

Cultural Gandhism

Casting Out the Dalit Woman

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This article argues that Gandhian cultural nationalism is not just an ideology but an ideological consensus, and that it turns even opposing ideological positions like Marxism into variations of its own practices and certainties. It is the caste question that provides the ground for developing this ideological consensus, and it arises from the depoliticisation of untouchability in such a way that a dalit political subject becomes impossible to imagine. Telugu social reformers attempted to translate this logic into the cultural realm, especially through films. The paper critically analyses Gudavalli Ramabrahmam's popular Telugu social film, *Malapilla*, made in 1938. This film portrays untouchables in a negative light, and issues of inter-caste marriage and love constitute an important undercurrent of the narrative. *Malapilla* is the inaugural moment of popular cinema's investment in Gandhian nationalist politics and history.

In this paper, I will show how Gandhian cultural nationalism produces an ideological consensus in which ostensible political differences of ideology and practice are neutralised. This consensus, I argue, arises from the depoliticisation of untouchability in such a way that a dalit political subject becomes impossible to imagine. We can see this process of depoliticisation in the realist mode of representation in early nationalist cultural production, which is produced by a sexual differentiation.

Implicit in the logic of the Gandhian resolution of caste and untouchability is the annihilation of dalit women, and consequently the annihilation of the dalit as a community. It is interesting to explore the ways in which Telugu social reformers attempted to translate this logic into the cultural realm, especially through films.

I critically analyse Gudavalli Ramabrahmam's popular Telugu social film, *Malapilla*, made in 1938, at a time when the MacDonald award of separate electorates made the political scenario ripe for competitive claims for representation of the untouchables. Gandhi argued that it was not Ambedkar but he who represented the untouchables, *in his body*. Untouchables from various parts of the country denounced this claim and voted for Ambedkar as their representative at the Round Table Conference. The decades after the Poona Pact witnessed elite Hindu nationalist creative writers, artists and political thinkers taking upon themselves the task of consolidating the Gandhian resolution of the caste problem. I maintain that *Malapilla* inaugurates the Gandhian mode of representation of the caste question in Telugu cinema. This film portrays untouchables in a negative light and blames the victims of untouchability for their downtrodden status. Issues of inter-caste love and marriage constitute an important undercurrent of the film narrative. I look at *Malapilla* as the inaugural moment of popular cinema's investment in Gandhian nationalist politics and history.

However, in order to understand this film and its relevance within the Telugu political context, I present a broad picture of untouchable leaders' activities for their own emancipation and their engagement with Gandhian politics. This paper is therefore divided into two sections. In the first, I map the ideological positions ranging from the Adi Hindu to broadly leftist positions that characterise the question of caste and untouchability in the Gandhian nationalist imaginary. In the second section, I analyse the film *Malapilla*.

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1 Caste and Untouchability in Gandhian Nationalism

Since the 1930s, Gandhian ideology has had a great influence on the Indian imagination. Judith Brown argues,

Gandhi's rise did not symbolise 'a radical restructuring of political life' or emergence of mass politics, rather it signified the rise of Western-educated and regional-language-literate elites of backward areas, in place of the western-educated leaders of the Presidency towns. It was the loyalty of these local leaders or the so-called 'sub-contractors' that enabled Gandhi to extend the constituency of the nationalist politics (cited in Chakrabarty 2006: 3).

In the Telugu regional context, Brown's observations hold good as elite social reformers like Ramabrahmam, Tapi Dharmarao (who adapted prominent progressive writer Chalam's story for the screen), Putchalapalli Sundarayya, Pattabhi Seetaramayya, and others took up the cudgels of Gandhian culturalism, after which they modelled their discourses on the dalit problem and untouchability.

It is possible to trace a Gandhian mode of representation of the caste question in Indian thought, literature and films. In literature, for instance, we see the representation of caste equations in India in the Gandhian mode in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), and in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938). Even the progressive films of early Indian cinema are saturated with Gandhian approaches and solutions to various social problems (Kapur 2000: 236).¹ Later films, in order to serve different and not-so-different historical purposes, also perpetuated a Gandhian ideology. In the late 1970s, we have *Balipeetham*, a novel in Telugu written by Marxist feminist Ranganayakamma, being made into a film; in 1988 there was *Rudraveena*, a film directed by Balu Mahendra. A similar deployment of the Gandhian understanding of the caste question marks radical Telugu cinema as late as the 1990s (*Osey Ramulamma*).

Telugu social films can be broadly classified under the ideological rubric of radical left politics and liberal humanist ideology, which stalled or deferred dalit politics in Andhra Pradesh from taking on Ambedkar's ideological orientation till the resurgence of the dalit movement in the 1980s, after the Karamchedu and Tsundur massacres of dalits. However, common to both the leftist and liberal humanist understanding of the caste question and the problem of untouchability is the cultural paradigm of Gandhian resolution.

