It is the relation of the supplement to the supplemented of “danger” and “corrupting the purity” that has necessitated the conversion of the superior untouchability to an inferior untouchability.

Thus, Sarukkai’s final analysis is that the “untouchable is at the core of the “touchables”- not surprisingly then, we find that untouchability is actually an essential marker of brahminhood” who have displaced it to the untouchables through “the process of supplementation which makes untouchability a positive virtue for the brahmins and a negative fact for the Dalits.”

In Sarukkai’s own word this deconstructive of untouchability will help in generating new and liberatory ideas against brahminical hegemony and allow us to develop a foundational ethical response to untouchability, a response based on the ethics of touch.

Gopal Guru in his debate with Sarukkai’s (Archaeology of Untouchability, 2009), makes a very essential observation: “Untouchability in modern times is forced to hide behind certain modern meanings and identities”. What he is significantly bringing to our notice is the “much subtler forms” of untouchability which keeping with the changing times have changed from visible manifesting practices to a less identifiable mix of practice and consciousness.

He identifies certain moves by the Brahmin in the process of creation of its supplement, the untouchable. All organic bodies produce and contain “negative properties” such as sweat, mucus, urine, excreta and thus at a metaphysical level, all bodies producing impurities, suggests a kind of ontological equality. This is further supported by the Indian philosophy of the Sankhya school according to which all bodies are made of the same substances, the Panchamahabhute, that is, earth, fire, water, air and akasa or space. These insights in the metaphysics of body refute the cultural construct of filthy bodies. However, the Brahmin self to proclaim its superiority created the notion of impurity and imposed these impurity by the process of converting the ecological into sociological. The Manusmriti mentions the brahminical view that the earth is polluting and

physical association of the upper castes⁴² with the earth is pollutes them. This single move leaves the other castes to do the work related to land and also claiming them to be polluted.

Water, which is vital for living beings, cannot be marked as polluting. However, based on its vitality to all, it was used for practicing untouchability. Untouchables could not draw water from the same source in case of wells, tubewells etc. In case of a river, Untouchables⁴³ in a village were restricted to take water from locations where the water touched by them could be polluted. Locations of Untouchable hamlets in a village are therefore downstream the main villages. Similar notions of the air and space being polluted by the Untouchables were constructed. Thus, hamlets of Untouchables are found on the eastern side of the village so that the western sides do not get “polluted”. The “pollution” of the space was possible through sound produced by the Untouchables, thus, they were compelled to announce their arrival into the main village or paths by beating the drum⁴⁴. Fire unlike the others acts as a purifying agent used not just for Agni Pariksha but also for destroying Dalit settlements.

According to Guru, untouchability as a supplement, as Sarukkai’s work suggests, helps us to arrive at the insight that “the untouchable is forced to become the repository of the impurities of touchable”. It also elevates the debate on untouchability beyond the purity-impurity scale. However, with changing times, untouchability has changed its forms and have become increasingly subtle. According to Guru, in the urban space, with opaque social relations it is in the domestic sphere that the practice of untouchability can be traced. The “pure self” in his sovereign sphere, that is the home, will invite only those whose back ground he is aware of, he performs rituals to retain his purity if he invites a person otherwise mistakenly and lastly, when he knows his guest is from the lower caste and cannot avoid inviting him, offers him a tender coconut, which can be disposed off later without the necessity of ritual purification rituals!!

The Women Question

“Menstruation itself is a form and a metaphor for a woman’s special creativity. Thus, a woman’s biological and other kinds of creativity are symbolized by flowering.” A.K.Ramanujan (2003)

There are many popular and varied metaphoric connections between tree and women. In a popular Kannada story, “A Flowering Tree” a girl turns to a tree and girl again and reinforces cultural opinions on the vulnerability and need for careful handling of both women and tree

⁴² As used by Gopal Guru.

⁴³ As used by Gopal Guru.

⁴⁴ We see this in the autobiography of Baby Kamble and Viramma.

(Ramanujan, 2003). There are cultural sentiments (which can often be supported by religious prohibition or economical consideration) such as a tree when it bears fruit or flower is not cut down and “treated as mother, a woman who has given birth” (ibid). It is the act of reproducing that is at the base of this metaphoric imagination. According to Ramanujan, the words for flowering of a tree and for menstruation are the same in languages such as Sanskrit and Tamil. In Sanskrit a menstruating woman is called *puspavati* (women in flower) which would also mean a tree in blooms and in Tamil, the word is *puttal*. This signifies how the culture and society views or imagines the women. These may be taken as the standards for one’s behaviour which might not always be followed, but largely the view that this metaphoric relationship signify is a careful handling and respect for the women. There are, however, two underlying notions, one that a woman has to be handled, robbing her of agency⁴⁵ and the second, and woman as closer to nature for her capacity to reproduce like nature.

In folktales, mythologies and stories the representation of woman as essentially biological, that of a mother that has led to the construction of womanhood. The oral and written traditions, with their repertoire of words and sayings, are keys to our understanding of the past. The mother metaphor for women is universal, not just implying the natural capacity of “motherhood” but also the cultural and social construction of “motherhood” and “women” weaving around motherhood. Over the period of time these constructions have changed as is argued by historians and feminists. In the hunting-gathering societies women were revered as “Mother Goddess” because of their reproductive power related to the survival of the community. These societies were matrilineal, where women were not subjected to authority of men or other women. This is evident from prehistoric paintings in Kathotia, Bhimbetka and Kharwai in central India which show women as both mothers and engaged in hunting and gathering food and not just as reproducers (Chakravarti, 2003).

Gerda Lerner in her work, “The Creation of Patriarchy” (1986) tries to unearth the origin of patriarchy using historical evidence from Sumeria, Mesopotamia, Egypt and Assyria. Her findings also support the egalitarian nature of the hunting-gathering society. However, over a

⁴⁵ In the same piece Ramanujan mentions the difference between a woman and a tree: “A woman can speak, can move, can be agent on her own behalf in ways a tree cannot.” Although he may be identifying the physical differences, the social expectations from a woman of the “flowering” age group which we can largely identify with the reproducing and marriageable age group are very much the same as that from a tree. In both the upper caste and other caste groups and faiths across the rural-urban divide with some concessions in the upper class, women of this age group are expected to act according to the wishes of her husband and in-laws. In a later section, he mentions another difference between tree and woman, a tree belongs to the *puram* or exterior in Tamil and a woman to the *akam* or interior.

period of time society got stratified. According to Engels the nomadic groups settled down and learnt to grow crops and store the surplus. The production and storage of surplus lead to fights between groups over resources. The vanquished would be taken as slaves and this was the “first great division of society into classes”. As these groups accumulated wealth, men who created the wealth started asserting themselves on the women and the relationship between men and women changed. Household labour, mostly done by women was devalued. An increase in production created the institution of private property and soon women also became part of it along with land and animals to have control over children⁴⁶. Women lost their exalted status and children learnt to identify their descent and inheritance. This is how patriarchy or the rule of the father was established according to Engels. Lerner’s explanation on patriarchy builds on Levi’s Strauss’s idea that women are objects of exchange. What is of value in this exchange is the women’s sexuality and reproductive capacity which was central to the survival of the species. This system of exchange and abduction was the basis for control of their offspring which along with the desire to safeguard resources for future generation lead to control over resources and the development of private property (V.Geetha, 2002).

Both the explanations result in women being considered the property of men. A woman was bound to a single man and woman had to be loyal to her husband while a man could have many wives and mistresses. The norm of monogamy emerged as a mechanism of control on women’s sexuality. According to Lerner, women had no direct power as they remained excluded from education; however, they were not always passive victims. They continued to use their limited positions of power directly and sometimes covertly (ibid).

Inspired by Lerner, Chakravarti does a gendered reading of historical evidences in India. In the Indian context, the emergence of patriarchy is entangled with the emergence of caste system and landownership. Chakravarti uses the term Brahminical Patriarchy to denote the control over women’s sexuality shifting from reverence for the same (V.Geetha, 2002). The ideal Hindu woman is untouched, pure as a daughter and virtuous and motherly in the role of a wife, what Uma Chakravarti refers to as the Pativrata. According to Chakravarti the ideal of the Pativrata, a woman devoted to her husband, is systematically ingrained in the minds of Indian upper caste⁴⁷ women through such mythological ideals such as Sita (who retained her purity even after being abducted by Ravana), Savitri (who won back her dead husband from death because of her devotion to her husband), so much so that women become complicit in their own exploitation.

⁴⁶ It is possible that being an agricultural society, children were also seen as additional labour for field as many contemporary studies in India have shown. It is also possible that the idea of manhood was attached to children.

⁴⁷ As used by Chakravarti, though she mentions it is in the dire dearth of existing choice.

Over the years these Hindu ideals through televised mythologies and writings have been revised in the recent memory of Indians and have attained a pan-Indian character. This notion of Pativrata is an important mechanism in the caste system to distance the upper caste women from the lower caste women. For the lower caste women it is a necessity to work to survive and hence they cannot follow the strict ideals of the Pativrata: of remaining indoors and not interacting with other man. As seen earlier, the intersection of caste and class invariably has the Dalit women and men working for the upper caste landlord, who has a sexual access to the Dalit women. This makes the Dalit women's sexuality "available" to the caste men (V.Geetha, 2002).

We came across endogamous marriage practices and the mixing of castes through inter-caste marriages. In fact, the Hindu dharmashastras allow hypergamy, which is a higher caste man marrying lower caste women but prohibits hypogamy, that is, the marriage of a lower caste man with an upper caste woman. The reason behind this is the view that the woman is the field, denoting her role of carrying a child in her womb, and the man's sperm is the seed and it is the seed that gives the child its characteristic (Chakravarti, 2003). This ideological construction not only sees the male as more powerful it also gives the upper caste man a religious sanctity in having sexual intercourse with Dalit women.

The early Vedic and pre-Vedic reverence of women for their role as reproducers was now mixed with an anxiety over the sexuality of women in the post-Vedic period. This was also the period of establishment of control over land, patrilineal succession system over property and kingship. According to Mahabharata, women were innately sinful from the moment they were created. Ramayana also states women as weak and sinful. Manu's comments represent women as innately promiscuous with an inherent wickedness and insatiable lust and hence they have to be guarded and their sexuality controlled by the male blood relations such as the father, the brother and son in the absence of the husband. According to an eighteenth century commentary on Manu, women became innately impure because of the heinous crime of brahmicide, shifted on them when Indra killed Visvarupa. This myth also connects menstruation as an impurity they have attained due to the brahmicide (ibid.).

Notions of Masculinities

Within our earlier discussions we have located similarities and differences in the oppression of women and Dalit separately. It is interesting to find that the dharmashastras also locate women as lowly as the Shudra, as the slave of the husband. Women's oppression in the Indian society has been compared to the oppression of the Dalits in the feminist debates when

they attacked brahminic patriarchy, also identified as the oppressor of the Dalits (Chakravarti, 2003). The debate whether women are also Dalit came again into mainstream in the definition of the Dalit in the charter of the Dalit Panthers, modeled explicitly on the Black Panthers, a youth protest against white domination and racial discrimination in the United States in 1972, oppressed groups such as women and tribes were also included. It was in the words of Namdeo Dhasal, one of its founding members, "I tried to expand the definition of Dalits - to take in all the oppressed, not just the scheduled castes. If you really want to break untouchability, you have to get into the mainstream." It not just brought Dalit oppression in mainstream, but also brought about a political rupture in the idea of womanhood as endorsed by the feminist movement in India. Are women from upper castes also Dalit? If the position of the Dalit and the women are equated where is the Dalit woman located? As we see in the national political scene in the agitation against the Mandal Commission, upper caste educated young women from the urban location refused to identify with Dalits, rather stood for the caste system and endogamous marriage that are so much part of Brahminic patriarchy.

To understand the reaction of the women, one has to understand the ideological processes and the practices embedded within them. One brilliant way, as suggested, by Joan Scott, is to extend the male-female relations "via metaphors to different areas of social life so as to signify unequal relations of power in general" (S. Anandhi J. J., 2002). We will first look into the work by Anandhi et al. before we look into the above contexts. Their study of the changing notions and practices of masculinities in a Tamil village consisting mainly of Paraiyars and Mudaliars (the caste Hindu) show the day to day interactions based on the inter-relation of the landed and the labour between the men and women of the communities. As evident from the study the traditional dominant model of masculinity based on power and wealth seats within the mudaliar men, who controlled their "own" women and possessed land. Their "alpha" masculinity, however, existed in their power over the local machinery; they could beat up the Paraiyar man, usually a labour in their farm, who were "well-built" owing to "eating beef and working hard" and thus show them to be effete. They had a privilege over the Dalit women's bodies and contrast their masculinity against the Dalit men, who were unable to protect their women. As we saw earlier women's body was a matter of honour to be protected by the male, which is in direct proportion to his masculinity. This was further complicated with the denial of subjectivity to the Dalit men in case they had a sexual relationship with a mudliar women as these were initiated by the women rather than the man who always has the fear of reprisal. A further emasculation of the Dalit men occurs through the provisioning of the Dalit men by mudaliar women as the act of household

provisioning is conventionally done by male heads of the family. These are identical positions for the women in the family and the Dalits in the social contexts, however, the gender identities in the act of provisioning of Dalit men by mudaliar women above is reversed.

Coming back to our earlier contexts, the call for uniting as given by Dalit Panthers, an assertion of their subjectivity, is crushed by the agitation against the Mandal commission by the upper caste urban women. By siding themselves with “their” men, the upper caste women emasculate the Dalit men, whom they do not find suited as their husbands. It is marked as an important juncture of the women’s movement in the India by feminist such as Uma Chakravarti, Sharmila Rege etc. It is in the backdrop of the anti-Mandal agitation that the debate around the subjectivity of the Dalit women, the one visible in their numeric strength in the women’s movement marches and public meetings but invisible in the core of the movement began afresh.

