

Politics of Identity and the Project of Writing History in Postcolonial India

A Dalit Critique

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The central orientation of this article is organised around Dalit identity politics and their implications on the project of writing history in postcolonial India. It critically engages with the Subaltern Studies project as a school of postcolonial historiography that claims to represent the voice of the marginalised and yet stops short of acknowledging caste and caste-based oppression as worthy of historical analysis. In particular, it engages with Dipesh Chakrabarty's reflections on Dalit identity politics in postcolonial India and argues that Dalits, while demanding sociopolitical equality and a dignified identity, also challenge the epistemologies of the nation and demand its historical narratives to be egalitarian and inclusive.

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Given that the other has already been vividly depicted in one way, as subhuman, the antidote to that way of imagining must itself come via the imagination, in the form of experiences of seeing the other as fully human. If the other has been dehumanised in the imagination, only the imagination can accomplish the requisite shift.

—Martha Nussbaum

Historically in the evolution of human civilisations, identity is a defining feature of social, economic and political organisation. It “designates something like a person’s understanding of who they are, of their fundamental defining characteristics as human beings” (Taylor 1994). Therefore human identities continue to evolve and change in response to the changing conditions and circumstances. For instance, the rise of capitalism led to “the collapse of social hierarchies”¹ and inaugurated individualism and the idea of social equality which became the basis for the democratic politics in the Euro–American world. The collapse of old social institutions and the rise of individualism needed new forms of associations and institutions to bind people as cohesive communities. Therefore, new identities were imagined² and articulated on the basis of religion, language, race, ethnicity, nationality, sex and gender. Moreover, the principles emanated from the Enlightenment such as the ideas of equality, liberty, fraternity, democracy and human dignity also became founding principles for the making of political communities and nations. Among the modern Western philosophers Hegel is considered to be one of the foremost thinkers on the issue of identity. He had propounded the idea that the identities evolved in a dialogical manner with the self and the other.³ In this process, mutual recognition becomes the foundational principle for the formation of identity. For example contemporary philosopher Charles Taylor uses Hegel’s mode of dialogical evolution of the notion of identity and establishes an inviolable relationship between recognition and identity. He argues that “a person or a group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves” and also says “non-recognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted or reduced mode of being” (Taylor 1994). He also argues that “misrecognition shows not just a lack of due respect. It can inflict a grievous wound, saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred” (Taylor 1994). Therefore in multicultural society he says “Due recognition is

not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need” (Taylor 1994).

Dalit Identity

Historically, Dalit identity in India evolved dialogically at two levels; first in dialogue with the Hindu Brahmanical tradition as simultaneous inner and outer struggles to retain its core of identity and self. Second, it evolved through the unique historical experience of colonial modernity as a resource for anti-caste articulations such as through Enlightenment ideas and other tools of emancipation. For centuries the trampled humanity⁴ of the untouchables remained invisible to caste Hindus but nonetheless simmered like a volcano on the boundaries of villages till they got access to the ideas of modernity. Though in precolonial times they weaved anti-caste narratives to withstand the onslaught of Brahmanical caste ideologies and envisioned alternative paths of emancipation they were assimilated into Brahmanical tradition as they did not have alternative sources of economic opportunities and ideas as they were traditionally denied access to education. Though the precolonial antecedents of the anti-caste traditions of Dalits seem to have been blunted and eventually assimilated, they are powerful historical roots to claim their rightful place in history and society. Thus the antennae of Dalit identity politics from colonial to postcolonial times constantly point to multiple roots and make confusing claims because of the legacy of historical rupture from which they are trying to recuperate hidden histories to rebuild an emancipatory identity. Before the rebellious identity of “Dalit” came into the political parlance, untouchables in precolonial India were known as *Chandalas*, *Panchamas* *Asprushyas*, *Antyajas* (Parasher-Sen 2004) and other humiliating names in Brahmanical literature. However, in everyday life they were known through their specific regional identities, such as Malas, Madigas, Mahars, Chamars, Dhed, Pariah and many other names across India. These identities were not chosen by the untouchables themselves, they were imposed and enforced to be borne on their body and soul in order to conform to the prescriptive Brahmanical caste structures. While illustrating the condition of the black man under the yoke of colonialism, Frantz Fanon referred to their predicament as “to exist absolutely for the other” (Fanon 1952). The untouchable existence in premodern times can be understood in similar terms as their sole existence was rationalised to serve the “other” (the caste Hindus in this case) and not for their own self-fulfilment or happiness. In this way, the untouchable lived a double life; one meant for others and the second for himself/herself. However, the precolonial existence of Dalits relied on remarkable cultural resilience using the tactics of avoiding and dodging Brahmanical caste oppression. They also sometimes appropriated and altered the Brahmanical cultural symbols and practices.⁵ As Michel de Certeau (1988) demonstrates, in everyday life ordinary people work out alternative means to escape dominant impositions. Similarly, Dalits preserved their individual and collective souls using multiple means and challenged their oppressors using the tactic of visible confrontations and sometimes through meek obedience.