The genre of social reform cinema draws on Gandhism, especially in the way it poses problems pertaining to social and political minorities like dalits, women and religious groups. Although one can witness narrative resolutions of the Gandhian kind till the 1980s in social cinema, it is particularly striking in the nationalist propagandist cinema of the 1930s. S V Srinivas, a film critic, observes: "The archetypal cinematic representation of this gap, which served as the model for Telugu films over the next four decades, has been *Malapilla* (Gudavalli Ramabrahmam 1938)".²

My focus will be on *Malapilla*, which clearly elaborates a Gandhian politics of caste in Indian society. As I analyse the film, I point to the social and political implications of deploying Gandhian philosophy as a framework for the representation of dalits. Cultural Gandhism in Telugu land took root in the

1930s, with *Malapilla* setting an exclusively Gandhian tone in the way the problem of caste and untouchability is staged and resolved. Before I move on to the film, I will briefly sketch out the Gandhian position on the caste question and dalit initiatives (especially of the many women), and their engagement with showing how a Gandhian resolution aims at superseding and foreclosing dalit initiatives for their self-emancipation. The communitarian concept of "dalit", as envisioned by Ambedkar, has dalit women as active participants of a casteless utopia. However, in the Gandhian schema, the dalit woman's role in the emancipation of the dalit community is eradicated by attributing models of passivity to dalit women, even as caste Hindu women take on the mantle of reformers – as the role of Radhaabayamma in the film shows. Furthermore, the dalit woman is imagined as a victim of dalit men's violence, without any reference to the caste patriarchy of Hindu society and the state, which is the actual machinery behind exploitation and oppression of all dalits, men, women and children. The Gandhian resolution believes that at its core, the dalit community is divided into passive, submissive women and violent, unreasonable, aggressive men. History bears ample evidence to the continued contribution of dalit women in the various struggles for self-respect that they are involved in their everyday lives, as well as in anti-caste movements (Pawar and Moon 2008; also see Kamble 2008). However, popular cultural texts such as films continuously produce narratives, images and metaphors that habitually undermine the dalit community, and dalit women in particular.

The Historical Context of the Emergence of the Gandhian Method

Gandhi undertook the arduous task of building a nation spearheaded by elite caste Hindus and elite Muslims. The Hindu Mahasabha, a militant Hindu outfit, worked to keep the Muslims, as active self-determining agents, at bay in the new political sphere, since it harboured visions of a Hindu rashtra. Through his long-standing discourse on Hindu-Muslim unity and the abolition of untouchability, Gandhi played the role of negotiator vis-à-vis demands for a share in political power by both the major minority, that is, Muslims, and the untouchable communities. Gandhi navigated the strong challenges put forth by Ambedkar for securing the right to self-representation for untouchables.

I look at how cultural Gandhism is disseminated through Gandhian films like *Malapilla*, which in turn constructs the problem of untouchability in a Gandhian way. The political scenario in the decades following independence bear evidence to the impact Gandhi had in constructing a commonsensical view of the caste question. The Harijan Congress leaders were trying to build their political platform on the foundation of the Indian National Congress and the Hindu cultural imagination.³

At this point, it is important to situate Gandhian Hindu reform in its historical context. Claude Markovits, one of Gandhi's biographers, states that Gandhi's method is individualistic with regard to his propositions to resolve the problem of

untouchability, that is, defining untouchability as a sin committed by caste Hindus, and thereby placing the burden of uplifting the untouchables on the caste Hindus themselves (Markovits 2003). Gandhi views this act as one of self-purification for the upper castes. Gandhi's approach to the problem of untouchability follows a modern, liberal Hinduist method which affirms individual agency by creating conditions of non-untouchability on the part of the untouchables by following the oppressor caste habits and world view. To do so, they are supposed to refrain from eating meat and drinking alcohol, and abandon the practice of animal sacrifice, adopting the tradition of cow protection instead. On the other hand, the upper castes should atone for their sins by taking up constructive programmes in the Harijan Sevak Sangh. This approach thus shifts the epistemic privilege from the dalit to the caste Hindu, and from the realm of the collective to that of the individual. Nakka Chinna Venkaiah, a Mala poet of the 1930s, wrote *Harijana Keertanalu*, where, along with criticising brahminical culture, he also urged harijans to change their habits and style of living (Ilaiyah 2004: 251).

Bhagya Reddy Varma started the Adi Andhra movement in the city of Hyderabad, and it later spread to the rural areas. In 1917, the first Adi Andhra Conference was held at Vijayawada, during the course of which he defined Adi Hindu as indigenous people, who were different from Hindus (Omvedt 1994: 118). This entire contemporary historical context was suppressed in *Malapilla*, the first Telugu feature film on the subject of untouchables.

The activities of these untouchable leaders need to be read differently from the apparently not-so-different aspects of Gandhism because of one crucial difference. Gandhism appears to validate and consolidate the Hinduising impulse of dalits as they fight for access to temples, Vedic knowledge, vegetarianism, and many other acts through which they seem to emulate the cultural practices of caste Hindus. However, the crucial difference is that in the Gandhian resolution of the caste question, dalits not only lose out on their discursive pre-eminence in this resolution, but also become passive recipients of caste Hindu paternalism, as the resolution is now premised on the change of heart on the part of the caste Hindu, and his moral responsibility for atoning for the sin of untouchability.

This crucial shift from dalit-centric Hinduising initiatives to caste Hindu-centric harijanisation is symptomatic of the loss of agency suffered by dalits in their initiatives to emancipate themselves from the shackles of caste discrimination.

The harijanising tactics of the Gandhian reformist project have been used effectively by institutions of popular culture like the cinema, which functions as an ideological apparatus of the casteist state. The 1970s and 1980s films from K Vishwanath's oeuvre can be categorised under Gandhian Hindu reformist cinema. One of the ways in which these films construct the idea of a Hindu majority and a normative Hindu is by keeping the reform initiated by other religions completely out of the frame, and not allowing even hints of such reform to distract from the myth of Hindu India.