From our above discussion we also have some sense how the principles of caste system were implemented. We have to also understand the material realities for the implementation of such an ideology. These can be broadly categorized as: Control over land, water and other resources and Construction of cheap labour Agriculture being the predominant mode of production, the Brahminical society, claimed lordship over the land, water bodies and other resources which became contingent over a period of time. Land, labour and water being the main resources for agriculture there was usurpation of land and water. Studies show some tribes were pushed to less productive areas such as the hills and deserts while the more powerful warrior clans settled in the fertile plains. Many communities described as “lower caste” or “untouchables” who provide cheap labour to the land owning caste still have remnants of tribe cultures in various parts of India. The reason for this could be that the Brahmins and their caste system was focused on labour and service aggregation and allowed cultural autonomy within the laboring classes (Chakravarti, 2003). Thus, the communities outside the caste system could maintain itself as endogamous group and retain its cultural practices. However, entry of local dominant communities at the top levels, where land and political control was exercised, required assimilation (ibid.).

At a micro level the same is true for the village level resources which are appropriated by the “upper castes” and the Dalits were left to survive by providing labour. Although labour is as important as land for crops, it is through the socio-religious construction of physical labour and earthen work as lowly (as we see in the section on Untouchability that earth is seen as polluting) by the dominant caste that labour was constructed to be cheap. According to V.Geeta, human

societies everywhere have come to comprise of two groups: those who had resources and power and those who had skills and labour as their only resources. The former hardly get involved directly with production and employ the latter for production, their relationship being that of production, and power (V.Geetha, 2002). It is this production relationship and power invested in it, that we saw Dumont overlooked.

According to Uma Chakravarti, historians claim that once it had got a concrete shape, Brahminism moved out of the Gangetic valley to central, eastern and peninsular India through the grants of land and privileges from rulers. They brought with them their knowledge of agriculture and social relations which disrupted the social lives and modes of production of different tribes and clans existing in those regions. Chakravarti refers to Kosambi (Kosambi, 1975, 2002), whose study showed that the spread of the “Aryans” over the subcontinent destroyed the diverse discrete systems of production and cultures of the communities and brought them under their own social formation marked by the caste system. The river valley regions were targeted, sometimes through warfare, owing to their fertility and captured prisoners provided labour. The older communities were broken and incorporated in the new social relations as the regional historical works of the Tamil plains and Brahmaputra Valley show.

Control over sexuality of women through ideological construction of Pativrata and endogamous marriages. As we have seen earlier from the work Uma Chakravarti, “upper caste” women were considered “gateways—literally points of entry into the caste system” which was at constant threat of the Dalit man’s sexuality. To retain the purity of blood the “upper caste” women had to be guarded and the Dalit man “institutionally” prevented to have sexual access to the “upper caste” woman. This was done through the institution of endogamous marriage, and a mix of coercion and consent. The ideal of the Pativrata as we have seen earlier was ingrained in woman’s mind through socialization, myths and iconic figures. This was done through unspoken consent and compliance of women to the ideology of “chastity and wifely fidelity as the highest expression of their selfhood” (Chakravarti, 2003).

However, coercive process such as prohibitions, violence and ritual as well as social punishments, the rule of the king and the male head of the family were other mechanisms of control (Chakravarti, 2003). We have already seen the role played by myths and tales as part of the socio-religious scriptures and prescription of social relations. A well known narrative of instigating fear of punishment in women is the incident of mutilation of Surpanakha by Lakshmana for her sexual overtures to Ram and Lakshman. The cutting of nose is a metaphor for

genital mutilation, a barbaric form of humiliation and punishment meted to women (ibid). As a contrast to the female protagonist Sita, who unquestioningly follows her husband and whose purity is testified by the Fire, Surpanakha presents the “demonic” female desire which has to be curbed.

Given the need of labour and possibilities of interaction of the labouring caste with the women of the land-owning castes, they needed a mechanism to check their intermixing. This was done through the ideology of Untouchability, which not only restricted the location of the Dalit houses but also created a sense of “repulsion”⁴⁸ for the Dalits amongst the landowning caste women. This is important to understand that even though women in the varna system were treated unequally and experienced a similar discrimination, it was their feeling of ritual superiority in the wake of their patriarchal discrimination that kept them on the side of the oppressor.

As shown by Irene Gedalof in her work “Against Purity: Rethinking Identity with Indian and Western Feminisms” (Gedalof (1999) as cited in Daynes (2005)), there is an intimate correlation between the body, sexuality and gender, and the notions of purity and impurity and the latter are also intimately linked to the idea of difference as we have seen. Thus meeting the “other”, which is an intensified dialectic between purity and impurity, is also a sexual meeting, or at least, it can be according to Daynes. This has been the concern of the Brahminical society who had to preserve their purity for their dominance at all historical times, from the Vedic age to the colonial era. This can be seen in the anxiety around Kaliyug, which is a “time when families are broken, rites are forgotten and women are defiled. When women and the lower castes do not conform to the rules, that is kaliyuga. This mythical dystopia represents the ultimate degeneration and inversion of the moral order” (Chakravarti, 2002). As evident from the concept of kaliyuga and its content, it is the anxiety of the Brahmin male to retain the moral order which is based on the sexual control of their women and domination over the “lower caste” men. This is done again through a mechanism of consent and coercion.

However, the ideology of Untouchability is marked by its double standards. Not just as a supplement that we saw earlier but also in the way “upper caste” men do not lose their purity by sexual intercourse with untouchable women (Vijaisri) (V.Geetha, 2002). We have already come across the seed and field analogy earlier.

⁴⁸ As Bougle claims.

It is through strict moral codes and ritual codes of purification as we saw earlier that a person of the “upper caste” is made anxious of the Untouchables. Over the period of time, the forms of Untouchability have been reified and at the same time disguised differently. There has been ample writing on the way the idea of race was used by the Brahmin nationalist leaders to substantiate their claim of higher racial status. Ann Stoler (Stoler, 1995) has shown how the progressive construction of race during the colonial era was entangled strongly with the discourse of sexuality, the roles and statuses linked to gender, and the categories of purity and impurity.

Control over knowledge – For the material existence of the ideological construction of Untouchability, Patriarchy and the caste system it was required that Dalits and women were not in a position to attain a composure of critical analysis to dismantle the construct. That is why women and Dalits were excluded from gaining knowledge. The Hindu social life also disapproves questioning a practice and commands an unquestioning devotion for the prescriptions of the Dharma.

It is heartening that from the later part of the 19th century, the women’s questions did not figure in the mainstream political debates and social reforms. According to Valerian Rodrigues, this was an issue of contention between the Brahmin and the non-Brahmins in the pre-independence decade as the Brahmins considered it as part of what Partha Chatterjee terms the ‘inner’ realm (Rodrigues, 2005). Women in the Hindu social structure have long been caged in her gender roles ordained fit for her⁴⁹. As early as the 19th century, Dalit-Bahujan discourse has highlighted the relationship between women’s oppression and Brahminical domination. Periyar, identified and attacked Brahminical domination veiled as ‘nationalism’ in colonial India as the source and agency of oppression of women and the Shudras (Ramasami, 2009). Central to Phule’s thought was women’s right and consent, he asserted the rights of the woman to her body and Ambedkar criticized Brahminism for denying women self-respect and making their self-respect conditional on their relationship to men (Rodrigues, 2005). Dalit- bahujan discourse ridicules the private-public divide and demonstrates its links to the purity-pollution concept central to the caste system. They reveal the injustice done to women, the denial of their rights and freedom for perpetuation of the caste system whereby they were held as property and ‘untouchability’ was created to safeguard them (ibid.).

⁴⁹ Manusmriti ordains “Slavery is analogous to the condition of the wife” (Thorat, 2004).

One can see how women came to be seen as sexualised objects, their sexuality and bodies which could be polluted by men from other castes to be guarded by those who had a “right” to her as prescribed by texts such as the Manusmriti. The Hindu social structure took away women’s right to decide for themselves, robbing them of their subjectivity and reduced them to sexualized bodies. Such strength these ideologues have that they have not only persisted but have ramified and modified themselves to changing times over a period of more than two thousand years. Civilization, education, modernization nothing seems to make a dent on the psyche of people who dance in the frenzy of their honour by putting to death their own sisters and daughters who marry in a different caste or against caste prohibitions. Khap panchayat, death sentences and honour killing have become regular incidences.

Zygmunt Bauman in his work, *Intimations of Postmodernity* defines postmodernity as a period when comforting certainties have given way to crisis, uncertainty and contingency. The fears of modernity has not been allayed by postmodernity, rather it has been privatized. The collectivity of classes, races and nations have been done away with and the social world appears to be a “pool of choices; a market” to the individual. The government agencies are absent. The individual thus has to have her/his privatized escape routes for the privatized fears. It is in this scenario that communities are imagined⁵⁰ and to exist these communities have to be enacted: “I am seen, therefore I exist” is probably the imagined community’s version of the *cogito*⁵¹. Thus, imagined communities exist only through the manifestations of its ‘members’ in the form of occasional spectacular outbursts of togetherness such as marches, festivals, riots, demonstrations. Public attention is the life blood of political economy of postmodernity and it through public attention that the imagined community establishes its presence and right to arbitrate. To hold public attention members of imagined communities compete with each other to make their spectacle more shocking than other and more spectacular than yesterday. “To catch the attention, displays must be ever more bizarre, condensed and (yes!) disturbing; perhaps ever more brutal, gory and threatening” (Bauman, 1992).

Although it is debatable if India is undergoing postmodernity as it is a collaged society where growth of each section is not homogenous and smooth, neither is the process of modernization homogenous within the same section. Indeed in many cases it has been a *mistaken modernity*, as with the advent and accessibility of state of art technology and round the world communication and information channels, there is a sense of “pool of choices” and individuality in the urban and

⁵⁰ Bauman owes the idea of the imagined community to Benedict Anderson (Anderson, 1983), however, he accepts responsibility for the use to which he puts it in the concerned piece.

⁵¹ Reference to De cartes *Cogito*: “I think, therefore, I am”.

upcoming semi-urban cities. It is this sense of decreasing community and state presence that individuals utilize to break free of caste, community and other such social obligations and prohibitions. However, it is the reactionary forces of the “imagined communities”, the phantoms of the age old caste, community and other such social constructions, which hordes the limelight with their increasingly inhumane and brutal attack on the women of their own family in the name of caste and community

Chapter Four Breaking the Silence: Returning the Gaze

*Time will submit to slavery
from illusion's bonds we'll be free
everyone will be powerful and prosperous–
Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra and
Chandala all have rights
women, children, male and female and
even prostitutes– Tuka (Tukaram)*

In the preceding chapters we saw how women and Dalits as oppressed groups rose at particular moments of history to break their silence, voice their experienced realities, deconstructed the oppressive hegemonic ideologies of patriarchy and Brahminism and exerted their rights as equals. These chapters have unwrapped for us some of the important junctures of the women's struggle (in a universal and Indian context) and the Dalit struggle in the run of the colonial and post colonial period. We identified some of the common measures of oppression:

Exclusion from Knowledge Production and its Dissemination

We saw how socio-religious and structural hindrances such as gender and caste excluded women Dalits from educational institutions and scholarly pursuits. The religious and ideological frameworks differentiated them as unworthy of education and mental labour, which was the exclusive arena of pursuit of the Brahman male (Chakravarti, 2002, 2003; Panikkar, 1933). This exclusivity was further exacerbated by using Sanskrit, a language not used commonly for knowledge production and dissemination.

Exclusion from Social life

Social life was conveniently divided as private and public where the duties and social responsibilities of women and men, respectively, lay. However, power to decide upon matter of the family always remained with the male members. Women were conveniently kept under the control of the men as housekeepers and caregivers and this was rationalized by their natural ability to give birth. This was also the basis for rationalizing women as closer to nature as opposed to men, who were the learned repositories of culture (we see a connection in the next measure). This ideological division followed the actual division of spheres of activities based on

naturalized bodily distinction and assumption that neither sphere constitutes the other (Brown, 1987).

Exclusion of Dalits was even more marked owing to their “untouchability.” The exclusion from social life would also mean an exclusion from political processes as we have already seen earlier.

Inequality before the Law

The *Dharmashastras* which contain the rules for governing the society and the family have been criticized for the discriminatory law by both feminist and Dalit-Bahujan intellectuals. Prohibitions on women and the Dalits were sanctified by these texts. The most widely read and criticized of these texts is the *Manusmriti* written by Manu proclaiming the Brahman as the lord over women and all other castes. The Sudras as we saw earlier were to serve the Brahman and other upper castes. Women of all ages had to be guarded by their male relations (Chakravarti, 2003). The unequal laws and differential legal status of different groups based on *varna* and gender provided the ideological framework that sustained the discriminatory practices.

Work and Livelihood

The heart of the post-Vedic society was division and categorization; and it has also been seen as a highly systematic society. The division of the society in caste hierarchy and its decrees on occupation, landownership and knowledge, enabled the Brahmin-landed caste syndicate to exploit the Dalits, who were pushed to do menial jobs for maintaining the “purity” of the other castes (Gupta, 2000 ; Dumont, 1988). Manual labour and earth work was marked as inferior and unsuited to the non-Dalits. Owing to the exclusion of Dalits from owning property, they had to accept whatever work they got on the terms of the employers. Even today, in many rural locations, landless Dalits have to suffice with a handful of coarse grains such as millets (finer and costlier grains such as rice and wheat are assumed to be too good for them) as payment. There have also been reports as to refusal of non-Dalits to accept manual and earthen works for employment under the NREGA.

Dalit women have had to bear the brunt of double exploitation under the caste based occupations and the appropriation of their labour by their own families. The social position of Dalit women in the last rung of the hierarchy leave them at the mercy of everyone above them. They form the bulk of the informal sector which is devoid of any government regulations and provisions for employees’ social security. Traditionally they have been subjected to the whims

and fancies of their non-Dalit employers on matters of wages, permanency of work and engagement under the *jajmani* system. Being women and the “sexed” subject (Brown, 1987) their sexual victimization is further exacerbated by their historical identity of the “caste-marked” female subject (Rao, 2003). Dalit women have been sexually exploited and rendered voiceless under the pretext of sacred prostitution (Chakravarti, 2003: 88; Vijaisri) and sometimes by forced privilege of non-Dalit masters and employers over their bodies (V.Geetha, 2002; S. Anandhi, 2002).