While enduring a strangled social existence Dalits subverted dominant ideas and ideologies by weaving soothing alternative narratives of caste as a form of protective layer to withstand Brahmanical onslaughts in the form of folk songs and stories.⁶ These strategies are very similar to the ones James Scott showed in his seminal work in the context of Malaysia (1987). Another important strategy they followed to escape caste oppression in the precolonial period was by converting to non-Brahmanical sects and religions which preached social equality.⁷ However, ironically in the course of history, rigid caste structure and ideologies permeated them and reinscribed the earlier caste identity by assimilating them into the Brahmanical fold.⁸ Thus the precolonial anti-caste articulations and subversive politics of untouchables were in most cases co-opted and could not find an escape route from the caste rubric and its oppressive ideology.

However, the colonial experience opened up possibilities, albeit often contradictory, for Dalits. At one level because of the Christian missions and the hesitant colonial state policies, for the first time in history Dalits got access to education; which undeniably provided avenues to escape from the caste structure in terms of employment opportunities in modern sectors besides also helping them in envisioning emancipatory projects on the basis of modern liberal ideas. On the other hand, colonialism, true to its pragmatic and exploitative considerations, colluded with the dominant Hindu Brahmanical ideas and institutions to re-enforce caste prejudices and its accompanied violence ironically making Dalit lives more vulnerable both in physical and mental forms. David Washbrook’s marvellous article (1993) investigated Dalit conditions on the eve of colonialism and argued that they were better off both economically and physically before the British colonialism. Indirectly he provides a powerful argument that the consolidation of colonialism engendered the project of Brahmanism. Moreover, the colonial state and its policies treated Dalits not with benevolence but with contempt similar to the caste Hindu society. This can be illustrated through the nomenclatures it assigned to untouchables such as animists, Panchamas, Depressed Classes and Scheduled Castes. Terms like animists and panchamas were direct derivatives of Brahmanical ideology. While “depressed classes” sounds neutral in its coinage, it is the most inhuman identity one can attribute to living beings. Imagine nearly 20% of British India’s population dubbed as depressed. It is also inconceivable to imagine the agony of the bearers of this identity. How depressing it is to self-identify oneself as a depressed being in public. Again, though Scheduled Caste does not mean anything negative, it does not have any positive meaning either. Naming and conferring identity is a form of control and exercise of power over people. From precolonial invisibility to the blurred image of colonial era Dalits bore dehumanised identities and for centuries they internalised a devalued image of themselves as being lower than animals.

Nevertheless, it is the unintended consequences of colonialism that act as a catalyst for Dalit identity politics. The spread of modern education and Enlightenment ideas provided the

tools of emancipation to carve out new identities filled with positive historical narratives and images. Along with it the rise of anti-colonial nationalism in India under the leadership of the caste Hindu, English-educated elites also opened up new possibilities as Dalits are attracted to the anti-colonial nationalist politics in their political battles rather than its imaginative reflections. While not questioning the legitimacy of nationalism they altered the meaning of nationalism by challenging their exclusion, social and economic inequality and argued that nationalism should be inclusive and egalitarian in its form and content. They conceived new identities rooted in history embedding their political struggles into the very imagination of nation with identities such as *Adi-Hindus*, *Adi-Dravidas*, *Adi-Andhra*, *Adi-Karnataka*. These identities as original inhabitants of the nation (sons-of-the soil, no claim for the daughters) and Adi-Hindu religion as pre-Aryan claim egalitarian social, economic and gender relations. Caste Hindu nationalists like Gandhi responded to the growing aspirations of Dalits and bestowed a new “positive” appellation like “Harijans” on untouchables, meaning “children of God.” Gandhi’s paternalistic politics succeeded to some extent in bringing Dalits into the fold of the Congress⁹ but over the course of time the term Harijan came to be resented by self-respecting Dalits. Disenchantment with post-independence India’s political establishment’s response and policies towards issues of social and economic inequalities, along with the quest for the human dignity led to the further radicalisation of Dalit identity politics. Thus the 1970s can be described as the era of Dalit resurgence and the Dalit Panthers of Bombay emerged as the symbol of this radical politics (Joshi 1986). While resurrecting “Dalit” as a radical identity—meaning broken- or ground-down people—they scripted its historical and philosophical roots away from and outside of both colonial and caste Hindu imagination (Zelliot 1996). While changing the grammar of electoral politics, the Dalit identity transformed itself into a new epistemic language signifying opposition to Hindu Brahmanical ideology and also questioned secular knowledge which excluded Dalits including from the writing of the nation’s history.

Subalterns and Postcolonial Politics

Ranjit Guha outlined the intellectual agenda for the inauguration of the Subaltern Studies project saying

the historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism—colonialist elitism and bourgeoisie-nationalist elitism...Both the varieties of elitism share the prejudice that the making of the Indian nation and the development of the consciousness—nationalism—which informed this process were exclusively or predominantly elite achievements (1988).