K Vishwanath's *Swayamkrushi* was made at a time when the dalit movement was developing strongly in Andhra Pradesh against the backdrop of increased atrocities against the community in Padirikuppam, Karamchedu and Chundur. These atrocities led to the establishment of the Dalita Mahasabha in 1985, paving the way for the collective struggles of dalits for self-respect. Films like *Swayamkrushi* pose the dalit problem as an individualistic one, locating the causes of the evil caste system in the dalits' propensity towards alcoholism and laziness, thereby taking a typical Gandhian approach. The film promotes the Gandhian notion of hard work and highlights the Gandhian logic of welfarist measures to show how dalits can thrive even within their own caste occupations. Significantly, the narrative of *Swayamkrushi* places dalits within the traditional spaces and modes of living assigned to them by caste Hindus, and then reclaims them as harijans. It is interesting to note that whenever dalits develop political awareness and act accordingly, the hegemonic forces respond through integrationist Gandhian narratives.

In *Malapilla*, the hero, who hails from an orthodox brahmin family, takes on the Gandhian reformist project, and undergoes emotional turbulence because of the moral dilemmas posed by a clash between his caste Hindu self and his evolving reformist self. Despite Gandhi's vision of a new varna-based Indian nation, what emerged in practice was a caste-based society that is both hierarchical and discriminatory.

Caste in the Gandhian Imaginary

It is useful to begin by mapping the harijan vs dalit politics (espoused by Gandhi and Ambedkar, respectively) to understand the issue of representation of caste in Indian socio-political and cultural history. Gandhi and Ambedkar held opposing views on every point. Gandhi called himself a *sanatani* Hindu; according to him, the fourfold caste system was the "eternal principle", the "soul" of Hindu social life. Disrupting this system "amounts to creating disorder". In Gandhi imagination, the problem of dalits was an "internal" issue of Hinduism, one that was purely religious and social. This was why he constructed a separate category called "Harijans". In this system, the spiritual regeneration of the upper castes becomes central to the upliftment of the untouchables. As many dalit thinkers agree, it is more a self-glorification exercise on the part of the upper castes than a move for the empowerment of the "untouchables".

Gandhi started a newspaper called *Harijan* to propagate his views about the origins of untouchability. On this occasion, Ambedkar emphatically states that "the outcaste is a by-product of the caste system. There will be outcastes as long as there are castes. Nothing can emancipate the outcastes except the destruction of caste system" (Kheer 2005 [1954]: 227).

Following Ambedkar, dalits rejected the label "Harijan". They began calling themselves Adi Andhras and Adi Hindus by the 1920s and 1930s. As Kalekuri Prasad, a dalit writer, observes,

Dalits aspired to be treated on par with Hindus by imitating the lifestyle and habits of caste Hindus. Bhagya Reddy Varma's colleague

Arige Ramaswamy used the word "Adi Hindu" as a symbol of Hinduism. He drew similarities between Hindu religion, dalit culture and nondalits and he favoured Hinduisation of dalits. Later he became a Gandhian, and a Congressman (1999: 20).

Nandini Gooptu, a social scientist, observed in her study of the Adi Hindu movement:

The elements of social control and discipline of lower castes, as well as the imposition of a higher caste value system that these approaches implicitly harboured or explicitly advanced, inevitably rendered the relation between the nationalist reformers and the untouchables increasingly tension-ridden from the 1920s (2001: 182).

Kalekuri Prasad elaborates this tension thus:

Gandhians did not agree to take a dalit graduate into their school committee; they did not allow dalits to draw water from the village wells and threatened them of [sic] social ostracism if they did. Dalit journalism of those times (1930s) by Kusuma Dharmanna's magazine *Jayabheri* and B N Murty's magazine *Navajeevana* brought out the hypocrisy of Gandhi's Harijan upliftment programmes (1999: 20).

Opposing Gandhi's spiritualist position, Ambedkar maintained that the problem of untouchability was political. At the second round table conference in 1932, he said, "It is very necessary that the political reins should come in the hands of Untouchables. Untouchability in India will not be eradicated so long as the Untouchables do not control the political strings" (Narke et al 2003: 79). Further, Ambedkar told Gandhi that for the upliftment of the untouchables, "the Caste Hindus must assist the Depressed classes people to work out their own salvation and not attempt to uplift them by inducing them to follow the ideals of the Caste Hindus in every way" (ibid).

However, Gandhi protested the "Communal Award" that the British government declared in 1932 at the second round table conference, which made provision for separate electorates for the depressed classes, and even went on a fast unto death opposing it. Ambedkar was forced to settle for joint electorates according to the Poona Pact that he had signed. This resulted in Harijans in the Congress Party, rather than candidates from dalit-centric parties, occupying the reserved seats.

2 A Critical Analysis of *Malapilla*

In this section, I will detail the representation of the dalit self and dalit culture, the issue of inter-caste marriage, and the denial of access to education within the Gandhian paradigm, as explicated through the film *Malapilla*. *Malapilla* was considered a provocative film, and led to vociferous protests by brahmins for apparently contributing to anti-brahmin feeling in villages. It was also controversial for having brought caste politics centre stage. The brahminical elite find Gandhi's ideology useful to counter Ambedkar's propositions for the annihilation of caste.