The exclusion of the non-Dalit women and the Dalit women from the work force, however, is not the same. The non-Dalit women were forced to stay within the walls and security of the household and sometimes also fortified for maintaining their sexual purity (Chakravarti, 2003). This is part of the difference that Dalit women activist’s clamour has been excluded from the framework of mainstream feminism (Rao, 2003). The exclusion of non-Dalit women from paid work and the economy is closer the “universal” patriarchal exclusion of women marked by the division of labour and the invisibility of women’s household labour. This is to keep women subjugated under their male providers unlike the vulnerability of economic and sexual exploitation of Dalit women (Ibid.).

Psychological Exclusion

The practice of Untouchability and the resultant disability in social, moral, political and economic life created an environment of psychological exclusion. The idea of freedom and dignity, crucial to a fulfilling life was denied to the Dalits. The caste Hindu women, apart from suffering from physical exclusion within the material world craved for equality and freedom as is evident from the readings of personal narratives of women of this period (Kumar, 2010). Kumar’s work on Dalit autobiographies, aptly titles the autobiographies of the upper caste women as “The Private Self” as compared to “The Public” self of the upper caste men. His reading shows that the upper caste women started writing only after colonization pushed women’s involvement in the national movement. Some of these women self educated themselves. He observes that they had internalized their subordinate positions and perceived themselves as “insignificant”. Most of these autobiographies are personal writings stressing the accepted “private self” where one could not voice oneself and had to recourse to writing in secrecy.

It is through the Janus faced conception of women’s sexuality, as uncontrollable, dangerous and dark and the maternal chaste “*pativrata*”, essentially embodied in the “available” Dalit women and the “honourable” Brahmin women, respectively, (Chakravarti, 2003) that the

caste Hindu society maintained its “suppression of the desire” of caste Hindu femininity and “oppression” of Dalit femininity (Vijaisri). Women’s bodily difference and her “mysterious” sexuality came to be constructed as reasons for exclusion in the political and social realm while the ‘black’ body⁵² of the Dalit women came to be regarded as “natural object of desire and pleasure” (Chakravarti, 2003). Thus, apart from her dependency and subordination at home and outside, the violation of her body and sense of self through physical abuse and sexual violence at home and outside marred her conscious (Kannabiran, 2003; S. Anandhi, 26 Oct, 2002; Dube, 2003). Humiliation was part of daily life for a Dalit wōman and marked her psyche.

Factors that emerged as elemental for the women’s and Dalit movement

Some of the factors can be broadly put together for both the movements and others can be categorized differently for the Indian women’s and Dalit movement. Here we enumerate these in the order of the above reference:

Social and Religious Reform Movements: A significant role was played by the *Bhakti* and Social Reform Movements that paved the way for the anti-Brahmin movements in different parts of India. According to Uma Chakravarti, a significant challenge to the caste system and Brahminic patriarchy came from the various strands of *Bhakti* Movement. *Bhakti* traditions evolved in different parts of medieval India for different spans, these are: Tamil region from ca A.D. 700 to 1200 A.D.; Maharashtra from ca 1200 to ca 1700; North India from ca 1400 to 1700 and eastern India ca 1600 to 1800. The commonality of all these traditions is that they provided democratic access to God (Chakravarti, 2003), to people from all the segments of society including the untouchables and women. The social reform movements that followed the *Bhakti* traditions lead by Maharashtra and Bengal, in the early colonial period also paved way for the anti-Brahmin and women’s movement. The *Bhakti* movement and the social reform movements have also been criticized as co-option of the dissenting Dalits within the folds of Hinduism and a concern for reforms within the domain of the upper caste Hindu family, respectively (Ambedkar, 1988/1993). Gail Omvedt (2004) insists that the *Bhakti* tradition marks the rebellion of the untouchable believers against the rituals of Brahminism and the divisions of caste hierarchy.

Colonization: Colonization in the history of the South Asia is the marker of its advent into modernity. It brought with it modern machines from the rail, the printing press to the mills, which at the same moment killed many traditional occupations and their dependents too. While it created a “dissolving” effect on the traditional village feudal by opening up new avenues of

⁵² Based on actual *varna* or colour differences.

employment and education to all castes it also maintained the feudal hierarchy. Not only did the upper caste-moneyed class get in the bureaucracy but the “emerging Indian working class was divided along caste lines” (Omvedt, 1979). Thus, even though it brought in new administration, which sometimes brought changes in power equations, caste remained intact. Colonial administrators showed interest in the social life through study of castes, communities, regions and census but often left the local system untouched owing to their policy of staying out of the social and religious life of the colonized. They brought in whatever minimum changes that were required. Despite of these, in both the movements’ colonization and its experience plays a vital role as they utilized the colonial law, justice and administration as major resources (Sarkar, 1997). We see below some of the consequential developments which led to the germination of these movements and gave them impetus at various historical moments.

Education was a major channel of empowerment for the non-Brahmins and the Brahmin women, who were kept outside the folds of education. The opening of the colonial government supported schools for all sections, caste and class of society. This was in itself a revolution of sorts in the rigidly hierarchical Indian society.

Revolutionary Writing: The most decisive and empowering element in both the cases were the revolutionary writings of women and of Dalits. Writings in the form of sharing of experience, critical analysis of the situation and ideology for the domination of women and Dalits to refute the social construct of nature-culture and pollution-purity, respectively and the call for challenging the edifice of domination in both the cases have been catalytic. These writings emerging from “eccentric locations” are marked out of the mainstream not because they “collude with or reinforce dominant ideologies of gender, class, nation, or empire, but for the gestures of defiance or subversion implicit in them” (Lalita, 1991).

Printing Press: The print media was a boon for the oppressed. It became a tool for the enlightened few amongst them. The print media enabled conscientization, spread awareness within the oppressed groups and helped to mobilize the people. The dissenting pieces in chronicles were engaged in informed debates with what were regarded as some of the best opponents of the patriarchal and Brahminical systems. The contributions of print media in the women’s movement, in awakening the Dalits of Tamil Nadu are evident. Writings such as *The Second Sex* and *Gulamgiri* continue to be translated into different languages and printed into numerous editions. The effect of the printing press as an effective medium of propagation of

revolutionary ideas of the women's movement (including the Indian and black women's movement) and the Dalit movement is monumental.

Emergence of National Identity: It was the exploitation of the masses clubbed with the subjugation of the erstwhile ruling classes unleashed by the imperialistic/capitalist mode of production of the Imperial rulers that kindled the construction of the national identity. The identity constructed by the elite was that of a male Brahmin appealing to "Mother India" who is chained by the colonial rulers. The nationality professed was the dominating Brahminical North Indian culture mirrored in the front running political organization, the Indian National Congress Party. It posed as a threat to the organized Dalit communities and the socially and politically active women within political organizations.

Saving the Culture from Influence of West: In his paper, *The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question* Partha Chatterjee has shown the dilemma facing the nationalist leaders on the issue of women, which they resolved by bringing in the imperative change of woman's involvement in the national movement while at the same time reaffirming the notions of womanhood embedded in pre-existing patriarchal structure in the new garb of "Indian Womanhood". The burden of preserving the spiritual core fell wholly on the women located in homes which were unfettered by the political negotiations outside (Chatterjee, 1987). Behind this resolution of the women's question lay the anxiety over preserving the "national" culture, the burden of which fell on the women within the home and on the Dalits outside. It is visible in the nationalist leader's resistance towards the colonial and colonial mediated endeavours of feminists and Dalits to bring about changes in the family and in the social relations amongst the Indians: Tilak's resistance to the Age of Consent Bill in 1890s (Chakravarti, 2003), C. Rajagopalachari and S. Satyamurthy's resistance to abolition of *devadasi* system (Bharadwaj, 1991). The latter claimed that *devadasis* represented national art and culture. He also opposed the Child-marriage Restraint Act (1929) for it would hurt the sentiments of the Hindus (Ibid.).

Satyamurthy seemed to have argued that the system should be retained and every *devadasi* should dedicate at least one girl to be a future *devadasi* (Bharadwaj, 1991). To the brahminical perpetuation of the system in the name of culture, Periyar had said that the Brahmans should send "their" women to be *devadasis* if it was so important (Chakravarti, 2003). His remark exposes the perpetuation of sexual slavery of the lower caste women in the name of culture.

Changes in Law and the Legal Setup: Despite the resistance of religious and community leaders in the nineteenth century Bengal and Maharashtra important legislations were enacted such as the

Abolition of Sati (1813), Hindu Widow's Re-marriage Act (1856), Age of Consent Bill (1861). The process of social change targeted at familial relationships was seen as an impending catastrophe for the existing patriarchic property relations within and without the family. They decried of the coming crisis in the cultural realm of the Hindu society (Loomba, 2005/1998). In the wake of the national movement, nationalist leaders conceptualized the colonial interventions in social life in a similar manner as we saw in the above section. The colonial rule professed equality of Law at least in its papers (Bandyopadhyay, 2005/1989) unlike the *Dharmashastras* which were used by caste Hindu males to subjugate the rest of the persons (Panikkar, 2008/1933). The colonial rule led to a continuous tension between the changed legal system in matters of land, property, women's rights and the existing Brahminic-patriarchal socio-political and legal system.

Interaction with Other Societies: Writings of Tarbai Shinde⁵³ and Ramabai who had a chance to study western society where the condition of women was incomparable to that at home show a marked effect of their interaction with other societies. For a woman who stood as an equal to men of a supposedly "superior" race in course of her education, noticed the opposition met out to her by her own society and this fuelled her thoughts. It was the interaction with other societies, which were less restrictive to women, through writings, interaction with members of these societies and close observation of these societies that Indian women started questioning the treatment met out to them.

The interaction of women with the "other" was possible due to an upwardly mobile bourgeoisie which saw itself as an equal, an ally or as the probable rulers of the country with the withdrawal of the British. The men of this largely economically prosperous complex of Brahmin-erstwhile ruling classes-businessmen wanted their women to be able to move within the social circles of the local British officials and their families, the bourgeoisie and hence aspired them to learn English, and to learn the ways of the British women, to be "cultured" as compared to their Indian counterparts. Some of the men themselves were ideologically motivated for a more equal society and were disturbed by the western criticism of Hinduism (Vijaisri, 2005). An apt presentation of the same has been in Satyajit Ray's film *Ghore-Baire* (The Home and the World) released in 1984 and based on a novel with the same title by Rabindra Nath Tagore.

⁵³ Tarabai Shinde wrote the critique of men-women relations *Stri Purush Tulana* (A Comparison Between Women and Men) which was originally published in Marathi in 1882

English as the Official Language: Introduction of English as the official language opened the doors for the emancipator new world writings on religious dissent, political uprisings such as the French Revolution and the American struggle against colonial rulers as well as the excesses of the colonial rulers in the third world colonies. It was seen as the vehicle for India to enter into light from the darkness of superstitions by reformers such as Ram Mohan Roy (1772- 1833) (Loomba, 2005/1998). Men and women educated in west brought with them evidences of the universal slogans of Equality, Liberty and Fraternity. Freedom and Individualism came to be their aspiration.

In the Wake of Democracy

In postcolonial India, the struggles have been both at individual and collective levels, both as agitation and appeal for reforms in the legal, political and social sectors. The state as the protector of the citizen has been pressurized internally (as an upholder of citizen's rights) and externally (as a signatory of various international declarations and conventions of Human Rights and Women's Rights). A recent development in the front of Dalit Movements has been the appeal for recognition of Casteism as Racism in the International forum to gather support for the fight against casteism. This had led to heated debates amongst the social scientists in India who regarding the veracity of the claim.

Legal recognition of live-in relationships in the Domestic Violence Act (2006) and the decriminalization of consensual adult homosexuality under Article 377 by the Delhi High Court (2009) have legally paved the way for alternatives to the institution of normative-heterosexual marriages. The larger social reaction to living relationships and homosexuality, a mark of difference that is unsettling for many, that pushes for the largely patrilineal and imposed heterosexuality, has been brutal. Fear of non-acceptance of and by their family, ridicule and stigmatization by society, which perceives homosexuality as not being "normal" have been and still remain, challenges for homosexuals.

Films depicting homosexuals have also been a marker of the reality. There was vandalizing and violent protest staged by motivated political parties and their mercenaries against director Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* (1996), which engages seriously with the lives of two sister-in-laws involved in a homosexual relation, there was not a protest by the same league of "cultural policemen" against producer Koran Johar's *Dostana* (2008) which is a comic portrayal of two men who pose as a homosexual couple for a "couple's only" accommodation. The difference plays out to ridicule the vein of the social reality. Not that the "cultural police" had grown any

tolerant in the intervening years as is visible from their ever-readiness to graze public attention on matters of “Indian culture” but for the fact that the second film is not an assertion of the difference, a reel depiction of a truth but a farce which the characters plot and which conveniently denies the existence of homosexuality while retaining the deep seated psyche of ridicule for the aberrant “sissy”. Whatever, the content be, playing by or against the social norms, the increased representation of homosexuality as a comic interlude in mainstream Bollywood films such as director Nikhil Advani’s *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2003), or *Golmaal Returns* (2008) directed by Rohit Shetty or as a theme in films such as Karan Razdan’s *Girlfriend* (2004) have certainly helped in bringing homosexuality discourse out in the open.

Celebrities, especially women in heterosexual live in relationships have been at the receiving end of the popular Indian media for their “outrageous” and “indecent” act. Such media coverage backs the negative image of women outside the socially accepted norms. This is but obvious from the experience of the Special Marriage Act (1954) which legalized heterosexual marriage against the social norms between two consenting adults yet the frequency and brutality against inter-caste marriages have increased over the years.

Mainstream films do not enter the realm of caste in contemporary India. Caste and caste based oppression of women find a voice only in the realm of alternative genre of art movies and documentaries such as Deepa Mehta’s *Water* (2005), and Stalin’s *India Untouched*. The early caste-sensitivity of the 1950s and 60s as exemplified in mainstream movies such as Franz Osten’s *Achut Kanya* (1936) and Bimal Roy’s *Sujata* (1959) (has been taken over by the class and regional factors as evident in innumerable Bollywood movies based on rich girl- poor boy (which is more marked in the male-dominated social reality) or urban-rural narratives. Caste and communal aspects are essentially and effectively downplayed, not that there are no “takers” but the sorry fact that there are no “makers”. It is the downplaying of the achievements of the Dalit leaders, such as Mayawati, in the political arena and faultfinding by the mainstream print and electronic media which makes it *Manuwadi*, as claimed by Kanshi Ram (Kumar, 2009).