However, he defines “elites” and “subaltern classes (whom he also calls people)” in an interesting manner. According to Guha (1988):

[The Indian elite] are the dominant indigenous groups included classes and interests operating at two levels. At the all-India level they included the biggest feudal magnates, the most important representatives of the industrial and mercantile bourgeoisie and native recruits

to the upper most levels of the bureaucracy. At the regional and local level they represented such classes and other elements as were either members of the dominant all-India groups still acted in the interests of the latter not in conformity to interests corresponding truly to their own social being.

The “elite” and “subaltern” as categories of analysis of historical processes in colonial India were found to be a revolutionary intervention in rewriting the history from the point of non-elites. The approach was deemed a corrective to the historic injustices of colonialist and nationalist elites who ignored the agency and the revolutionary political movements of peasants, tribals and other mass articulations. However, the very conception of elite and subaltern categories and their application in rewriting the history of colonial India is fraught with a fundamental problem at two levels. First, the very categories elite and subaltern are misconceived categories precisely because they do not represent the social and historical reality in terms of caste, class or community. Second, these two categories also do not present an “experience of social being” which, in fact, is the basis on which Guha finds fault with the regional-level elite who were “not in conformity to interests corresponding truly to their own social being” (Guha 1988). Historically speaking, caste has been an experiential social reality in the Indian subcontinent for centuries which not only defined the social existence of millions of people into caste groups but also drew boundaries of accessibility to political power and material wealth while defining their mentalities (Parasher-Sen 2004). If the categories used to analyse and capture the historical transformation do not reflect such a fundamental reality it is bound to fail to comprehensibly represent the history. Moreover, the fundamental basis for the elite domination and power over the subalterns was based on caste which drew its legitimacy from the precolonial Brahmanical religious traditions. Therefore, these two categories while failing to capture this reality also remain spurious because they neither reflect the experience of being elite or subaltern nor apply to any living social beings. For example, historically, all categories of analysis such as class, caste, race and sex not only represent human beings whose experience they reflect but also help us comprehend the complexities of social reality. Unfortunately, the categories of elite and subaltern remain unaccentuated by social experiences and especially the category of subaltern remains inaccessible to the people they are supposed to represent.¹⁰ The dual categories of elite and subaltern are also constructed from a modernist perspective that overlooks the premodern inherited privileges (sanctioned and maintained by caste) thereby rendering the categorisation not only incomplete but also skewed. The latter category thus remains largely theoretical or even imagined since it lacks representation by the subalterns themselves.

In the same vein Dipesh Chakrabarty in his *Provincialising Europe* (2000) extends the project of Subaltern Studies with a historical and methodological search for the histories and voices of subaltern groups in colonial India from a postcolonial perspective with the aim of dislocating the centrality of European thought (Enlightenment) as power and knowledge. One

interesting aspect of this endeavour is to lay out theoretical, moral and ethical grounds for writing the histories of minorities and inclusion of subaltern pasts in larger historical narratives. Thus the chapter on “Minority Histories”¹¹ reads as an extended version of theoretical justification for the Subaltern Studies project laid out by Guha in his “Some Aspects of the Historiography of Modern India” which I referred to earlier.¹² In making a case for Minority Histories, he uses the term not just in empirical sense but in semantic and ontological sense. As Chakrabarty (2007) writes:

Recent struggles and debates around the rather tentative concept of multiculturalism in Western democracies have often fueled discussions of minority histories. As the writing of history has increasingly become entangled with the so-called “politics and production of identity” after the World War II, the question has arisen in all democracies of whether to include in the history of the nation histories of previously excluded groups. In the 1960s, this list usually contained names of subaltern social groups and classes, such as, former slaves, working classes, convicts and women. This mode of writing history came to be known in the 1970s as history from below. Under pressure from growing demands for democratising further the discipline of history this list was expanded in the seventies and eighties to include so-called ethnic groups, the indigenous peoples, children and old, and gays, lesbians and other minorities. The expression “minority histories” has come to refer to all those pasts on whose behalf democratically minded historians have fought the exclusions and omissions of mainstream narratives of the nation. Official or officially blessed accounts of the nation’s pasts have been challenged in many countries by the champions of minority histories.

He also says “minority histories, one may say, in part express the struggle for inclusion and representation that are characteristics of liberal and representative democracies” (Chakrabarty 2007). Borrowing from Eric Hobsbawm’s notion of good and bad histories¹³ Chakrabarty argues “Good histories on the other hand are supposed to enrich the subject matter of history and make it more representative of society as whole. The transformation of once-oppositional minority histories into “good histories” illustrates how the mechanism of incorporation works in the discipline of history” (2007). Further, he also says “good minority history is about expanding the scope of social justice and representative democracy.”