Champa, the protagonist in *Malapilla*, unquestioningly follows Hindu rituals and notions of purity and impurity, and is therefore made acceptable within the framework of the Gandhian reformist ethos. The purpose behind the film seems to be to create the image of a reformable untouchable. The Gandhian framework the film is set in never allows the dalit self to find any respectability.

Ideologically, this film falls under the category of Gandhian Hindu reformist. It is important to note the implications of survival in a system which demands that a dalit should somehow become willingly subservient to brahminical hegemony. Commenting on *Malapilla*, S V Srinivas maintains:

This film revolves around the conflict between the dalits and brahmins of a village and its resolution by the intervention of the local Gandhian Chaudhurayya (Suri Babu). Both dalit and brahmin communities are represented in the film as 'backward' and being at fault. Their beliefs, practices, and actions cause tensions repeatedly. Further, their members are presented as being incapable of thinking beyond the interests of their respective castes. On the other hand, Chaudhurayya does not belong to either caste and with his fellow Gandhians frequently appears at the site of conflict to diffuse it. The character's mandate is to reform both communities. Reform, in turn, is imaged as the process by which these groups give up specific practices that are identified with each of these communities (animal sacrifice, meat eating, and alcohol consumption, on the one hand, and orthodoxy, on the other) (2009: 134).

While the film pronounces it imperative for dalits to give up specific cultural habits in order to become reformable harijans, it should be noted that caste Hindus needed to only give up their practice of untouchability. The Gandhian reformist framework within which the film posits the problem of untouchability harijanises dalits. This means that the citizen-subjecthood of dalits is contingent upon their will and ability to model themselves culturally upon the brahmins. Yet the harijanisation of dalits offers only tenuous citizenship rights – through their inclusion as caste Hindu-based Congress harijans.

If, as Gandhi claimed, the society he envisaged was one with no caste hierarchy, where each caste was placed on par with the others, and where the practice of untouchability did not exist, it would have held out the possibility of the dalitisation of orthodox Hindus, just as the brahminisation of dalits is posited as a desirable mode of existence for the latter. This, however, was not to be, as there could be no scope for considering dalits, culturally or otherwise, as being on par with the twice-born within the social framework of Hinduism propagated by Gandhi.

Representation of the Untouchable Self and Untouchable Culture

The untouchables are represented as drunkards and as prone to self-destruction because of their habits, customs and festivals. They are portrayed as a dehumanised bunch of people and termed dirty, uncivilised and barbaric because they do not follow Hindu culture. The notion that they are themselves responsible for their degraded existence, that it is their habit of drinking alcohol, eating meat, animal sacrifice and dancing that takes them beyond redemption is one that recurs repeatedly.

In *Malapilla*, Nagaiah, the wise young dalit man who wants to marry Champa, is shown as uncultured, and his favourable response to the idea of violent rebellion against caste Hindu oppression (as opposed to the non-violent, peace-loving harijan leader Munaiah and other caste Hindu reformers) makes him unworthy of Champa's attention. Let us look at why he is uncultured and unworthy of the harijanised

malapilla's attention. Nagaiah has a healthy suspicion of brahminism and Harijan Seva Sangh activities, which he critiques openly. Nagaiah criticises the brahmins' indolent lifestyle, terming the latter idlers who do nothing but eat and perform pujas. He states that there will come a day when the wealth the brahmins have accumulated will be distributed amongst "us", the toiling masses. He challenges the divinity of the brahmin god, who is avaricious and greedy for the food that brahmins offer him. He mockingly says, "Should such a gluttonous god of brahmins parade through the poverty-stricken *malawaadas*, his eyes would burst and he would die. But he hid himself in the temple and employed us to be his guards." Nagaiah challenges the theory of "karma" prevalent in Hinduism: he asks if it is always the brahmins' karma to sit idle and eat, and the karma of malas to suffer, to remain famished, and die.

Scenes of romance between Champa and Nagaraju alternate with the scenes of suffering Malas negotiating with adamant brahmins to let them enter the temple, and to let them draw water from the village pond. Champa's father Munaiah begs the brahmins to allow the Malas access to water from the pond. While the animals and people in his community fall ill and die after drinking dirty water, Munaiah talks about the virtues of *shanti*, and about pleasing the gods and brahmins by not "demanding" their right to drinking water, and thus to life itself. Both the Congress and Munaiah view such demands for human rights as "*dourjanyam*" (vice, violence, force).

The clearly angry Nagaiah criticises Munaiah's subservient attitude, saying, "Munaiah is a traitor to malas; he still has not lost his faith in brahmins, cows and their gods". However, towards the end a paradigm shift takes place for Nagaiah. His spirit of resistance diminishes and he completely acquiesces to the Gandhian reformist discourse, thus signalling the failure of the Ambedkarite approach in resolving the problem of untouchability.

Champa has no respect for Nagaiah, evident in the way she brushes him off whenever she encounters him as a possible suitor. She slaps him and Nagaraju even beats him with chappals. The young, educated brahmin Nagaraju is, however, an object of Champa's instant affection. Worried about Champa, Nagaiah cautions her against her friendship with the brahmin. Given the long history of upper-caste exploitation of dalits, especially the sexual exploitation of dalit women, Nagaiah's concern and anger are understandable. As Wandana Sonalkar observes, "The dalit woman has no defense against sexual and other exploitation from upper caste men in her village" (1999: 27). When Champa's father throws her out of the house, she goes to the brahmin Nagaraju, who had claimed to be in love with her. However, despite his claims of the previous night, he refuses to acknowledge her before his friends for fear of being ostracised in his community and, pretending to not know her at all, calls her a beggar when she goes to his home.