Legal provisions and safeguards for the Dalits had been a major victory for the Dalit movement which was made possible by the presence of Ambedkar. The framework for affirmative action which Ambedkar developed in the 1930s in the form of the Poona Pact following the differences owing to the decisions post-Third Round Table Conference, pioneered the inclusive policies of the world (Kumar S. T., 2008). Being the Chairperson of the Constituent Assembly, he brought in legislations such as Untouchability (Offences) Act, (1955)

Reservations for Dalits in government educational and employment institutions, provision of constitutional enforcement and safeguard of rights, right to Equal Opportunities etc.

Special educational and research programmes have been funded by the government, non-government and international projects on both these sectors and we have women's studies and/or gender studies programmes in most universities the world over and in India today. Dalit studies and Dalit literature is also making its foray in the universities and in the theoretical world.

Elusive Selfhood of the Dalit Women: Experience in the Dalit and Women's Movements

"If there is any soul in this country who is subjected to all kinds of oppression and exploitation, it is the Dalit woman. On one side she is oppressed by the caste system, on the other side she is subjected to gender oppression and class exploitation. She is a Dalit among Dalits." (Rani, 1998: WS21)

The early 1990s saw the assertion of autonomous Dalit women's organisations at both, regional and national levels. According to Sharmila Rege (1998), this assertion had thrown up several crucial theoretical and political challenges, besides underlining the brahmanism of the feminist movement and the patriarchal practices of Dalit politics. Issue of representation of Dalit women both at the level of theory and politics have always been contentious and to break out of their dependency mould to be represented by others. It is their invisibility in the women's movement due to non-Dalit forces homogenizing the issue of Dalit women and the Dalit movement due the patriarchal domination within the Dalits that exhorted Dalit women to speak "differently" (Guru, 1995). This difference is also marked by the difference in experience based on ones socio-political location. It is through the experience of the Dalit women that one can get "access to the complex reality of Dalit women" and through the complex realities mediated by gender, caste, class that critical issues such as of rape can be grasped (ibid.).

The unwillingness of upper caste women to express solidarity with Dalit women humiliated and tortured by upper caste men has produced disenchantment from the promise of sisterhood (Rani, 1998). Further Dalit women have questioned and rejected caste in terms in which upper caste women are even today unable to do. Their stand has remained ambivalent regarding the critique of caste (Guru, 1995). Even upper caste women who suffer patriarchy humiliate Dalit women, because they belong to a lower caste. Disenchantment with the women's movement is evident in the following poem by a Dalit woman:

Do you remember
your words when
your husband plucked me like a chicken ?

Do you know how often
I was cheapened
at your hands
in your house

(Sasi Nirmala, verse from 'Dalituralu', original version of the poem is in Telugu)

(Translation of poem into English by Vasanth Kannabiran)

There is an uncanny similarity between racism and casteism not based on the idea of Dalits being a different race but on the ideological construct, practices and modes of both these oppressive systems as Beteille expressed. We had earlier seen how the third wave of international feminism saw an assertion of the black and third world feminists of their difference.

Dalit women have criticised their male counterparts for dominating the literary scene and dismissing the assertion of Dalit women as divisive (Guru, 1995). Similar experiences have been voiced by the black feminists in the wake of black women's assertion of their selves. Patricia Hill Collins cites Calvin Hernton, to bring to the fore the masculinist bias of the black men and black social and political movements towards black women by their opposition to their writing:

"The telling thing about the hostile attitude of black men toward black women writers is that the new thrust of the women as being "counter-productive" to the historical goal of the Black struggle." (Collins, 1990: 8)

The exclusion of black women within the black movement was further expressed by the result of Pauli Murray (1970) research, as cited by Collins. Murray's work showed that from 1916 to 1970 the *Journal of Negro History* published only five articles devoted exclusively to black women. What we see here is the face of patriarchy and skewed power relations within the black community settled in a mixed society in America.

Dalit Writing

According to M.S.S. Pandian (1998), Dalit literature and Dalit literary criticism in Tamil, which appeared close to the birth centenary of Ambedkar, created much anxiety and rage among

the gate-keepers of the literary establishment. Dalit literature, which marked itself as distinctly Dalit, was “reviled” by both the left and right of the literary establishment as it questioned “the received commonsense about what is sacred and profane in literature” (ibid.). This anxiety of sacrilege is not new to the society crafted on caste ideology. In fact, Dalit literature and criticism have proliferated in the face of opposition like other literature of the oppressed such as Black literature and women’s writing. This is because contestation is its lifeline (Ibid.).

Caste has dominated the scene of literary production in India for too long (Das, 2002). According to Das, the poem *Violence Zad* (The Tree of Violence) by Namdeo Dhasal, the founder of the Dalit Panther Movement, after two decades of independence is the harbinger of the emerging Dalit Literature. This brings us to the issue over what is Dalit literature and whose writing is Dalit literature. These issues have generated considerable debate within and outside Dalit organizations and literacy circles. According to Challapalli Swaroopa Rani, a Dalit feminist and poet from Andhra, “Writing by Dalits that is based on Dalit consciousness will reflect the painful lived experiences of Dalit people. The fact of being born a Dalit alone is not enough to write Dalit poetry. Dalit consciousness is a critical factor in Dalit writing. The question of whether non-Dalits can write Dalit poetry has also come up from time to time. Writing by upper castes that expresses Dalit reality in terms similar to that by Dalit writers can be called sympathetic poetry. There is an unanimous view that only those who suffer oppression can adequately represent that oppression.” (Rani, 1998)

Dalit literature- literature produced by Dalits in a conscious, defined, modern sense with an awareness of what it is to be Dalit- emerged in Maharashtra in the 1970s (Anand, 2007/2003). It was a period when Dalit literature with its “political awareness of the specificity of Dalit experiences came to be articulated across the country” in various Indian languages. According to Anand, Dalit literature emerged in Maharashtra in the 1970s as a consequence of the translation and publication of Ambedkar’s writing, which was mostly in English, into many Indian languages. He clearly states that not many Dalits have access to English hence works in English do not reach the Dalits and at the same time the Dalit writings in the vernacular languages hardly find space in the mainstream readership which is mostly English. It was the post- Ambedkar centenary period, in 1992 that the first two English books on Dalit literature saw the light of the day- Mulk Raj Anand and Eleanor Zelliot’s *An Anthology of Dalit Literature* containing Marathi Dalit poetry, published by Gyan Publishing and *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* containing prose excerpts, poetry, fiction and autobiographical accounts, published by Orient Longman. Bama’s autobiography *Karukku* was published in Tamil in the

same year and the English translation was published by Macmillan in the year 1999. It was around the same time that Sahitya Akademi published the Marathi autobiographies of Laxman Mane, *Upara: The Outsider* (1997) and Laxman Gaikwad's *Uchalya: The Branded* (1998) who brought in the experiences of the denotified tribes to the fore.

Maharashtra has been the locus of the Dalit literature movement not just in Maharashtra but the other states such as Andhra Pradesh (Rani, 1998) and Gujarat (Basu, 2002). While Dalit literature in both states has its roots in the Dalit movements in the states, they were inspired by Dalit Panther movement's ideology of "political upheaval instigated by a literary upheaval" (Basu, 2002). According to Challapalli Swaroopa Rani , the poetry of *bhakti* saints, the work of Joshua, a converted Dalit, Siva Kavulu, who strongly opposed the '*chaturvarna*' theory and verses by Vemana laid the foundation for Dalit poetry in Telegu. However, it was incidents of upper caste violence against Dalits like those at Karamchedu, Chundururu, and Padirikuppam along with the inspiration of Ambedkarite anti-caste movements led to the direct use of Dalit poetry as a weapon against oppression. It signifies the use of literature and poetry for protest in a state judicial system that fails to protect it's citizens.

Dalit Autobiographical Writings

Gopal Guru cites Bhiku Parikh's (1989) *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform* where he has proposed that writing of autobiography is a rare endeavour in the Indian context. The limited value on individuality ordained by Hindu metaphysic suppresses autobiographical writings. . Individuality forms a precondition of writing an autobiography and the Indian Philosophy does not give much scope for celebrating the self. The self is, rather, morally constituted by the tradition of renunciation. At the same time the western self is driven by the need to demand recognition from others which is rooted in the Hegelian master-slave relationship". Writing an autobiography is thus an individualist and modernist project⁵⁴.

In the Indian context, it has mostly been the women of upper castes, who have enjoyed the opportunity of being educated and have written autobiographies. It was in 1910 that Pandita Ramabai Ranade, wrote her self-story. Maharashtra and Bengal are the two states which produced many upper caste women's self stories. These were not written in direct speech but were rather

⁵⁴ Professor Gopal Guru, points out that Gandhi, who belongs to the tradition of self-effacement and not self-affirmation wrote his autobiography.

narrated in an indirect form of a *Bhakti* or devotional song. Dalit women's autobiography is a recent phenomenon, not more than two decades old which originated from Maharashtra and later from Tamil Nadu. The indirect narrative style of the upper caste women's self writing is a result of their colonization of their space and time within their inner private space and in the various rituals. Dalit women "flow freely" in their writings unlike the uppercaste women as they are relatively free from the colonization of their body by the Dalit patriarchy. They move freely from the domestic to the public sphere.

Sharmila Rege (2006) has used the word testimonies for autobiographies of Dalit women from Maharashtra. This can be contemplated as legal testimonies, as pleas to a judge, the Dalit man or male in a larger sense. The other use would imply "political initiative to engage with Dalit patriarchy and social patriarchy...as kinds of protests against the exploitation by the state on one hand and market on the other...as kinds of protests against the adversaries both from within and outside....protest against their exclusion from the Dalit public sphere-literary gatherings, academic gatherings, publishing spheres and other spheres of recognition, like political parties....Dalit women make only a guest appearance in the autobiographies written by "Dalit males" where "Dalit women" are projected as a self sacrificing mothers or mothers patiently enduring pain and suffering, but very rarely as the agents for change" (Guru, 2008).

According to Gopal Guru, the subordination of Dalit women by the Dalit male autobiographers provokes Dalit women to write their own story, it is "the politics of presence" that has led Dalit women to announce their arrival in the "Dalit counter public" and has also added value to the subversion value of the counter public. The self in the self-story of the Dalit women is not the disembodied self of the west but a self that is "deeply rooted in the mores of the community" which is both the self and the collective, "constituted by the life-story and acquires larger meaning only in the context of the narrative of the community". The self of the Dalit woman is "historically located and sociologically constituted" and it is this normative link between the self and the community that empowers the Dalit women to offer dispassionate criticism of community practices. Dalit women's autobiographies unlike those of their male counterparts are "more inward looking as they tend to interrogate the evil practices of the Dalit community", apart from questioning the larger oppressive social system.

According to Professor Guru, autobiographical writings by Dalit women in Maharashtra till now are concentrated in the Mahar-Buddhist women only, and autobiographical writings have not as yet been written amongst the Matang and Charmakar. The reasons for this could be the

dire provocation that Mahars, who are landless agricultural labourers unlike the Matang and Charmakar, face in the slack period. Their socio-economic conditions have pushed these women out of their traditional roles giving space to modernity. Further, the provision of education to girls by the rich Mahars from the Vidarbha region had given them the courage for self assertion. The differences within Dalit women mediated by their religious faith, region, education and communities underlie Guru's (2008) observations.

Dalit Women's Experience

Foundational questions of epistemic objectivity, validity and reliability spring up the moment, "experience" as the realm of analysis, is proposed. Feminists worldwide and intellectuals from oppressed groups have questioned the notion of objectivity which is based on the perspective of privileged groups such as white men, who have traditionally reigned over the arena of philosophy and science. Sandra Harding premises women's experience and the experience of oppressed groups on the "questions an oppressed group wants answered...queries about how to change its conditions; how its world is shaped by the forces beyond it; how to win over, defeat or neutralize those forces arrayed against its emancipation, growth, or development", precisely their experience in political struggle, which is not touched by the so called scientific (read white male's "partial") perspective (Harding, 2004: 460).

As we saw in an earlier section the Dalit women's movement and the existential reality of Dalit women revolve around the experience of Dalit women. It is the same experience of being a Dalit and of not born a Dalit that forms the crux of Dalit literature. The experience of exclusion enabled a process of resistance and emancipation, a process of self-definition challenging the stereotypes within the black women. Collins defines black feminist thought in the framework of such a contest.

This dialectic of oppression and activism, the tension between the suppression of Black women's ideas and our intellectual activism in the face of that suppression, comprises the politics of Black feminist thought.

Collins (1990) goes on to list out the situations and conditions that shaped the black women's activism and resistance. According to her oppressive situations are inherently unstable and the larger political and economic conditions lead to simultaneous subordination and activism of the subordinated. The oppressed usually know this. The culture of resistance of black women, which she accepts is not a monolithic culture, arose as a result of multiple reasons. One major

reason was the ghettoization of the blacks that provided them space to articulate an independent Afro-centric view. Black women are central to the retention and transformation of this worldview. According to Collins, it is these “self-definitions” and conceptions of the self and the community that enabled black women to resist the negative evaluation of the black womanhood by the dominant groups. Black women’s ghettoization in domestic work gave them the space to come closer to the white and to demystify them. Though many of them formed closed ties with the people they worked with, they remained outsiders with a “curious outsider-within stance, a peculiar marginality”. It is this location of a traditional grounding and an outsider-within perspective, which according to Collins, gave black women the material for a unique standpoint on the self and society. Alice Walker describes the impact of this as quoted in (Collins, 1990: 12):

“I believethat it was from this period—from my solitary, lonely position, the position of an outcast—that I began really to see people and things, really to notice relationships”

It is this self awareness that made it possible for black women to question in return, a gaze back, the contradictions of white women’s thinking that they run the lives of their husbands while the power lied with their husbands; they questioned the contradictions between the ideologies of womanhood as fragile and passive and the treatment of black woman as strong enough to do heavy manual work. It is through their assertion of a self defined by the self that enabled them to deconstruct “white womanhood” as a social construct.