Subalterns and the Politics of Misrecognition

This section uses theoretical frame deployed by Ann Stoler in *Along the Archival Grain* (2010) and reads against the grain to critically engage with Chakrabarty’s reflections on Dalit identity politics and its implication on the project of writing history. Subaltern Studies as a postcolonial critique makes palpable the “epistemic violence” inherent in the Western epistemologies and their invisible presence in the very conception and imagination of the formerly colonised subjects especially among liberals, nationalist elites and Marxist intellectuals. Its radical alternative way of (re-)presenting the stories of marginalised into the mainstream acts may be regarded as an important theoretical route in recuperating Dalit voices and emancipatory struggles too. Undoubtedly the Subaltern scholars’ interrogation of mainstream knowledge systems, through the tools of ethical and moral parameters and their representation

of minority histories, “has resulted in methodological and epistemological question of what the very business of writing history is all about” (Chakrabarty 2007) in the South Asian context. Paradoxically, however, an aspiring historian, like me, encounters a glitch in unquestioningly following the theoretical and intellectual paths laid out by these scholars.¹⁴ As I discussed earlier, the very category of subaltern does not include the dynamics of caste domination and oppression; it also fails to represent the humiliating experiences of historically marginalised subjects like Dalits. Moreover, recent scholarship of Subaltern scholars like Chakrabarty further complicates the approach to the question of Dalits and their representation in historical narratives. In 2008, Chakrabarty guest edited a special issue of the journal *Public Culture* on the theme “The Public Life of History.” His article (2008) “The Public Life of History: An Argument Out of India” can be read as an important reflection on the issue of caste politics and the impact of identity politics (electoral politics especially of Dalits in Uttar Pradesh in this context) on the project of writing history in contemporary India. Historically, the Brahmanical knowledge system which naturalised caste discrimination and exclusion as social practice and preached the language of contempt as religious ideology came under attack from the newly educated non-Brahmans including untouchables. Also importantly the “new moderns”¹⁵ aspired to rewrite their identities tracing back to respectable historical pasts and figures such as Shivaji in the case of Marathas (in colonial and postcolonial times), and Uda Devi, Bijli Pasi and Jhalkaribai (I am referring to these figures mentioned by Chakrabarty) in the case of Dalits in Uttar Pradesh. The early nationalist imagination in pursuit of “scientific history” allied to the Brahmanical imagination. Consequently the caste Hindu elites including Rabindranath Tagore, Jadunath Sarkar, R G Bhandarkar and many others while using the language of universality propagated the idea of “social unity” equating it with national unity. They assumed natural leadership over the illiterate lower orders and thought it was their duty to “disseminate scientific knowledge” similar to Europeans who thought the knowledge they produced should be received by the rest of the world with gratitude. But neither the Europeans nor caste Hindu elites anticipated that the receiver of that knowledge would have critical faculties which might one day awaken and question its inherent prejudices. Not surprisingly, the Marathas questioned the scientificity of Brahmanical interpretation of Shivaji and Dalits in Uttar Pradesh resorted to producing “myths, legends and mythical anecdotes through oral, written and visual media. Statues have been made of Dalit heroes and heroines, their images put on cheap calendars, fairs and festivals organised in their names, and books brought out to narrate their stories” (Chakrabarty 2008). Interestingly, Chakrabarty (2008) reads the upsurge of mass politics (coming of non-Brahmins and lower castes) on the colonial public sphere as a threat to the discipline of history itself and says:

...with all their belief in the universality of knowledge, what a Tagore or a Sarkar, or a Bhandarkar for that matter, could not imagine was the actual nature of the democracy that evolved in India once mass

politics became the mainstay of the nationalist movement. As more and more groups were swept up in the tides of the nationalist movement in the 1920s and 1930s, the ‘wars’ that marked the social body of India came to the fore, destroying the ideal of social unity that once inspired Sarkar or Maitreya before the World War I. What once looked like a benign ‘enthusiasm for history’ now produced as mass politics evolved so many history wars. Historical contestation pitting one social group against another took place in the 19th century as well but gained real momentum in the political bargaining of the 1930s and 1940s, when enthusiasm for the past was fast transformed into partisan passions. To put it simply, the Hindus now wrote histories that tried to depict Muslims kings as unabashed oppressors: Muslims blamed the Hindus for their relative decline: lower castes revolted against Brahmanical texts and oppression....The idea of historical knowledge as a universal, as some kind of a public good, was clearly in crisis.¹⁶

Scrutiny of Democratic Politics

As a Subaltern scholar, instead of seeing these awakenings as a positive sign of consciousness among the marginalised challenging the elitist caste and class prejudices, the author seems to rue the unnecessary “crisis” that has been precipitated. Interestingly, Chakrabarty (2008) becomes more emotional and pours out his sadness as the discipline of history came under the critical scrutiny of democratic politics in recent times.¹⁷ In a tone of nostalgic lament, he states:

Fragment or no fragment, this imagination of the nation as constituting some kind of a whole seems untenable today. The assumption that there is ‘whole’ in India that always trumps all conflicts and diversity does not strike us today with any degree of obviousness beyond what the media or Bollywood can produce with cricket or the occasional war with Pakistan...but it would be unrealistic to think of these moments as somehow revealing a deep transhistorical truth about India’s capacity for social or political unity.