The obvious explanation is his fear of ostracism. But the underlying fact is that it is Nagaraju's own casteist belief that dalits should not enter brahmins' houses that prompts his action. Allowing dalits inside brahmin homes means erasing

the boundaries set for the former, and polluting brahmin traditions and values. It is another matter if brahmin men desire dalit women; that is considered an outside matter, and the brahmin man is supposed to keep his dalit lover strictly outside the boundaries of his home.

Dalit Men as Violent Rogues

In this Gandhian narrative, Nagaraju evolves into a reformist and dalits are constructed as violent people. This representation is symptomatic of caste Hindu perceptions and their fear of those whom they suppress. So the same people who do not even have the power to drink water from the village pond are shown to carry sticks and other weapons during their attempts to enter temples. They do the same when they discover that Nagaraju has left for the city, taking Munaiah's daughters with him. In another scene, caste Hindu women and the Choudhary of Harijan Seva Sangh lecture the dalits, who are dancing, singing and celebrating in a *jaatara*, to give up their customs of animal sacrifice, dancing, drinking, and such *jaataras*. A drunk dalit man hits one of the Sevak women and she bleeds. He even makes advances towards the caste Hindu woman. Once again, dalit men are represented as unreasonable, violent rogues who do not respect women, and who are clearly in need of education by the Gandhi-reformers.

Young dalit men are generally characterised as aggressive and hypersexual. It is important to note that Nagaiah is shown attempting to physically attack Champa, who is rescued by the brahmin hero. Champa makes the highly improbable choice (given the pathetic condition of dalits in the narrative) of falling in love with Nagaraju, the brahmin English-educated man, and not with a man from her community, not even Nagaiah, the wisest and most sensible of them all. Thus, she forces herself into the vulnerable situation of being attached to a brahmin man, removed completely from her own people and culture. The climactic shot has Champa and her sister Anasuya inside the temple, near the sanctum sanctorum, along with the brahmins, facing the other dalits who are standing apart at a well-defined distance. She is thus no longer on an equal plank with her people; her position has been elevated through a process of harijanisation, aided by her association with the brahmin hero.

Throughout *Malapilla*, Champa takes no part in the productive processes of dalit life, inevitable for a dalit woman from a penurious family. The fact that her community is steeped in poverty and intolerable caste oppression does not affect her even remotely. Her disconnect with her family and community is so incredibly absolute and final that she only indulges in idle pujas, singing songs in praise of the Hindu god Krishna, dancing with her sister Anasuya, and spending time with the brahmin man. They have no food, their cattle and fellow dalits are dying because there is no water to drink. Yet she is never seen working, not even with her own family. She remains unconcerned about her people throughout the narrative. The only time she does any work for her family is when she goes to fetch drinking water for her mother from the pond. The guard, appointed by the Shastri to prevent dalits from taking water from

the pond, makes advances at her. The visuals of the dalits in the film focus essentially on the males, as the brahmins and untouchables confront each other. The cinematic address systematically reproduces a glaring separation between dalit men and women.

A New Language of Political Discourse

Malapilla is an out-and-out Congress propagandist film, and the filmmakers do not try to camouflage its political motives. The film is dedicated to the memory of the departed Andhra leader and president of the Harijan Seva Sangh, Kasinadhuni Nageswar Rao Pantulu. The film scene opens with shots of a rooster crowing at dawn, followed by members of the Harijan Sevak Sangh, who march into the Malawada singing a consciousness-raising song, exhorting the harijan youth to awaken from their slumber, to which the dalits nod in agreement. The song goes like this: "Isn't it the act of mere humans who threw you at a distance calling you Malas!" It thus absolves the Hindu scriptures of all responsibility for actively sanctioning and endorsing untouchability, notions of purity and pollution, and rigid caste hierarchies. Who are these unmarked "human beings" who are responsible for social evils like caste discrimination? This is an issue that cannot be explored within the Gandhian humanist framework.

At one point, Chowdhary tries to convince Sundara Rama Shastry that the practice of untouchability had not been in existence from the beginning of Hindu society; it came much later. Shastry and Chowdhary check the shastras to see if untouchability is sanctioned in the Hindu scriptures. They come to the conclusion that it is not. However, B R Ambedkar emphatically states, "It is no use seeking refuge in quibbles. It is no use telling people that the Shastras do not say what they are believed to say, grammatically read or logically interpreted. What matters is how the Shastras have been understood by the people" (1990: 84). In the film, though, the malapilla Champalatha and Anasuya happily look on while their father Munaiah praises the Harijan Seva Sangh, and the other harijans – the half-naked children and adults – are assured of the blessings of the deified Mahatma.

In yet another song, the Sangh members stand near the temple entrance, collecting alms from the people visiting the temple. The camera's immediate focus is on the beggars outside, singing about the plight of the poor and asking forgiveness "for the sins of their *past*". Thus, in the Gandhian narrative, being treated with respect is not a right the dalits can demand. They can only beg for better treatment by the gods and the caste Hindus.