The difference of the black women from “womanhood” made her the “other”. It is a similar process of othering that the Dalit woman, that is so much part of her experience. It is this difference in experience expressed in their writing that “ought to be seen as carrying positive emancipatory potential” by the Dalit men and mainstream feminists (Guru, 1995). Guru argues the autonomous mobilisation of Dalit women can also be understood from an epistemological standpoint. As we have already seen in an earlier chapter Sandra Harding has argued for a feminist standpoint which asserts that the less powerful members of a society have a more encompassing view of social reality than others because their disadvantaged position.

Joan Scott has argued, 'Experience is at once always already an interpretation and something that needs to be interpreted. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested and always therefore political... Experience is, in this approach, not the origin of our explanation, but that which we want to explain. This kind of

approach does not undercut politics by denying the existence of subjects; it instead interrogates the process of their creation...' (Scott , 1991)

However, Tharu and Lalita warns us of the pitfall of essentialisation of “women’s experience” as something distinctively female deviated from the use of experience as a resource for critical discussion amongst groups of oppressed women for conscious raising (Lalita, 1991).

Keeping our aim of exploring the selfhood of Dalit women, autobiographies become an apt medium. According to Vijaya Ramaswamy, private and personal writings often become the medium through which women’s consciousness expresses itself as these record feelings and attitudes around events. These could be used to reconstruct femininity from the perspective of the author. Women’s autobiographies are becoming increasingly important as sources of self-perception as well as providing insights into gender relations, social structure, political and social change and so on (Ramaswamy, 2009).

In the next section we briefly touch upon the historical and ongoing socio-political negotiations in the two states that our autobiographers hail from, for a nuanced reading of their experiences in life.

Historical Location of the Autobiographers

It is not co-incidental that while looking for autobiographical works of Dalit women in English, i came across very few English translated autobiographies, that of Urmila Pawar, Shantabai Kamble and Baby Kamble where the latter two have been translated from Marathi and Viramma’s and Bama’s that have been translated from Tamil. It was also not co-incidental that these were located around Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, which have historically witnessed the most massive and consistent Dalit mobilization. The choice of the autobiographical works: Baby Kamble’s *Prisons We Broke*, Bama’s *Karukku* are based on the relative exclusion and difference within the category Dalit women. Bama, a Dalit Christian, becomes a nun and leaves the order to work for her community. She touches a contingent issue, the mediation of caste in the space of a faith other than Hinduism. Baby Kamble, a school educated shop owner, from Maharastra writes against Hinduism.

In the process of the present research, i required an understanding of the historical location of the Dalit women autobiographers for substantial and appreciative reading of their work. This historical location is difficult to grasp, it is an always intermingling and concurrently

running “life histories” of the Dalit self⁵⁵ in the national and the particular geographical locations (which is the linguistic state or province here) which exerts itself over a period of time, in a specific historical context of colonial rule. There is an obvious import to the national history in the context of the centralizing colonial rule which is maintained in independent India. It is in the reading of the struggle of the “depressed classes”⁵⁶ against the Brahminical caste system, its institution of untouchability, inequalities and oppression of women, that one can understand the lived experiences of the autobiographers. The next section is a review of the translated works and anthologies of Dalit social thinkers in the colonial and post independence periods.

Maharashtra

According to Uma Chakravarti, historical evidences show that the western region of India, including present day Maharashtra, was brahmanized by the first century B.C. However, owing to the presence of Jainism and Buddhism in the region, well up to the early medieval period, Brahminism was not all pervasive. It was in a state of contestation as is evident from the claims of Satavahan kings (first century A.D. to the third) to control mixing of *varnas* and patronizing Sanskrit to the twelfth century text of Brahminic rites by Hemadri, the Brahman chancellor of a Yadav king (Chakravarti, 2003). The period from 1200 A.D. to 1700 A.D. saw a strong critique to Brahminism in the form of the *Bhakti* tradition of Eknath and Tukaram.

In the eighteenth century, the Maratha kingdom of Shivaji came to be annexed by the Peshwai, the hereditary prime ministers of Shivaji’s dynasty. They were *Chitpavan Brahamans*. The rule of the *Peshwai*, with its throne in Pune, is recorded to be highly discriminatory against the untouchables (Chakravarti, 2003). The Peshwai prohibited the Ati-Shudras from entering the temple of Vithoba, containing the image of Chokhamela, which was earlier allowed, and relocated the Maharvadas to a distant location to avoid pollution of the upper castes.

In the colonial period nationalist leaders such as Ranade, Gokhale, and Tilak voiced their concerns for a Maratha nation and Maratha people to unite the people against the British rule. Tilak started the *Ganpati Utsav* as a festivity uniting all the classes, castes and religions. However, the figures of Phule and Ambedkar stand etched out for their forceful invocations against Brahminism and the caste system. They advocated education for women and Dalits. Phule was the first to start a school for girls and the Dalits, even before the colonial government or the

⁵⁵ i had to confine myself to the Dalit self as i faced a dearth of literature on or by Dalit women at all junctures.

⁵⁶ As termed by the colonial rulers, were those against which the Dalit communities protested, to the effect that it was repelled.

princely states. Phule compared untouchability with slavery and the domination of the blacks in the west. He attacked the notion of Indian National Culture which according to him was based on upper class ideology against the mass ideology. He attacked the *varna* system as a creation of the foreign Aryans and Gandhi's *Ram Rajya* which involved the killing of a Shudra boy, Shambuka, for trying to follow the Brahminic path of self reform (Omvedt G. , 1971).

In his work *Gulamgiri*, Phule attacked the caste system as exploitation of the masses along the lines of black domination and hence forged a unity amongst the oppressed in two different halves of the globe. He tried to organize the non-Brahmin rural communities through his *Satyasodhak Samaj* which was based on the principle of equality. It is through the work of the *Samaj* that Phule tried to unite the non-Brahmin masses and raise their awareness, it played a vital role in preparing the ground for the most important movement of the Dalits lead by Ambedkar.

Ambedkar was born in 1891 in a Mahar (ex-untouchable) family. His father, Subedar Ramji, was a career officer and military school headmaster in British army. Both sides of his family were active in the *bhakti* cult of Kabir (1440-1518). In school in Satara both Ambedkar and his brother were discriminated against as they were Mahars. They had to sit separately from the other students, their notebooks were not touched by teachers and they could not drink water from the common source (Ahir, 1994; Queen, 1994). However, their parents supported them and they were taught at home by their father. Ambedkar's father was a friend and admirer of Phule (1827-1890) and an activist for the rights of Untouchables. At twelve when Ambedkar passed a school examination, he was gifted a copy of *Life of Gautam Buddha* by K.A. Keluskar, his father's friend and also the author of the book. This opened him to the thoughts and life of Buddha and had a great influence on him. Ambedkar graduated in 1907 and was the second Untouchable to do so. Kabir, Phule and Buddha were the greatest influences on Ambedkar.

Ambedkar was supported financially by the Maharaja of Baroda, Sayajirao Gaekwad, for his college education in Bombay. This support continued for his Master's and Doctorate of Philosophy degrees in Columbia University, New York and his Master's and Doctorate degrees in science from University of London. He was admitted to the bar in London (1923) and continued his post doctorate studies from University of Bonn (Queen, 1994). In the meantime he worked as a state official in Baroda (1917), as a professor in Bombay University (1918-1920) and a barrister in Bombay High Court (1923). Ambedkar faced caste discrimination associated with untouchability, inability to drink water from common source and to find a place to stay.

Ambedkar realized that even his personal rise could not make him free of the prevailing casteism even amongst the educated and upwardly mobile city dwellers. It was only through a social revolution with massive support and participation that the evils of casteism can be tackled. Thus, began his crusade against the caste system. For twelve years he organized protests and demonstrations for equal access to temples, public facilities and fought for Dalit rights in courts. He lead Dalit protestors to drink water from a tank forbidden to them at Mahad on March 20, 1927. In Chowder, the upper caste people performed purifying rituals for the water source after the Dalit used it, and this led Ambedkar to declare that Hinduism itself had become the fighting issue. Few months later he led 15000 people to a protest which burnt *Manusmriti*, a religious text that legitimizes the caste system and preaches discrimination against the Dalits. This was to reject the scriptures that legitimize descent based hierarchy in the form of the caste system. He participated and represented the Dalits in the three Round Table Conferences in London (1930-32) pushed the goal to have constitutional safeguards for the Dalits.

In 1935 in a conference in Yeola, Ambedkar gave a stirring speech urging 10,000 Dalit leaders to consider religious identity by choice and not as descent based. The way out of discrimination and inequality of the caste system and Hindu religion was to leave it.

“If you want to gain self-respect, change your religion.

If you want to create a cooperating society, change your religion.

If you want power, change your religion.

If you want equality, change your religion.

If you want independence, change you religion.

If you want to make the world in which you live happy, change you religion.”

This speech created intense debates within the Dalit communities and in the whole of India for years. Ambedkar sent his followers to observe the religious conferences of other religions in India, he himself attended religious gatherings and read voraciously. Leaders of various religious communities invited him and his followers to embrace their religion and promised equality. All religions, including Christianity, Islam and Sikhism lost their charm as it came to issues of equality amongst their followers, converts and women. Jainism was ruled out because of its extremity towards non-violence.

Ambedkar’s preference for Buddhism became visible in his work. In 1940 he proposed that “Untouchability was Brahminism’s punishment” (Queen, 1994) for those who embraced

Buddhism in ancient times which he developed in his book *The Untouchables* (1948). He calls the Untouchables as “broken men”:

“Why did the Brahmin regard broken men as impure? Why did the broken men regard Brahmins as impure? What was the basis of this antipathy? This antipathy can be explained on one hypothesis. It is that the Broken Men were Buddhists. As such they did not revere the Brahmins, did not employ them as their priest and regarded them as impure. The Brahmin, on the other hand, disliked the Broken Men because they were Buddhists and preached against them contempt and hatred with the result that the Broken Men came to be regarded as Untouchables” (Ambedkar, 1948)

Ambedkar’s role in bringing in the safeguard for the rights of the Dalit- Bahun in the constitutional framework of India is vital. As a member of the Constituent Assembly which framed India's new constitution, he sought to change the situation legislatively. Untouchability was prohibited and the rights of the Dalits pertaining to employment, wages and benefits, humane working conditions, and education were made constitutionally enforceable rights. However, by the time India became a sovereign republic in 1950, Ambedkar realized that legislative measures alone could not erase the concepts and practices of the caste system. He returned to the idea of moving out of the folds of Hinduism itself and converted to Buddhism. He also organized mass conversion of about three million Mahars to Buddhism to take them out of the clutches of caste and brahminism ceremonies held in 1956 and 1957 (Dharwadker, 1994).

Gandhi and Ambedkar’s Dialogue

The historical context and the chronology of the Dalit struggle would be incomplete without the debate on caste and the *varna* ashram between the “nationalist”⁵⁷ and the leaders of the Dalit community, Gandhi and Ambedkar being the archetypes, respectively. For a caste Hindu Indian born in post independence India and to others inside and outside India, the possibility of encountering Gandhi, the father of the Nation and his thoughts on caste are much more than encountering the thoughts of any other leader. The reasons can be the invisibility of caste in the history of India as taught in history books and the “objective” treatment of caste as any other social ailment, with a congratulatory note of a benevolent benefactor on the abolishment of untouchability

⁵⁷ A term used to mark the leaders and thoughts, in the pre and post Independent period, in support of India as a Hindu nation and that too predominantly north Indian values. This was a major concern with the leaders of minority communities and the Dalits who show the shadow of the Brahminical looming large in the name of Nationalism.

Gandhi's "India of my dream" is an ideal type, an utopia which he tries through the difficult and slow process of self-transformation based on moral inquisition and an appeal to the Indian upper caste. He, however, does not aspire for a revolution as his path is not of uprooting the *varnaashram*, that is, questioning the bases of the caste system. He is mired in clashes of values, of his socializing Hindu and human values and he settles for the "middle path"⁵⁸ of achieving the human values through the Hindu values, through an appeal to the Hindu morality. He does not have a specific plan or method to attain this ideal, his tool for the task was communicating his thoughts and arguments against some of the ramifications of caste system were through chronicles and public speeches. What was of greatest help and impact to his cause was his own disposition of a benevolent benefactor of the masses, giving space to the "Harijans"⁵⁹ within the Hindu fold.

Ambedkar's ideal is a society based on Liberty, Equality and Fraternity and democracy not just as a form of government but "essentially an attitude of respect and reverence towards fellowmen" (Ambedkar, 2007/1936). His ideal is based on his shared experience of being a Dalit, of fighting for the denied rights and cause for his community. His path of emancipation was through more concrete and practical ways: petitions for political and educational rights, reservations of seats in government jobs and legislations, social reform through temple entries, burning of religious texts sanctifying the *varna* and caste system, mass conversion to Buddhism etc. The very centre of his revolution was the Dalit masses. He was and still is their leader, their ideal. His was a revolutionary path of conscientizing and mobilizing the masses to rise up against the oppressive system and demand their rights. His was a movement for self-respect and freedom, for rights and not concessions. His impatience and urgency can be understood from the vantage point of a man standing at the threshold of a revolution in a historical moment and that has eluded his ancestors for 3,000 years. While reading Baby Kamble's autobiography one can see the effect of Ambedkar as a great leader in the lives of ordinary people. Baby Kamble minces no words in expressing it.

⁵⁸ The middle path is the basic teaching of the Buddha to the call of *Dhamma*, as opposed to the extreme call of duty professed by the *Bhagwad Gita*. This could be understood in the light of Gandhi's view of Buddhism as part of the Hindu culture and his pacifism learnt from the Buddha. Gandhi himself claims it. It was this aspect of Gandhi's thought which was (and is still) viewed as the effeminate. Gandhi's religion and politics of passive resistance was different and shocked not only his opponents but his followers too.

⁵⁹ A term that Gandhi used for the Dalits (suggested to him according to him by a member of the same caste and after a Gujrati poet) and which was against the sentiments of many members of the caste.

Post Independence

After Independence, People's Education Society established by Ambedkar, opened schools, colleges, and hostels in Marathawad for the Dalits. He also formed the Republican Party of India. As Zelliott says "While the newspapers may be seen as a symbol of the whole paraphernalia of modernity, the educational institutions as the means for opportunity, the political stress as a basic urge both to participate in government and to maintain unity, the conversion to Buddhism provided psychological freedom." (Dharwadker, 1994: 320) However, his political establishment the Republican Party of India failed to garner power in the nascent nation amongst its illiterate masses proliferated by Congress rural workers.