The reading of assertions of marginalised and excluded communities as a threat to the unity of the Indian nation sounds less Subaltern and more like that of the colonialists who questioned India’s ability as a nation to overcome myriad fissures and challenges. Also surprisingly Chakrabarty misses the pertinent historical point that if we scrutinise the catalogues and the histories of anti-caste, non-Brahmin, Dalit and other marginalised movements and ideologies in colonial and postcolonial times, we would find that they never challenged the fundamental unity of India as a nation. Instead, they demanded their legitimate space and identity in the nation and its imagination. In addition, he derides the aspiration of Dalits and other “marginalised castes” for positive historical narratives by using the writings of Kancha Ilaiah and Badri Narayan. Chakrabarty (2008) says:

Many of the intellectuals and politicians of the lower-caste¹⁸ groups in India—for instance, the political bloc that sometimes goes by the name of *dalit-bahujan samaj* (society of the oppressed and the majority)—prefer to write histories that have deep connections with politics of identity and that do not subscribe to *ideology of a whole* [italics added]. Listen, for instance, to Kancha Ilaiah, a *dalit-bahujan* (oppressed-majority) intellectual, writing in *Subaltern Studies* on the need to *combat* [italics added] upper-caste histories: “The Dalit-bahujan experience a long experience of 3,000 years at that—tells us that no abuser stops abusing unless there is retaliation. An atmosphere of calm, an atmosphere of

respect for one another in which contradiction may be democratically resolved is never possible unless the abuser is abused as a matter of shock treatment.’ The casualty of Ilaiah’s approach to history is not Indian democracy. For as Badri Narayan has shown with his meticulous research, such contestation of upper-caste rendition of history has been an integral part of the electoral politics of recent *dalit-bahujan* leaders Kanchi Ram or Mayawati. The causality of this history war has been the historical method itself.

This reading and presentation of Dalit–Bahujan¹⁹ struggles as combative and divisive is at once too simplistic and ahistorical. It is true that the historical struggles of the oppressed are usually launched from a higher ethical and moral edge in their demand for dignity and respect, but historically there is no evidence that they are launched from a vantage point of combative or retaliatory abuse. On the contrary, any critical historical reading of Dalit movements across India including B R Ambedkar’s would clarify that they did not resort to retaliation and violence either as an ethic or strategy.²⁰ If retaliatory abuse and violence²¹ was/is the method Dalits and other marginal adopted India would have arguably witnessed real “wars against upper castes” (in Ilaiah’s language) given their numerical strength. Instead, we continue to witness violence unleashed against the Dalits as an integral part of caste domination and oppression with Dalit girls and women being raped, killed and hung from trees (in May 2014 Uttar Pradesh),²² and men being maimed and killed. Therefore, just as Ilaiah’s polemical assertion is unfounded, Chakrabarty’s use of him to counter Dalit aspiration for dignified space in historical narratives makes it a self-defeating exercise.

Chakrabarty himself picks up the issue of evidence to disparage the legitimacy of the Dalit perspective in history. He writes:

Dalit historians have not always cared for ‘evidence’ in the way that we might expect them to if they were our colleagues or students in universities. Ilaiah, for instance, writes with a clear and explicit intention to eschew the use of ‘source’ and ‘evidence’ and to base his history on ‘experience’ alone.... In the essay he wrote for *Subaltern Studies*, Ilaiah, a university-trained political scientist, deliberately set aside all academic procedures in order to claim for *dalit-bahujan* peoples a past that would not look to academics for vindication. Ilaiah’s radical claim was that the existing archives and ways of reading them—the discipline of history to be precise—had to be rejected if *dalit-bahujans* were to find pasts that helped them in their present struggles.²³

It is true that Ilaiah, in the essay he wrote for *Subaltern Studies* and his subsequent writings, pays scant attention to theoretical models or historical evidences. However it is not out of any innovative methodological design; rather his style can be attributed to his ahistorical reading of Dalit–Bahujan struggles and consciousness. It is particularly regrettable as the Telugu public sphere (like most other regional languages) which has been historically very vibrant and witnessed large-scale struggles against the Brahmanical oppression articulating anti-caste ideologies from as early as 17th century, for example, those initiated by Potluri Veerebrahmam and Vemana (Fuchs 1965). Even in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the non-Brahmin movement and specific Dalit movements produced powerful critiques of Brahmanical Hinduism and its rituals and caste practices including untouchability. Non-Brahmin

writers and activists such as Thapi Dharma Rao,²⁴ Tripuraneni Ramaswamy Chaudhary,²⁵ Kodavatiganti Kutumba Rao and others wrote extensively against the Brahmanical Hinduism. Interestingly reformers coming from the Brahmin background such as Goparaju Ramachandra Rao (known as Gora)²⁶ and Gudipati Venkatachalam (known as Chalam)²⁷ also stand out as outstanding critiques of Brahmanical irrationality and patriarchy. However, the field was made even more vibrant by the earliest generation of Dalit writers and activists who played a critical role in the context of anti-colonial nationalism, such as Kusuma Dharmanna, Jala Rangaswamy, Jala Mangamma, Tadi Nagamma, Nakka Chinna Venkaiah, and Bhoi Bheemanna. Historically, one of the most significant aspects of the Telugu public sphere is that anti-Brahmanism and anti-caste traditions evolved out of and spread across the breadth of the social spectrum without being an exclusively prerogative of just non-Brahmin castes or Dalits; as suggested before, the contribution of even Brahmins such as Gora and Chalam cannot be overlooked. The experience of oppression especially the genre of life narratives was a vibrant field in Telugu literary sphere—Brahmin widows,²⁸ to non-Brahmin²⁹ and Dalits³⁰ wrote biographies and autobiographies indicting Brahmanical patriarchy and caste discrimination and the practice of untouchability. Narrating the experience of oppression has been a powerful tool by many as a mode of protest and this lineage needs to be recognised while acknowledging or situating writers like Ilaiah.