On the front wall of Munaiah's thatched hut is inscribed: "Sri Rama". The anxiety of caste Hindus to retain the dalits within the Hindu fold in order to maintain the caste status quo is evident throughout the film. Under a huge portrait of Gandhi is written, "Hindu religion cannot lose the seven crore Harijans". Indeed it cannot.⁴ Srivatsan explores the political significance of the concept of *seva* from 1900-50, employed to divest the project of dalit self-empowerment in the political realm. He explains the political interests of Gandhi while

initiating the Harijan Sevak Sangh's activities. He further maintains: "This religious organisation (HSS) was designed to begin the constructive work of bringing Harijans in to the Hindu fold. Gandhi wanted to ensure that the untouchable vote was not separated from the mainstream Hindu one" (2006: 432). Indeed, Gandhi says in his speech in Ahmedabad at the Suppressed Class Conference, a convention of the untouchables, in 1921, "Yudhishtira would not enter heaven without his dog. How can, then, the descendants of that Yudhishtira expect to obtain Swaraj, without the untouchables" (Homer 1983: 164)?

In fact, in *Malapilla*, the brahmins refer to dalits as beasts and beggars. And this is apparently a film that opposes the practice of untouchability. It was not out of concern for the human dignity and rights of dalits that Gandhi initiated his lip-service to the cause of the untouchables; it was because if the Hindus lost the dalits, they would be left with no choice but to loosen their hold over dalit labour. Besides, attaining Swaraj would become difficult without the support of the masses. As Vijay Prashad observes,

During the first decade of our century, the colonial government challenged the credentials of the Congress to represent the entire nation. Drawing on the sociological origins of the members of the Congress in terms of demographic data from the census, the government argued that they did not include a number of groups, notably untouchables and tribals (1996: 553).

In the pamphlet written by Shradhdhananda in 1924, he suggested that "the nationalists mobilise untouchables into the Congress" (Prashad 1996), as it would silence the British who often pointed towards the social inequities in Indian society to claim that the liberal values of the Congress were suspect. By his own admission, Gandhi was aware of the vices prevalent in all the great Hindu shrines, but he "loves them in spite of their unspeakable failings" (Homer 1983: 171). It should be noted that, as Ambedkar contends, "Mr Gandhi has never used the weapon of satyagraha against Hindus to get them to throw open wells and temples to the untouchables" (1991: 239).

Towards the end, *Malapilla* shows dalits entering the temple. And this act itself is seen as the narrative resolution of the problem of untouchability. Even Nagaiah is happy with this solution. However, Ambedkar, in the speech he delivered about temple entry on 2 March 1930, said that temple entry in itself did not solve the dalit problem, because "our problem is comprehensive. It is political, social, religious, economic, educational and so on" (2003: 182). He believed that temple entry was an occasion to question and test if Hindus were willing to accept dalits' demands for humanitarian rights.

The strategy of impersonation, on the one hand, is used by the Harijan Sevaks to create trust in dalits regarding the goodwill of the Congress towards them. On the other hand, what it does is to construct the caste Hindus as the sole agents of reformist political action, simultaneously constructing harijan subjects (as opposed to dalits) who are grateful recipients of caste Hindu charity. Impersonation is a Gandhian strategy through which he reinstalls the privilege of the

already privileged twice-born Hindus as icons of social reform, which in turn marks them in history as nationalists and patriots, as opposed to leaders like Ambedkar who were either erased from cultural memory or branded as anti-nationalists and British stooges. *Malapilla* excels in exploring the performativity of this technique, as manifested in the character of the reformer Chaudhurayya and his fellow Gandhians. They reiterate their impersonation of dalits in the film narrative through songs and speeches, which often exhort the caste Hindu orthodoxy to reform. For example, a popular song in the film goes like this: “*Kollaayi gattithenemi, maa Gandhi Malayai thirigithenemi*” (What if Gandhi wears a loin cloth, what if our Gandhi roams about calling himself a *Mala*).

In another instance, Chaudhurayya and his fellow Gandhians are forced to vacate their ashram building (which they have rented for the purpose of weaving khadi and carrying out Gandhian construction programmes) because of their negotiation with the brahmin orthodoxy to allow dalits to take water from the ponds. In this context, Chaudhurayya breaks into an emotional outburst, declaring that “Our caste is harijan caste”. He addresses his fellow harijan sevaks thus: “Now it is our everyday routine to drink water with *them* and starve. Come! Let us go to the *Mala gudem*. Let us become Malas among Malas and proclaim to the world that Malas too are humans.” In the Gandhian imaginary, it is only through the upper-caste impersonation of malas that the latter gain “human” status.

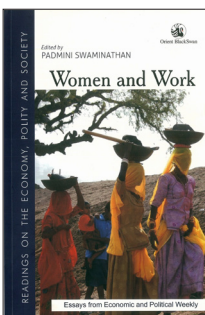
The strategy of impersonation, on the one hand, is used by the harijan sevaks to get the dalits to trust the goodwill the Congress bears towards them. On the other hand, what it actually does is construct the caste Hindus as the sole agents of reformist political action, simultaneously constructing harijan subjects (as opposed to dalits) who are grateful recipients of caste Hindu charity. The film cleverly inserts the nomenclature and politics of the harijan within the genealogy of dalit initiatives for their emancipation, viz, the Panchama movement, the Adi Andhra movement, and so on. While these movements are dalit-centric initiatives put forward by dalits themselves, harijanisation or harijan politics is caste Hindu-centred reform, emerging in the crucial context of managing dalit challenges to elite caste Hindu nationalism, and attempting to suppress the demand for a dalit share in political power in the ensuing new democratic nation. Mallikarjuna Sharma sarcastically remarks, “Harijans! Harijans!! Malas became Panchamas; Panchamas became Adi Andhras; Adi Andhras became Harijans ...God knows what else they would become...they might even become Brahma Rishis!”