As the Law Minister in the government, Ambedkar, presented the Hindu Code Bill in the parliament for discussion in 1950. He was put to bitter criticism for the provisions related to women in the bill which consisted of right to parental property, abolition of caste in matters of marriage and adoption, principle of monogamy and divorce. He resigned from the post in 1951 and the failure to pass the bill was amongst one of the reasons (Zelliot, 2003).

The significance of Ambedkar's work is yet to be fully brought to light. However, it had kept the fire burning as is evident from the rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party under the leadership of Kanshi Ram and Mayawati in Uttar Pradesh rising from the debris of the Republican Party and the formation of the Dalit Panthers in 1972. The Dalit Panthers, modeled on the Black Panthers protesting racial discrimination in the United States, was launched by a group of Dalit writers in Maharashtra to protest both atrocities against untouchables in the villages in the absence and ineffectiveness of the Republican Party. These Dalit writers were a product of Ambedkar's movement. As Baburao Bagul, one of the prominent fiction writers of the movement, suggests, Dalit writing begins with the Buddhist conversion of 1956. Colleges run by the People's Education Society and other Buddhist groups, such as the Milind College of the Arts in Aurangabad became the centres of the movement as many of the members were attached with them (Dharwadker, 1994; Basu, 2002). As we saw earlier the ideology of a literary movement linked with political activism, initiated by the Dalit Panthers has spread out to the other parts of the country in the last few decades.

Tamil Nadu

We had earlier seen that historical evidence points towards different processes of formation of the caste system in different regions of the subcontinent. The Tamil Sangam

literature (ca B.C. 100 to ca A.D. 300) shows that the society was relatively less stratified than it became after this period. Brahmins presence in the literature is seen around 300 B.C. The Sangam period is marked by rules of small kings and chieftains which were consolidated in the period 500 to 1000 A.D. under the rule of the Pallavas and Cholas. As agriculture progressed in the Kaveri basin region⁶⁰, the society came to be stratified. Brahmins came to own substantial proportion of land granted by kings and through intensive agriculture extracting labour from others. By their ingenious policy Brahmins came to be crucial component of the society by the sixth Century A.D. It is from the tenth century that the inscriptions mention untouchability. The biography of the famous Saivite Nandnar, a Paraiyan in this era, shows the untouchable castes living in distinct *cheris* or neighbourhoods outside the main village (Chakravarti, 2003).

Tamil life and consciousness were transformed by the unfolding of complex socio-political events and intellectual practices inaugurated by colonialism which were utilized by the non-Brahmins to fend against social and psychological exclusions (Rajadurai, 1993). The northern districts of the state particularly those of Arcot had a relative low impact of Brahmins, and the non-Brahmin communities had preserved their economic and cultural autonomy until the rule of the colonial government lead to the spread of the Brahminical hegemony (Aloysius, 2010). Though the Brahmins constituted only about 3 per cent of the total population in the Madras Presidency, they has substantial control over the Madras administration through top level bureaucratic posts. It was almost monopolistic. Thus, the pre-existing Brahminic hegemony in the indigenous society exercised through caste and religion was complemented by the authority in the colonial administration and politics. This all-pervasive configuration of power in the hands of the Brahmins created anxiety amongst the non-Brahmins (Pandian, 1996).

As a result of economic empowerment of some section of the Pariah community working in the Kolar Gold Fields and relative autonomy and education the non-Brahmin Pariah community in these districts opted to voice their concerns primarily through the print media (Aloysius, 2010). The last decades of the 19th century saw the emergence of Dalit journalism as a move of self-assertion and self-identification of the non-Dalit communities. The newly literate and bilingual non-Brahmin intellectuals came to negotiate their lives and history amidst the hegemonic cacophony of the Brahmins and the Colonial administration. Early on they became aware and sensitive to the politics of caste, from the very basic naming and identification to

⁶⁰ This qualifies for the same region identified by Mencher as supporting the densest population of Dalits, coinciding the rice growing districts in Tamil Nadu in an earlier chapter.

representation in administration that remained at the heart of the contention of all nationalist and social-reform efforts.

Amongst the non-Brahmin intellectuals Iyothee Thasser stands out for his campaigning through writings in the *Tamizhan*⁶¹ for the self-identification of the Pariahs as *Adi-Tamizhan* instead of the “depressed class” as it meant “the structural consolidation of their already degraded societal status within the new Brahminical power scheme” (Aloysius, 2010) blocking their path of self-determination and empowerment. Through his re-readings of history and literature and systematic deconstruction of the term 'pariah' in *Tamizhan*, Iyothee Thasser showed the present-day pariahs to be original inhabitants of the land, who followed the Buddha until the arrival of Hinduism and Brahminical domination. Thasser feared the co-option of the *Adi-Tamizhan* into Hinduism through social reform along national lines. The Sri Siddhartha Puthagasalai (Sri Siddhartha Publishing House) that his followers founded, continued to publish for consolidating the non-Brahmin communities and in the 1930s published the writings of the self-respecters.

The Tamil case is considered to be the most striking and successful instance on the subcontinent of a vigorous assertion of identity based on language (Ramaswamy, 1993). It is the assertion of the non-Brahmin movements in nineteenth-century Tamil Nadu which asserted Tamil as a language belonging to a south Indian Dravidian family of languages distinct from the Indo-European "Aryan" languages of the north, and especially from Sanskrit, to establish the distinctiveness of a Tamil/Dravidian Self. This *Adi-Tamizhan/* Dravidian self was projected as being different from the non-Dravidian Brahman. This distinction of the self was marked by the Sanskrit language alien to the *Adi-Tamizhan*. According to Pandian, in the early Dravidian movement's engagement with the language issue was to break the “people-intellectual separation” which was affirmed by the Brahmin orthodoxy in Tamil Nadu through its exclusive control over Sanskrit, the sacerdotal language, and English, the language of colonial government.

The other component of the Dravidian movement(s) in the colonial Tamil Nadu was the self-respect movement led by E V Ramasamy which he launched after breaking away from the Indian National Congress in 1925. The reason for his parting ways from the party was the refusal of his resolutions seeking communal representation for the non-Brahmins in the Kancheepuram conference of the Tamilnad Congress. Thereafter, he declared his political agenda to be 'no God,

⁶¹ The weekly journal was started by Thasser in 1907 with the monetary help and encouragement of supporters from the Kolar Gold Fields. It was originally named the *Oru Paisa Tamizhan* (literally, One Paise Tamilian), after a year the prefix “one paise” was dropped owing to reader's request.

no Religion, no Congress, and no Brahman'. In the late 1920s the self-respect movement attempted temple-entry of Dalits and worked through conferences to raise awareness against the oppressive brahmanical code. In the 1930s, the movement went beyond the attack on priest craft and religious obscurantism and included equal civil rights for Dalits and for women and measures to redistribute wealth within society as their agenda (Pandian, 1995).

For the Self-Respect Movement, Sanskrit not merely led to the degradation of lower castes, but also of women. The movement targeted the Sanskritic marriage customs which affirmed women's and non-Brahmins' subordination. Periyar viewed marriage as the Brahminic mechanism to keep women subordinated to men. He linked it to the denial of women's right to property. He preached for a marriageless society based on companionship and initiated the self-respect marriages free from rituals. He ardently criticized the classical Tamil literary texts such as *Silaparikaram* and *Tirukkural* for preaching chastity as a necessary quality for women (Ramasami, 2009). According to him, 'The imposition of *'patrivratha'* qualities on women has destroyed (Geetha, 1998) their independence and free-thinking and made them unquestioning slaves-to men-who are supposed to demonstrate undue faith over chastity.' Bharadwaj advocated polyandry and divorce as solutions for women's oppression (Bharadwaj, 1991).

Periyar strongly criticised Tamil literature for the dominant representation of women as sexualised bodies. He argued that women should oppose such a projection and break the notion of women as mothers which has been essentialised so that they could "look on their bodies as their own parts, part of their being" and think of themselves as "sportsman, adventurer, workers, thinkers" beyond the reified images of chaste wives and mothers (Geetha, 1998). The movement also criticized the Sanskritic text was such as the Ramayana which represented the south negatively. Ramayana was reread and interpreted as a text celebrating northern imperialism. (Pandian, 1996) As a mark of protest the self-respecters organized public meetings where they burnt Sanskritic texts which endorsed caste, particularly *Manusmriti*.

Women's participation within the Self Respect Movement and its journal *Kudi Arasu* was distinctively significant. Famous amongst them are Kujitham, Neelavathi, Anapoorani and Ramamirtham Ammaiyar. Ramamirtham stands out amongst them (Bharadwaj, 1991). As a child she was given to the temple as a *Devdasi* by her family. She defied the society and system by coming out of it and marrying. Although educated only upto the third standard she regularly contributed to the *Kudi Arasu* on issues facing women. In 1936, she published a voluminous document in Tamil titled *Tasikalin Mosavalai Allathu Matipettra Mainer* (The Treacherous Net

of the *Dasis* or a Minor Grown Wise) based on her personal experiences. Her writing did not follow the tradition of Tamil literary style which only goes to mark her defiance.

The Self Respect Movement is only one phase of the Dravidian Movement (s) and in its subsequent incarnations, it has taken the forms of Dravida Kazhagam, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. In 1944 the Self Respect Movement renamed itself the Dravida Kazhagam while the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam was founded by C.N. Annadurai along with others.

Bama

“There are other Dalit hearts like mine, with a passionate desire to create a new society made up of justice, equality and love. They, who have been oppressed, are now themselves like the double-edged karukku⁶², challenging their oppressors.” (Bama, 2000: vi)

Bama is the pen-name of our autobiographer, a Parayar⁶³ woman from rural Tamil Nadu. She belongs to a Roman Catholic family based in a hilly village in the Western Ghats. Her community is considered to be the lowest of the low by the other villagers even though they have converted to Christianity. Bama wrote the original version of her autobiography, *Karukku*, in colloquial Tamil emphasizing a break from and contesting the standardized Tamil, which is exclusively used by the educated, thus, barring the majority of illiterate Dalits (Pandian, 1998). The Tamil version was published in 1992⁶⁴ and Mark S.J. who urged Bama to write it puts down in the foreword: “At the first sight it reads like a history of a village. From another angle, it reads like an autobiography. From yet another angle, it reads like a brilliant novel.” It is, according to Pandian, a willful violation of the boundaries of the genre (ibid.). Bama breaks the rules of grammar and spelling and joins words differently. It is going with her rebellious style of writing that she uses popular Catholic vocabulary instead of the terminology of theologians. She uses Sanskritized Tamil words to give them a new Catholic meaning (Holmstrom, 2000). The narrative also defies chronology unlike other autobiographies and chooses to build around different themes such as work, belief, games and recreation. She creates anew by breaking the old rules.

According to Pandian, her narrative deals more with “the context of Dalit life in which she grew up and acquired a certain self-awareness” rather than herself. The collectivity of the

⁶² “*Karukku* means palmyra leaves, which with their serrated edges on both sides, are like double-edged swords.” (Holmstrom, 2000)

⁶³ The same as Pariah, Paraiyan that has been used earlier, the term used here is Bama’s.

⁶⁴ According to Pandian this was perhaps the first Dalit testimonial narrative in Tamil (Pandian, 1998).

Dalit community displaces the autobiographical “I”, which in tune with autobiographical writings by women and Latin Americans, tend to feature the community instead of the individual (Pandian, 1998). He also gives prominence to Bama’s strategy of “erasing specificities by masking them with a veil of anonymity” which turns the narrative into a “universal statement about oppression” and at the same time “invoking larger solidarities”. It is her refusal to name, her village, the order she joined, the biased village school headmaster, that she enables a “politics of collectivity” (Ibid.).

The English version, translated and introduced by Lakshmi Holmstrom and edited by Mini Krishnan, was published in the year 2000. The present analysis is based on this edited and translated work.

On the Autobiography

Her description of the village is the entry point of her narrative. Its natural beauty, the importance of the hills, lakes and stream in the lives of the villagers finds significance in her narrative. At the same time the division of the village in hamlets of different caste—Nadars, Koravar, Chakkiliyar, Thevar, Chettiyaar, Aasaari, Naicker, Udaiyaar and Parayar—is graphically presented with notice of the fact that the upper castes do not need to enter the habitations and streets of the Dalits as the post office, markets, and the church are located within the upper caste habitations.

Like other Paraya and Pallar children of her village she got her initial education in the church based school in the Nadir hamlet. Her days in the village school had left a mark of discrimination against the Dalits. She notes that the headmaster, being from the upper caste, would stigmatize the Dalits. After her eighth standard she went to high school in the neighbouring town, which again was church based. The significance of the church in providing education to the Dalits is evident from her narrative. She also mentions that the teachers and sisters were encouraging; however, there were always people who would point out the caste of the Dalit children to find faults with them. At the same time, the stigma attached to the Dalits would surface again and again; this was also heightened owing to their numerical minority as evident here, on the “Harijan” students being asked to stand in the assembly,

“We’d stand in front of nearly two thousand children, hanging our heads in shame, as if we had done something wrong. Yes, it was humiliating.”

Joining college she felt that at in a big college, among numerous students from different places nobody would bother about caste. However, this proved to be a wrong assumption. When Dalit students were asked to stand up in the class, “Just two students stood up: myself, and another girl. Among the other students, a sudden rustling, a titter of contempt. I was filled with a sudden rage... It struck me that I would not be rid of this caste business easily, whatever I studied, wherever I went.”

Early on, her brother had urged her to do her best in studies to garner dignity in straight words, “[b]ecause we are born in the Paraya jati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities.” This has come from his own experience which Bama describes in her narrative. How the initials M.A. after his name obtained him respect from the library attendant who held the Parayas visiting the library with contempt.