'Even the Oppressed Needs a Memory'

Michel de Certeau had said that the overemphasis on the rationality in the writing of history led to "folklore abandoned along the roadside of progress" (1988). Folklore or folk narratives definitely constitute a powerful tool to recuperate the histories of the "dalit-bahujans" particularly because many struggles and histories were recreated in the form of folk tales and performed in village theatres in the form of caste puranas by the satellite castes who acted as social archives for the illiterate masses who were denied access to education and literature.³¹ Such repertoire of literature, apart from or in addition to the colonial archives, gives us many possibilities for writing the histories of anti-caste struggles and intellectual traditions to write alternative histories of the marginal and other oppressed sections.

Ilaiah's assertion "I deliberately do not want to take precautions, qualify my statements, footnote my material, nuance my claims, for simple reason that my statement are not meant to be nuanced in the first place. They are meant to raise Dalit-bahujan consciousness"³² theoretically promises a radical departure from the existing mode of writing history, but it falls short and even becomes counterproductive to the emancipatory struggles of the oppressed. It is because through his rhetorical strategy Ilaiah promises to challenge the dominant mainstream historiography, but fails to include or bring to light the rich historical tradition of anti-Brahmanism and anti-casteism in the Telugu public sphere that preceded him. Arguably, tracing that lineage would be the ideal means to "raise Dalit-bahujan

consciousness." To use a metaphor of caste oppression it is similar to the image of a long walker who has travelled far but with a broom tied to his back to erase his own footprints. At the end of the journey she will not even know how far she has travelled or where she has reached.³³ Most importantly the debilitating experience of oppressed castes is that the ontological wound can be healed not just by recounting the experience of oppression. Rather, it needs to be coalesced with a positive historical memory of anti-caste traditions which can instil self-confidence in them to fight and assert their right as equals. That is why D R Nagaraj says "even the oppressed needs a memory" (2011). Mere polemics and protest, instead of "raising Dalit-bahujan consciousness," rob them of their historical roots and disempowers their claim for a rightful place in history and society.

It is unfortunate that at one level Subaltern scholars like Chakrabarty do not recognise caste and caste-based discrimination as worthy of historical investigation. In fact, they use the writings of scholars like Ilaiah whose work is neither based on methodological innovation nor on theoretical or historical insights, to discount Dalit and other oppressed caste aspirations for positive historical narratives and their claim for a legitimate place in the nation and its imagination. As Amartya Sen says "India has a terrible record in social asymmetry, of which the caste system is only one reflection" (2005).³⁴ He adds that "to acknowledge the long-standing presence of remarkable societal inequality in India, we do not have to endorse radical oversimplifications about cultural—not to mention genetic predispositions towards asymmetry in India" (2005). It is significant to note that Sen sees the politics of democracy and their possibilities as ways to mitigate the inequalities at every level unlike Chakrabarty who sees the politics of democracy and identity as a threat to the discipline of history.³⁵

The exclusion and dehumanisation of Dalits and other oppressed is so complete in Hindu Brahmanical literature and imagery that a Dalit can never see his/her self-being reflected in that iconography. Even the academic writings, including that of the Subalterns, are not exceptions. Therefore, it is self-explanatory that in the context of electoral mobilisational politics which are based on caste and community identities, Dalits resort to reconstructing their own real and imaginary heroes based on folk memory and legend to rally people as inspirational stories of fighting against injustice and demonstration of valour. Their own sense of history and methods of doing might not fit academic conventions and procedures (in reference to Badri Narayan's work by Chakrabarty) but they bind people together as a community. In this context, a line from the renowned Kashmiri poet, Agha Shahid Ali, aptly captures the Dalit relationship with the mainstream academic writings. "Your history gets in the way of my memory" (Ghosh 2002). Even though it is improper to see all these authors, including Subalterns, as casteist or supporters of Brahmanism, the question that remains is: how to understand these ethical failings on part of conscientious intellectuals especially scholars dealing with modern India.