Yet another song goes, “All coolies should come together...”; this represents the socialist wing within the Congress Party that collides with Hindu orthodoxy within the Congress in matters to do with untouchability. The film narrative resolves the challenges put forth by the socialist wing by showing the failure of non-cooperation and the hartal of dalits against caste Hindus. While the hartal fails to bring about any change, the harijan initiative to save the most oppressive brahmin

Women and Work

Edited by

PADMINI SWAMINATHAN



The notion of ‘work and employment’ for women is complex. In India, fewer women participate in employment compared to men. While economic factors determine men’s participation in employment, women’s participation depends on diverse reasons and is often rooted in a complex interplay of economic, cultural, social and personal factors.

The introduction talks of the oppression faced by wage-earning women due to patriarchal norms and capitalist relations of production, while demonstrating how policies and programmes based on national income accounts and labour force surveys seriously disadvantage women.

This volume analyses the concept of ‘work’, the economic contribution of women, and the consequences of gendering of work, while focusing on women engaged in varied work in different parts of India, living and working in dismal conditions, and earning paltry incomes.

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household from a fire changes the attitudes of the brahmins vis-à-vis the untouchables.

Caste, Family and Motherhood

In *Malapilla*, when Nagaraju's mother discovers her son's fondness for an untouchable girl, she tells him to have a secret relationship with her and let her be his "keep", but not marry her. When her son pays no heed to her advice, she cries out that they must have performed black magic on her son, otherwise he would not befriend an untouchable girl. It should be noted that even today, dalits are accused of performing black magic and causing evil in their villages, for which they are tortured and killed. This particular scene underlines a brahmin woman's agency in the casteist sexual objectification of dalit women, in upholding upper-caste hegemony as well as the status quo of the Indian social system.

However, the Gandhian narrative, while opposing such Hindu orthodoxy on the part of caste Hindu men and women, constructs a new kind of caste consciousness and caste Hindu hegemony through Gandhian reform. This is part of the film's critique of "old" forms of brahminism. As Uma Chakravarti observes, "upper caste men have had sexual access to lower caste women which is an aspect of the material power they have over the lower castes" (2002: 205). She describes this centuries-old practice as follows:

Fairly early on a "black" woman was regarded as the natural object of desire and pleasure. Apart from using their labour, masters of dasis in early literature used the sexual services of women in servitude (ibid).

In the light of this observation, Nagaraju's mother reacted as a typical brahmin woman, whose identification is first and foremost with her caste, thanks to brahminical patriarchy in India.

Inter-Caste Marriage and Harijanisation of Untouchables

Champa in *Malapilla* shows an unusual interest in offering pujas to the Hindu god Krishna in a secluded, uninhabited cave, singing devotional songs while her sister dances. No other dalit does such things in the film. Representing a dalit woman as having so much leisure at her disposal and spending that time devoting herself to worshipping Hindu gods in songs ridden with sanskritised/non-colloquial Telugu is a deliberate political ploy to construct a Hinduised dalit female identity. Challapalli Swaroopa Rani, a dalit poet, maintains that

the reality of dalit lives, the splendour of their life's work, their troubles, their tears, all take the form of stories, or songs or poetry. This is a truth that cannot be hidden. However a large part of the written and oral literature written and sung by dalits for centuries has been stamped out by time (1998: 22).

While this important aspect of dalit lives is erased in the film, there is instead the imposition of dominant Hindu culture on dalits – along with a legitimisation and justification for the same through the representation of harijanised dalit images. In the powerful hands of caste Hindus, the medium of cinema becomes a tool in perpetuating social inequalities and caste Hindu hegemony in the cultural realms of society. Gandhism

was the powerful hegemonic vehicle through which this historical task was accomplished in the 1930s.

The film addresses the question of inter-caste marriage against such an ideological historical background. In *Malapilla*, the love affair between the brahmin Nagaraju and dalit Champalatha takes place in ample privacy on the village outskirts in the presence of the Hindu god Krishna. This location for the love-drama establishes a divine connection between the two of them, thus removing them from their immediate social context and ensuing material needs. This spatial removal of the couple facilitates their further distancing from the turbulent village, which is boiling over issues of temple entry for dalits; brahmin outbursts of anger; the subsequent torture dalits are subjected to by being denied basic necessities like drinking water; their poverty; the deaths of their people and cattle; their strikes; and so on. None of this, however, touches the couple. On the contrary, they discuss Krishna, the Hindu deity, as a god of love who neither hates brahmins nor harijans. Kancha Ilaiah, in a sudra critique of Hindutva, contextualises the rise of the Yadava Krishna into the Hindu pantheon, and the important role he plays in rebuilding consent for caste hegemony. It is also important to situate the figure of the deity Krishna as producing "an unheard of defense of murder" in Ambedkar's reading of the *Bhagavad Gita* (1987: 365). A war-monger god is depicted as a god of love in popular cinema.