She went on to take a B.Ed. degree and work in a school for the next five years. The church based school catered to underprivileged children and nearly a third quarter of them were Dalit. As a teacher she was happy, teaching children with whom she could identify but the attitude of the majority of the nuns towards the children disturbed her. Though the boarding attached to the school was for the welfare of the destitute children, these children were made to do menial tasks for the nuns. Although Bama does not specify the tasks her critique of the nuns is their behaviour, which showed no endeavour to develop the minds of these children against caste oppression but rather to reinstate fatalistic notions such as “this is the way it was meant to be for Dalits; and that there was no possibility of change.” (Bama, 2000: 89)

Troubled with what she saw and what she felt could be done by the nuns for the children, time and again she would be seized by the wish to enter an order. The dominant yearning was to “teach those who suffer that there was a Jesus who cares; to put heart into them and to urge them onwards”. While Bama expresses that this yearning was “in spite of” her criticism of nuns and experience of “years of castigation and reproaching nuns”, it seems that it is exactly because of these reasons, as a challenge to the prevalent system she joined an order, to prove otherwise.

The first three years were years of hope of the achievements once she becomes a nun and urgency to be a nun. These were spent of reading and debating the sufferings of people, the life of Jesus and the lady who founded the order. It was her story of “love and concern for the poor, and how she lived and died for their sake” that inspired her to become a nun and “to be like her”. However, after her vows she was sent to a prestigious school to teach. The students came from

wealthy families and the school was well endowed. Bama felt a deep alienation from her teaching, something that she liked and her faith, something that she had learnt to “love—*paasam*” over her initial “fear—*bhayam*” (Bama, 2000: 87).

“And the Jesus they worshipped there was a wealthy Jesus. There seemed to be no connection between God and the suffering poor. Neither the prayers that were said morning and night, nor the daily *Pusai*, showed any evidence of that connection. I couldn’t make it out at all. I found I had to search hard to find God.”

The life in the convent was luxurious and far from the life of service and struggle that she thought a nun’s life would be. The struggle that she had seen her family and people undergo for survival shamed her for the life of comforts and abundance she was leading. She was teaching children who were privileged while the pitiable condition of the poor and Dalit children tormented her.

She is extremely critical of the way people were treated in the convent—based on their material conditions—the rich were welcomed while the underprivileged were discriminated against. The logic of running the school was to generate funds for their work amongst the Dalits and underprivileged. Bama explains that her disenchantment with the order was heightened when her request to be sent to a school for the Dalits and underprivileged was turned down and she was exhorted to “see with the eyes of faith”. Nobody was allowed to be different or speak differently or disobey their superior.

The people in the convent were far removed from the Dalits and many had “an extremely poor opinion about Dalits”. As a nun within the convent Bama dared not to reveal her own caste to them, she would rather “shrink into” herself. It is a fear of being discovered, of being shamed that numbs her in her early days. It is only when she realizes that there is nothing wrong in her or her community, when she finds strength in her faith through her own reading that she lashes out:

“Dalits have begun to realize the truth. They have realized that they have been maintained as the stones’ steps that others have trodden on as they raised themselves.”

It is in her experience as a Dalit within the order, which she claims is made of people from the upper caste, that she “understood the lack of humanity in their piety”. In her criticism of the caste based rule of kith and kinship in her order, Bama realizes and reveals the use of religion to perpetuate Dalit stigmatization. “They teach them to shut their eyes when they pray with their deliberate intention that they should not open their eyes to see. They teach them to shackle their

arm together and prostrate themselves in prayer at full length on the ground so that they should never stand tall.”

She left the convent and returned to the outside life amidst uncertainties—that of having to struggle, to find employment and earn a living. The challenge of being a Dalit woman looking for a teaching job when schools are run by higher castes, of being a single woman, when lecherous men will not even let an unaccompanied woman stand somewhere peacefully, of being out of the protective fold of the order after eight to nine years fending for yourself all collapse into each other.

What stands out is her ability to feel other’s pain, which one cannot within the comfort of the convent. She is no more alienated, confused or confound.

“Today I know what it is to be hungry, to suffer illness in solitude, to stand and stare without a paisa in one’s hand, to walk along the street without protection, to be embarrassed by a lack of appropriate clothes, to be orphaned and entirely alone, to swim against the tide in this life without the position or status or money or authority.”

The Autobiographical Urge

It is in this moment of her life that she wrote *Karukku* “to make sense of her life” as Lakshmi Holmstrom, who translated it from the original Tamil version, says. It is shaped by her “quest for integrity as a Dalit and Christian”. Although it is a narrative of the self driven by the quest of the self, it fits into the larger contemporary debates within the Dalit movement—that of faith and identity. It challenges the notions of the Dalit women within Dalits as well as non-Dalits. Bama, being a woman, does not fall within many of the ordinary categories and stereotypes for women—wife, mother, the sexualized women. She also skips from engaging in these in her autobiography. She hardly touches on the issues of Dalit women within and outside the household something that is marked in the Marathi original (Pandian, 1998). The reasons for this could be many—may be the relationships are egalitarian (Ibid.), the male members of her own family—brother and father—are based outside studying and working in the army, her mother is the one who would work tirelessly and provide for them as father’s income would go in their education, grandmothers are shown to work from dawn to dusk in the house of the upper caste landlords, wife beating by a neighbor is shown to be regular and something nobody meddles into, her own childhood experience with the boys is mixed with fun, competition and wish to be able to enjoy the same freedom that they do. The major emphasis in her narration is the crisis in her life around her faith and it is in this sense her narration has a polemic “unusual” and “inadequate” of a

Dalit woman only when we essentialize Dalit womanhood. That there is heterogeneity within Dalit women and it has to be acknowledged and engaged with by Dalit feminist is a crucial exposé.

In my reading, Bama, in her own rebellious way challenges and exposes the brittleness of structures—she is an insider and an outsider in the order at the same time, a woman and not-so-womanly, a Dalit but contesting it simultaneously. What strikes out in her narrative is her indomitable spirit that defies definitions and boundaries.

In Bama's writing there is a quest for the meaning of religion—is it all rituals fulfilling what it claims to be—transformatory, a path to God (something that we had earlier seen in our discussion on the autobiographical genre) as it is professed by the church and its various authorities. She turns to the scriptures to discover for herself the faith that she is born into, that embraced by her family to move out of the clutches of a social system that discredited them by religious sanctifications and prohibitions. At the crux of her narrative is the recognition of the divisive forces elemental in social life and in her own experience—religion (as she differentiates it from faith), caste, language, region and gender. What it questions is the intolerance to difference and more brutally that the intolerance of a faith that professes equality and tolerance. It is a crisis in her faith, a dilemma in her life. It's a tension of the professed and the reality.

Baby Kamble

The Autobiographical Urge

“Baba's word showed me the way. I decided to begin my struggle through my writing. I followed Baba's advice verbatim, to the best of my ability”. (Kamble, 2009/2008:135)

Baby Kamble lives in Phaltan, a small town in Satara district of Maharashtra. She had been part of the Dalit Movement(s) in Maharashtra from a very young age, since her school days and derives her inspiration from Babasaheb Ambedkar and his selfless work for the Dalit community.

Everyday Baby Kamble used to sit at the counter of their small shop and attend to the customers from nine in the morning to four in the evening. This was the period her husband was away to buy things they required. Whenever she found some time she wrote her autobiography in Marathi in notebooks. She had to be careful that nobody saw her writing. She also had to hide her notebooks as she feared her husband, though he was “a good man”, he would have not “tolerated”

the idea that she was writing. He was as she says “like all the men of his time and generation” who considered woman to be an inferior being. She started writing around the age of thirty and got it first published in 1982 after twenty years as a series in a women’s magazine *Stree* with help from Maxine Berntson, a sociologist, who was working on her doctoral thesis on Scheduled castes. Since she was working in Phaltan where Baby Kamble lived, Maxine had approached Baby, who was known as a political leader and women activist. It is during one of such meetings that Maxine asked her to write about her work and Baby showed Maxine her notebooks. It was only after the autobiography was published in Marathi by Mansanman Publishing House that everyone in her family came to know about her writing.

The original autobiography, *Jina Amucha*, published in Marathi in the year 1986, was translated into English by Maya Pandit, a women’s and teacher’s activist in Maharashtra in the year 2008 by Orient Black Swan. It consists of an introduction by Maya Pandit, twelve chapters and an interview by Maya Pandit and an afterword by Gopal Guru.

On the Autobiography

Like an Auto-ethnographer, Baby gives detailed description of the houses, locality of the houses in the village: the Maharwada, the restrictions faced by Mahars in the other parts of the village or even in their area in the presence of a higher caste man. She narrated all this not just from the experience of being a Mahar, but a Mahar woman.

Early on, she exemplifies the differences of class within the Mahars in her community—that of the leaders of the community—who got a greater share for their services and had houses which were in somewhat good condition when compared to the rest, whose “houses were the poorest of the poor, eternally stricken by poverty” (Bama,2000:7)

The self in her narrative appears through the shared intense poverty, hunger and oppression of the community. “That great maker of the universe had indeed made some provisions for the meek slaves of the earth. If he had given a mouth, he also had to give a few morsels to feed it, to compensate for the fasting of the remaining eleven months. Perhaps Ashadh was the provision that had been made to allow them a little food.”

She identifies the notions of double consciousness within the Mahar women. Although “Hindu philosophy had discarded us as dirt and thrown us into their garbage pits, on the outskirts of the village” yet Mahar women desperately tried to preserve whatever bits of Hindu culture they could imitate so that they would be able to live like the upper caste, enjoy wealth like their

wives and practice their rituals. She is aware that these rituals marked their difference from the upper caste and were denied to them to keep them suppressed. At the same time, the Mahar women imitated the Hindu rituals as “an outlet for their oppressed souls”(Bama, 2000: 18).

Her narration is from the various angles of the self's experience, shared experience from women of her community and her own observations. This covers in it the temporal span of her childhood and adult life which also brilliantly captures the experience of her community and the women of her community in the height of Ambedkar's revolutionary leadership and beyond. There is in her story a history of a great people and their movement under able and revered leadership, a lament for the way the movement had lost its aim in the political mayhem and personal agendas of the people of the community itself and a hope for reemergence of the movement of pride and dignity.

She is outspoken and does not dilute her narration in self-glorification of the community. Rather there it is self-critical and self analytical of the community, its behaviour towards its women, towards its way of life. While she tells the story of her father, who was educated and ready to sweat it out in his work as a contractor for buildings, she also brings out the helping nature of his which at times would leave the family with nothing to eat. She portrays the anguish of the women against the hardships and poverty in the sharp remarks of her mother for her father who would never save (he would always say that one does not need more than a bellyful). The helpless requests of the mothers of the poorer family (who would ask their husbands to get some cactus flowers to cook) at the same time shows the terrible side of the same women as a mother-in-law.

She narrates the sorry state of the young (eight or nine year old) married girls who had to work hard under the eyes of their mother in law, be the last to eat if anything was left for her and also get abused and beaten even without any fault of hers. The provocation for punishment as big as having ones nose chopped off could be the mother in law's feeling jealous of the young girl, a chat with a male outside the family and she could be beaten by her father in law also. This brings out the terrible condition of the women within the household, the strong patriarchal and malevolent ideology of the society towards a girl brought home after marriage. The situation of a Mahar girl: married at a young age, devoid of education to stand for self, beaten and bruised by in laws and husband, working long hours, getting whatever is left over after families consumption, and undergoing regular pregnancies where she has no choice leaves her at the bottom of the ladder of development. Her movement curtailed and under surveillance very much the same way

as that of women from the upper caste, her sexuality controlled by her family and relatives through taunts and thrashing, her position as the last in the family from basic consumption to decision making, the Mahar women is under the dual burden of her caste and her sexuality.

She breaks the myth of a democratic Dalit family. She brings out the inhumane acts of chopping of the nose of women by the husband and his family, the regular burden of torture and taunts. She remarks that in the days prior to 1940s at least one woman in a hundred would have her nose chopped by the husband under the provocation of his mother or father. The overall condition of women is pitiable not just because of the troubles they have with the other castes but also because of an existing disrespect for women at large. Women have to bear the burden of purity, they could be questioned if they do not veil themselves properly, called a "slut" by the men and women all for any shortcoming (the connotation of the word itself is derogatory to women only, there is no mention of an equivalent term for the male). It has been an enigma how a community which is obsessed with the worship of the Goddess and celebrates the possession of the bodies of their women by these Goddess can butcher the same body as filthy and polluted.

According to Gopal Guru most Dalit women's autobiographies talk about "exploitation, humiliation and starvation" under the class, caste and gender systems. Ambedkar also forms a common reference point in these autobiographies along with resistance against Dalit patriarchy and social patriarchy. Modernity is also a common theme. In Baby's autobiography there is a tension between tradition and modernity to which the Mahars respond with the determination to achieve modernity. This modernity is embodied by Ambedkar and is epitomized by him. Again there are traditional structures within the community such as the *Chawdi* which is very much a modern concept of a public space available for debates and deliberation. The *Chawdi* is the space of action, dialogue and doing: here the school boys plan their temple entry, here the Mahar *wada* celebrates their first Ambedkar's birth anniversary, here, Baby and her husband start the first shop of their *wada* as a protest against the shopkeepers of the village who practiced untouchability. It is also the place of the traditional get togethers and celebrations. There is a tension of the modern and the traditional in this space.

The work mostly revolves around the day to day lives of the Mahar community; the perpetual shortage of food, battered, stitched together pieces of rags as dresses, the snot-nosed and dirty children, the trials and methods of bringing food, home from collection of leftovers, food in exchange of labour, collection of dead animals during epidemics to poisoning some ones cattle in the most difficult situation. The autobiography speaks of the lives of the Mahar people,

their traditions, celebrations, their Gods and Goddesses. A large part of the work consists of retelling myths and stories around evil forces, superstitions and the belief of the people in forces which write their destiny, difficult processes of treatment in case of ill health. According to Baby Kamble, Mahars opt for these beliefs, superstitions and treatments in the face of want and needs. They have no money or means for alternatives.