It may be understood in two ways; first, it can be traced to the very idea of the craft of writing history and the second, to the inherited privileges and prejudices of the producers of knowledge in South Asia as well as their consumers. I will explore the first issue by using de Certeau's seminal work, *The Writing History*, which unpacks the tension between the craft of writing history (historians–discourse) and the subjects (social body–people) about whom they write. This might help us interpret the tension in *Subaltern Studies* with respect to caste, especially between its avowed intentions and its actual practice of writing history. According to Certeau “modern Western history essentially begins with differentiation between the *present and past*” (1988). He also says the writing of history assumes the separation, exclusion and differentiation into “periods,” “subject and object” and labour and discourse are fundamental. As “it forces the silent body to speak... the violence of the body reaches the written page only through absence, through the intermediary of documents that the historian has been able to see” (1988). Therefore the historians assume the dead past to exist independently to be brought into the present conversations in the form of narrative or discourse. In

this way Subaltern historians in India also assume the silent/dead to exist in archives and bring them to life through their research and writing. At one level the Dalit as a recalcitrant subject and object in history does not conform to the normative rules of the craft of history writing as Dalits are not the dead past and as subject and object of past and present they ceaselessly break the disciplinary boundaries and remain difficult to comprehend. On the other hand, the Dalit marked out by caste and the stigma of untouchability stands questioningly against the inherited privileges of the writers/historians (caste Hindus) stripping them of their moral and ethical advantages, which they claim against the West. Precisely because of this reason S Shankar says “postcolonial theory is peculiar. In startling ways it is not postcolonial at all. Consider for example, caste and how little postcolonial theory has to say about it” (2012).

Therefore acknowledging and including the anti-caste struggles of Dalits from pre-colonial to postcolonial India as part of the nationalist imagination—as the words of Martha Nussbaum attest at the beginning of this essay—is imperative not only to build an inclusive ethical society but also to pave the way for a richer democracy devoid of discrimination and violence.

NOTES

- 1 Charles Taylor's reflection on the relationship between honour and inequalities in pre-modern social hierarchies aptly illustrates the relationship between caste hierarchy and the misrecognition of Dalits as untouchables. He draws this important idea from Jean Jacques Rousseau.
- 2 I deploy the idea of “imagined communities” as used by Benedict Anderson in his classic work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2006. The important role of print capitalism in the imagination of new identities is demonstrated by Anderson as well as by other scholars who wrote on identity politics across the world.
- 3 For an interesting debate on Hegel's philosophy in identity and debate, see *Identity and Difference: Studies in Hegel's Logic, Philosophy of Spirit, and Politics*, Philip T Grier (2007) (ed), Albany: NY State University of New York Press, 2007.
- 4 The appellation “Dalit” literally means “trampled,” Hindi and several other Indian languages.
- 5 I use Michel de Certeau's *Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) which provides a powerful theoretical lens to read the everyday life of Dalits in terms of their cultural practices, rituals as well as mythological and oral narratives that sometimes subvert Brahmanical traditions and even appropriates them to reinscribe their social status with dignity above and outside the caste system.
- 6 Jamba Purana. See Simon Charsley's webpage for a detailed account: www.simoncharsley.co.uk
- 7 Emma Rauschenbusch-Clough, *While Sewing Sandals Or Tales of a Telugu Pariah Tribe and John E Clough, Social Christianity in the Orient: The Story of A Man, A Mission and A Movement* provides a fascinating story of Madiga untouchables who were engaged in the anti-caste tradition as followers of Badikatla Veeramma—a female yogi saint who preached social equality. Peraiyah, the first untouchable convert who led the flock of Madigas into American Baptist Mission, was a follower of Veeramma and was already leading Madigas' movement against caste discrimination and the practice of untouchability.
- 8 For example, the 12th century Veerasaiva movement led by Basava articulated anti-caste ideology and social equality but eventually was assimilated into Brahmanical tradition. Ironically, the main followers of Veerasaivism—the Lingayats in Karnataka settled for a socially dominant landholding caste identity. See Velcheru Narayana Rao and Gene H Roghair (1990). Introduction to this translation provides an excellent literary and socio-historical context of Veerasaivism not only as an anti-caste and anti-Brahmanical movement but also illustrates its intervention in the literary sphere which advocated use of popular (desi) form rather than classical Sanskrit (Marga) forms.
- 9 The dominant stream of Dalit movement in Telugu-speaking areas led by Kusuma Dharmanna, Jala Rangaswamy, Nakka China Venkaiah, Undru Subba Rao, Tadi Nagamma, Vemula Kurmaiah, Buusu Sambamurti, Bhagya Reddy Varma and others followed Gandhi and the Congress.
- 10 Even the recent historical writings on Dalits suffer from two fundamental problems: first, they are based on colonial and official archives (in English); the other is that they do not engage with the Dalit writings in vernacular languages thereby limiting the representation of “real” Dalit voices since most of the writings by Dalits were in their mother tongue.
- 11 Title of Chapter Four is “Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts”.
- 12 Interestingly, Dipesh Chakrabarty uses Ranajit Guha's article on the Santhal Rebellion to illustrate his argument on the Minority Histories and Subaltern Pasts.
- 13 Dipesh Chakrabarty quotes Eric Hobsbawm who argued that the bad histories give rise to bad politics but also bad history is not harmless history—it is dangerous.
- 14 I do not want to pretend I have no caste identity—I write from the vantage point of being a Dalit. I use my subjective position as a Dalit in my intellectual endeavour as a historian not to vent out emotions and frustration. Rather my own subjective experience of marginalisation and historical exclusion (of my community) provides an ethical lens to critically engage with the existing historical narratives to tease out their oppressive and liberative models as a way of social justice of inclusion. Therefore, the aim of this project is not to deride the existing historical scholarship on South Asia but to point out their omissions and learn from their theoretical and methodological paradigms, especially *Subaltern Studies*, to enhance the nuances of the narratives of history. Most importantly I do not subscribe to the dogmatic view that the Dalit only is qualified to write Dalit history. Indeed the inspiration for this project comes from the writings of American historians and scholars such as Eric Foner, David Blight and others who, transcending (yet being conscious of) their racial/social locations, contributed enormously in retrieving the hidden and marginalised histories and narratives of African-Americans. But I also believe that the feminist movement driven by men, LGBT movement driven by heterosexual men/women, and the Black emancipatory politics driven by white men and Dalit emancipatory project driven by non-Dalits lack authenticity of voice. Therefore being inclusive and sensitive to the insider voice is fundamental to write a project of emancipation for the people who face stigma and discrimination. Outsiders' interventions can further their cause but cannot claim their voice and identity.
- 15 Unlike the modernised Brahmin reformers who tried to reform caste Hindu Brahmanical rituals and practices, the non-Brahmin intellectuals and visionaries such as Jotiba Phule attempted structural reforms to the Brahmanical Hinduism with an anti-caste philosophy. Most importantly, Phule pointed out the collusion between colonialism and Brahmanism.