As S V Srinivas observes in his essay "Gandhian Nationalism and Melodrama in the 30's Telugu Cinema", in *Malapilla*

the romance and caste conflict run parallelly and the former does not contribute in any significant way to the resolution of the latter despite the fact that Nagaraju's love for a dalit girl is in itself presented as a mark of his modernity and large-heartedness (2009: 25).

There is not a single conversation between them regarding these issues they are otherwise so closely connected with. Instead, they only talk about sanskritised songs and their lord Krishna. We have no clue as to how the poor, uneducated, untouchable Champa could develop a taste for this god and such songs, while the other dalits dance in the "jaatara" of their goddesses.

In *Malapilla*, Chaudhurayya is the mouthpiece of the highly reactionary Gandhian harijan reform that was considered insincere by B R Ambedkar (1991). In fact, the idea of inter-caste marriage as a weapon that could be used to destroy the caste system is not Gandhi's; it is Ambedkar who maintained such an opinion. Further, he added, "The real method of breaking up the caste system was not to bring about inter-caste dinners and inter-caste marriages but to destroy the religious notions on which caste was founded" (1990: 23). The film, however, does the opposite by showing dalit women willingly performing Hindu rituals. It is important in this regard to refer to Gandhi's own changed position on the question of caste, and inter-caste marriages between harijans and caste Hindus. As Rudolph and Rudolph observe,

Gandhi changed his view of caste considerably between 1921, when he considered varna distinctions helpful to retaining striving and intemperate ambition (*Young India*, 6 October 1921), and 1932, when he declared his ashram would not help arrange marriages between members of the same subcaste. In 1946, he declared himself in favour

of marriages between caste Hindus and untouchables and subsequently said he would attend only marriages of such a kind (1969: 141).

Malapilla, however, portrays no such ambiguities over the question of inter-caste marriages and the other issues it dealt with in the film narrative. It provides a finality of sorts to the Gandhian resolution of caste and Gandhism within the film narrative. Thus, *Malapilla* inaugurates the Gandhian mode of representation of the caste question in Telugu cinema.

Conclusions

In this paper, I argue that Gandhian cultural nationalism is not just an ideology but an ideological consensus, and that it

turns even opposing ideological positions like Marxism into variations of its own practices and certainties. It is the caste question that provides the ground for developing this ideological consensus. The relationship between caste and ideology is cemented through representational means, such that the nationalist film's depiction of caste appears to exhaust all possible political positions in the caste debate.

This moment in the 1930s marked the beginning of the nationalist cinematic consensus on caste and untouchability, which still determines (although it has been challenged by the dalit critique from the mid-1980s) popular representations and debates on it.

NOTES

- 1 Kapur discusses the historical significance of "saint films" during the mid-1930s as nationalist realist films. She mentions that Marxist filmmaker K A Abbas praised the film *Sant Tukaram* as a progressive one.
- 2 Madhava Prasad points out,

Although Citizen-Subject remains an incompletely realised utopic figure in all instances, it is also the case that this non-realization takes specific forms in different nation-state formations. The problem, therefore, is not merely the gap between the citizen-in-theory and the population at large – for there are no instances where such a gap does not exist – but the ways in which the "non-realisation" is sought to be addressed in various sites, including, of course, the cinema (Srinivas 2009: 54, 134).
- 3 Ambedkar, on the other hand, fought the Congress and its politics openly, stating clearly that their politics is permeated by the caste Hindu structure and is against the untouchables. He was also building a new and emancipatory foundation for dalit politics, moving himself and his politics away from the Hindu cultural paradigm. In this context, it is apt to look at the question of dalit emancipation by tracing the currency and valiance of the different categories of reference vis-à-vis the dalits, the journey of the category "dalit", and challenges posed to it from the early 20th century. It is important because it helps to trace the historical trajectory of dalit struggles. Ambedkar, while exhibiting immense faith in the modern welfarist state, did not consider caste discrimination and untouchability as linked with individual reform; rather, he saw it as a problem that had its roots in the Hindu sociopolitical organisation of Indian society through the system of *varnashramadharma*, and therefore advocated political redress and a complete annihilation of caste.
- 4 By the 1930s, Chamars in UP had developed an aversion towards Hinduism and were turning to Christianity and Islam. The Arya Samaj, militant Hindu organisations, and Gandhi's Harijan Sevak Sangh realised that millions of untouchables were not at ease with Hinduism, and that they would lose them all if the Hindus did not initiate programmes to stop them from leaving the fold. Vijay Prashad, in his book *Untouchable Freedom*, delineates how the process of *shuddhi* was initiated by the Hindus to pull the Chamars into Hinduism.

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Survey

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Revisiting Communalism and Fundamentalism in India

by

Surya Prakash Upadhyay, Rowena Robinson

This comprehensive review of the literature on communalism – and its virulent offshoot, fundamentalism – in India considers the various perspectives from which the issue has sought to be understood, from precolonial and colonial times to the post-Independence period. The writings indicate that communalism is an outcome of the competitive aspirations of domination and counter-domination that began in colonial times. Cynical distortions of the democratic process and the politicisation of religion in the early decades of Independence intensified it. In recent years, economic liberalisation, the growth of opportunities and a multiplying middle class have further aggravated it. More alarmingly, since the 1980s, Hindu communalism has morphed into fundamentalism, with the Sangh parivar and its cultural politics of Hindutva playing ominous roles.

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