Baby never mention her own “life events”—her marriage, birth of children—except for her birth. What she mentions and with a great degree of emphasis is her enrolment in school, her experience in a new school with caste-Hindu girls, the opening of their shop in the Maharwada—the first one, her decision to be equally involved in the shop, her decision to write about her experience, the decision to send her children to school, their success in academic and professional world, her involvement and service for the community in terms of running a government supported orphanage for the backward caste. These are her “life events” that she feels significant events in her life. Baby Kamble breaks the boundary of given notions of womanhood and creates a self which dares to challenge the given. In her choice of significant life events she mentions those events which she has imbibed as important from her close engagement with Ambedkar’s thoughts. As she affirms, “I made a firm resolve, at a young age to lead my life according the path sketched by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, the light of my life. His principles have exercised a strong influence on me.” It his principles of education, economic independence and political participation of dalits and especially dalit women, that worked as her framework for her life and hence life events.

There is however, a tension within her beliefs—she herself claims that she was also influenced by the strength of Savitri from the movie *Sati Savitri*, the moral strength to bear adversities. She expresses her awareness of the ideal of Sati, a construct of the caste-Hindu to dominate women, is antithetical to Ambedkar’s principles of equality. It is however, her ability to be truthful that she cherish more than what other may say. This tension between following the caste-Hindu believes and Buddhism, the religion embraced by Mahars under Ambedkar’s leadership is openly expressed by Baby Kamble. This finds mention many times and in many forms—the worship of Hindu gods, celebration of Hindu festivals, young girls draping clothes like the Brahmin or Gujrati women, use of *haldi* and *kukum*—which Baby identifies as the desire of the Mahar woman to be like them. She also identifies this desire of better lives and living conditions underlying the desire of symbolic fulfillment.

Baby Kamble narrates her own and her communities shared experience of breaking prohibitions, internalized and imposed—"the prisons"—that excluded them. It is the prisons of hunger, illiteracy, untouchability, patriarchy, economic dependency, superstitions, diseases and social disabilities related to caste and gender that they broke. It is through the breaking of these prisons that the dalit, including the dalit women, assert their selfhood.

Gazing Back

At the ideational level, the return of the gaze would require a role reversal. This requires the "gazed", objectified subject to attain subjectivity, to be the holder of the gaze. Thus, it implies that the Dalit women gazes at the society. While returning the gaze the standards, views and perspective do not remain the same, they change. The subject returning the gaze has experienced being "objectified" and it is this experience that moulds the gaze. Consequently, the standards and perspective of the returned gaze would be "different". This difference is not simply the result of being branded different by the hegemonic powers for creation of the self but in excess of this. Thus, it is not a binary of the dominant, but an assertion of the self which exists apart from the dominant. That is, this difference is not just the "Dalitness" of the self as opposed to the dominant Brahminic self but a self which more than "Dalitness". The perspective of this self is thus not the same as the hegemonic, but it is more evolved (owing to it being subjected to the objectifying gaze). It is a much more human gaze as it does not in return objectify the hegemonic. This gaze, as our experience shows, draws heavily from an inward gaze. It is self critical as we saw with both the autobiographies. Writing in 1993, observing precedent autobiographical works, S.P. Punelekar observes that dalit autobiographies are introspective and self-critical, "the critical focus is turned inwards to scrutinize the biases, predilections, stereotypes and other angularities of their own parents, relatives, caste fellows and even leaders." (Punelekar, 1993: 394)

This criticality and reflexivity is at the base of subjectivity and selfhood, an assertion of the self—a self cannot be without its own mechanism and criteria of analysis. The returning of the gaze, thus, is an act of subjecthood, which implies power of the holder of the gaze over the gazed. It is empowering but does not annex power from the other. It changes the power equation as it asserts its share in the power. It tries to break the monotony of the monologue and the hegemony. It disturbs the stereotypes by revealing other perspectives, deconstructs the "given" by revealing alternatives. It opens up room for dialogue and exchange.

In a similar vein, Pramod K. Nayar writes, about Bama's Karukku:

“Reading *testimonio* like Bama’s enables us – readers, critics and students – to interpellate ourselves in a relation of solidarity with social reform and liberation movements. It provides a discursive space where an alliance between the intelligentsia and the subaltern can take place. Dalit life-writing such as Bama’s fashions a discourse of testimony and self-revelation, to establish a sense of agency, to articulate a personal history in and onto the texts of a traditional patriarchal, casteist culture.” (Nayar, 2006: 98)

Punelekar also observes in dalit autobiographies as urge to communicate with themselves and others and their own search and interpretation of their actions. This knowledge produced by dalits, here by dalit women, as insiders is immensely “significant for the construction of social theory and praxis for transformation” (Punelekar, 1993: 395), which is less-partial and from the perspective of the oppressed group.

The autobiographical writings of Dalit women are sites of multiple and reflective gazes. At the onset there is the gaze of the reader, one who identifies⁶⁵ with the autobiographer/ one who is alien to the autobiographer. This gaze can be further complicated by imbibing the gaze of the autobiographer, imagining oneself at her location or by looking at things as one’s own self but from the perspective or gaze of the autobiographer. In the latter there is a process of evaluating and processing the autobiographer’s perspective and is a critical gaze. There are multiple gazes within the act of writing and producing the autobiography. In the case of Baby Kamble’s autobiographical writing which she wrote herself in Marathi one comes across her gaze as a Mahar women on the Mahar society, as an internal critic of one’s own community, as a critic of the communities failure to follow the path shown by its leaders for self-empowerment, as a critic of the position and condition of the young newly married women of her community by her spouse and in-laws. She is her gazing back at her own community from the position of being a women and rebel. She is in a unique position where she not only differs from her own community in the values it propagates but also speaks this difference out. The act of voicing this difference in the larger society beyond her conscience is meant only to reach out to the community members and show the mirror to them. It is a moment of revelation of one’s shortcomings (where the autobiographer consciously identifies and is the community and not just its representative) to the ‘other’, to the larger society. It is an act of rebellion against one’ own community and in identification with it, against one self. It is in this intermediary position as the self-community-‘others’ and the juxtaposing of the self and the community that the ‘auto’ of the autobiographical

⁶⁵ Identification with the autobiographer can be again from multiple points, as a human, as a Dalit, as a woman etc.

writing emerges. It is in such a reading that one can trace the 'reveal-all' or 'confessional' underpinning of the autobiographical writing. In fact one can see the constant unconscious emergence and merging of the self and community as the 'auto', the protagonist of the work. Similar identification of the self is seen in Bama's autobiographical accounts.

Returning to the gaze of the autobiographer, it is indeed a complex, filtered, and reflected gaze. One cannot deny the "public"-ness of writing an autobiography. It has been one reason why women were confined to writing diaries, to themselves and their diaries for a long time while writing of autobiography for revealing of the 'self' suitable for illustrious men. Thus, both of our autobiographers were aware of their lives being made public. What was their psychological understanding and conception of revealing their life stories, details of their lives, sometimes humiliating and at others courageous tales of rebellion? Did they "create" or "re-create" themselves for rendering the stories of their lives to the public, as has been said for most autobiographies⁶⁶? Were they aware of the gaze of the others in their own gaze of themselves?

A very critical part of these autobiographies are the outlook of the autobiographers towards the dominant caste and their relationship with these castes. While Baby Kamble throws direct questions and accusations at the dominant caste as she does to her own caste and community members in a dialogic fashion, Bama never confronts the dominant castes and communities in her work. Her relationship with the other communities is mostly in third person, as an observer: her grandmother's interaction with her upper caste employer ashamed her, the contempt of the sisters of her order for her the Tamil and Dalit community hurt her, the treatment meted out to her brother for being an educated paraiah, are retold to the reader to grasp the ramifications of being a Dalit in the different realms of life: economy, religion, education.

She mentions that both her grandmothers worked as servants for Naicker families and were treated as servants, without respect for their age, even by the Naicker children. "The Naicker women would pour out water from the height of four feet, while Paati and the others received and drank it with the cupped hands held to their mouths." Her other grandmother would be treated the same way, given the leftovers to eat and carefully so that the vessels do not touch. On questioning her, Bama as a child is told, that this has been the same for generations and there is a kind of permanency about it. It cannot be changed unlike the hopes of change that education could bring as her brother had stressed.

⁶⁶ It is said that the self is created in retrospect in the act of writing the autobiography.

She positions herself as an observer and informant of these incidents of oppression and dehumanization. Her own experiences of being humiliated for her caste such as the shock and contempt of her class in college in knowing that she is a Dalit, her inability to attend a college function as she did not have a silk sari and nobody in her family had one, the doubt of the sister if girls from her community could join the order, are sharing of moments of facing challenges, personal growth and attaining deeper understanding of the people and society.

In her narrative Bama moves into the role of a critical observer, like an ethnographer studying a village she qualifies that all resources in terms of where the school, church, temples, post office, market were located in the area of the dominant castes of the village and somehow the village is distributed along caste lines. Bama is aware of the reader, the one for whom the idea of a village is a homogenous community. It is in her gaze of an informant-observer, a teller of the story of her village (she begins with a rich description of her village) that she positions herself as the imaginary reader, as the eyes and ears of the imaginary reader. She reflects the gaze of the sisters who disciplined the Paraih children in the church during ceremonies. Not only she observes and writes about their harsh behaviour and punishments for the children as an outsider, she also becomes one of them, lives as one of them and reveals the basic falsity of their intentions to serve the poor.

It's a gaze of intent which she ventures to take leaving her settled life of a teacher. It is her introspection into the meaning of her faith, religion and life. It is in this intentional yet life changing experience that she realizes the meaning of all three and of serving the needy, of being of help to her community. She leaves the order and returns to her community as she realizes that living in comforts of the order and teaching the children of wealthy dominant caste children, she was going away from the realities of her community, of the needy.

The non-Dalits and dominant castes play a major role in these autobiographies. It is of great import that no upper caste autobiography would have cast the community of their birth or other community in such a vast scale. The reason for this is simple: the importance of the community of birth or other communities in the life of the autobiographer. Community and caste are important markers in the lives of these women. They are important for the Dalit women unlike the caste men or women as they are dependent on the dominant castes for their survival as is evident from the narratives. "More than three quarters of the land in these parts is in the hands of the Naickers. People of our community work for them, each Paraya family is attached to a Naicker family, as *pannaiyaal*, bounded labour...Everyone in my community had to work hard

for their livelihood. Only a few of the teachers' family lived with any degree of comfort." (Bama, 2000: 42)

Even children are not spared from the curse of caste-landlessness-poverty, "As soon as children grew up to ten or twelve years of age, they' would go to find some way of making money. Untill that time, they'd go about carrying their younger siblings on their hips. They'd even gather a few twigs and sticks, and learn to boil a little gruel. It was always the girl children who had to look after all the chores at home." Bama consciously mentions the division of labour within the household amongst the siblings. Even in the games that children in her community play and which she as a child had played, caste would be present in the role plays that children loved. The "master-servant" roles were played with the boys always playing the role of the caste-Hindus—Naicker landlords displaying power and humiliating the *pannaiyaal* performed by the girls or Nadar Mudalaali, the shop keepers while the girls would buy grocery. There would be role plays of nuns and priests, girls being married and battered by drunken husbands and beaten by the police. From the childhood games we unearth the relationship amongst the communities and the social status of the sexes. Singing and hunting wild pigs and foxes are two forms of entertainment for the women and men, respectively. The women sang songs on different occasions—while working in the field, while rocking the cradle of the baby, when young girls came of age, dirges to the dead, teasing songs to couples getting married and during the celebration of Easter.

It is also in these interactions that caste is openly performed⁶⁷ through its symbolic and structural mechanisms such as pollution-purity, untouchability, inequality. Baby Kamble describes the way Mahar women would be treated when they went to buy something in the village shop (from upper caste shopkeeper's)

"Standing in the courtyard, keeping a distance from the shopkeeper, she would pull her *pallav* over her face and then, using the most reverential and polite terms of address, she would beg him in the utmost humility to sell her the things she wanted...He would give the innocent children (shopkeeper's) lesson in social behaviour, 'Chabu, hey you, can't you see the dirty Mahar woman standing there? Now don't you touch her. Keep your distance.' Immediately our Mahar woman, gathering her rags around her tightly so as not to pollute the child, would say, 'Take care little master! Please keep distance. Don't come too close. You might touch me and get polluted.' The shopkeeper would come out and, from a distance throw the things into her *pallav*, which she had spread out in order to

⁶⁷ The concept of performance used here is in the same sense as used by Goffman.

receive them. She would then respectfully keep her money on the threshold. That of course, did not pollute him!”

What stands out is that the criticism that Baby Kamble offers is politically nuanced. She points out the socializing of the young, the social performance in daily interactions, and the economic dependency of Dalits on the non-Dalits for their day-to-day survival and the constructed notion of untouchability which does not pollute money.

One issue that emerges out of the work is the intrinsic notion of private and public is not only is the social spaces but is also extended to the self. Although in the case of Baby Kamble who wrote privately, the act of publishing her “notebooks” is bringing the private self into the public realm and turning it towards the public gaze. The autobiography itself, as we saw earlier, is the confessional mode of writing, bringing ones “true self” for public scrutiny (Anderson, 2007). Both Bama and Baby Kamble use the autobiographical narratives for the purpose of awakening their communities when they publish them in their own language and for “breaking down an age-old barrier of silence” at a later stage get them published in English bringing them to the mainstream (Kumar, 2010: 259). The voiceless Dalit woman, the subaltern, speaks. She speaks in the language and medium that others understand (Spivak, 1985), in their language while not falling into the trap of misconstruing herself and her ideas, a concern raised by Collins (1990)

It is in the awareness of the reason behind their hardship and inaccessibility of resource that the subjectivity of the autobiographer emerges. Through the pages of the autobiographies we see Dalit women finding their voices. Through participation in movement for their rights ranging from dignity, to land and basic amenities, through writings in the form of autobiographies, fictions, poetry and prose, through alternate media of songs, everyday interactions and through hopes of an equal society they are asserting their selfhood which simultaneously is marked and is beyond their bodies and sexuality. They are moving towards the goal of equality as dreamt of by Periyar and the self-respecters and as worded by V. Geetha:

“Free to remake themselves in whatever manner they desired and tied to men in their lives through ties of mutuality, women acquired a new identity: that of the citizen⁶⁸, the women of civic virtue, and one who could claim and act on an identity which did not subordinate her to men, nor define her as essentially different from them.” (Geetha, 1998: 197)

⁶⁸ Note that the concept of citizen and civic virtue denies discriminations based on caste, class and gender.

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