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- 16 Like Dipesh Chakravorty, Ananya Vajpeyi (2012) vents out the collapse of ideal of social unity imagined by the founders Tagore, Gandhi and Nehru.
- 17 Richard Parker (2005) says "all politics is identity politics. Political activity is—and, at its best, is—animated by efforts to define and defend who I am, or we are or you are, or hope to be, or hope to be seen to be. By extension, it is motivated by our imagination of what is or ought to be mine or ours or yours. It is not only about self-government. Nor does it always involve much in the ways of public debate. What structures it, often beneath the surface, is the always unfinished enterprise of self-construction and self-presentation."
- 18 I have strong objection towards the use of categories like lower castes, upper castes, backward and forward castes as these categories, true to their colonial origins, strip the humanity of the subjects and result in "ontological wounds" on the people who bear those identities.
- 19 This hyphenated compound identity, though a convenient one in countering upper-caste oppression, is itself complicated and it needs to be pointed out that the experience of untouchability separates these two (Dalit and Bahujan) and ironically, in many cases the Bahujans also practise untouchability against Dalits.
- 20 For example, when B R Ambedkar led thousands of Dalits to access water from public tank, the caste Hindus resorted to violence but Ambedkar never urged his followers to resort to violence or abuse as a method of political struggle. As a qualified barrister from England he used the colonial court and legislative forums to demand equal access of untouchables to public properties. See Anupama Rao's *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*.
- 21 Dalit Panthers in Bombay used this tactic but were eclipsed with the same speed as they arrived.
- 22 In the southern states of the United States, assertive and ambitious Black men were punished with public killing by hanging. See Gyanendra Pandey's *A History of Prejudice: Race, Caste and Difference in India and United States* (2013).
- 23 Chakrabarty also quotes extensively Ilaiah's own statement, "I deliberately do not want to take precautions, qualify my statements, footnote my material, nuance my claims, for the simple reason that my statements are not meant to be nuanced in the first place. They are meant to raise Dalit-bahujan consciousness."
- 24 He wrote *Devalayalamida Butu Bommalenduku?* (What Is the Need for Erotic Sculpture on Hindu Temples?) in 1971 attacking the erotic sculptures on Hindu temples.
- 25 He attacked Brahmanical religious scriptures using rationalist thought. Among his famous writings is *Sambhukavadha* (Deceitful Killing of Sambhuka) deriding *Ramayana* as Brahmanical epic and anti-Sudra text.
- 26 Gora, the legendary Gandhian rationalist, spoke against caste and untouchability and also propagated rationalist ideas against Brahmanical rituals and practices. His conviction for rationalism was unparalleled as he even refused to use flowers for marriage ceremonies. One of his sons, Lavanam (his name means "salt" as he was born on the eve of Gandhi's famous Salt March) married Dalit poet Gurram Jashua's daughter Hemalatha. She recounted that her marriage was conducted without any ceremonies and as a symbolic gesture, she and her husband exchanged garlands of vegetables (instead of flowers) which were then cooked and served to the guests.
- 27 Chalam, one of the finest Telugu writers to articulate the feminist point of view especially

- in terms of freedom from patriarchal family norms and sexual liberation for women. His novel *Maidhanam* (Open Field without any Obstacles) is a milestone in articulating women's freedom and breaking all forms of Brahmanical norms and morality from marriage, sex, caste, and age. Interestingly, Chalam wrote the script for the first ever film on Dalits in Telugu titled *Malapilla* (An Untouchable Girl) in 1938. Thapi Dharma Rao, a fellow atheist, was the music director and Gudavalli Ramabrahmam was the director and producer of the film. The film was centred on love and marriage between a Brahmin boy and untouchable girl. The film was made as a response to the social boycott of Dalits in Kalyanapuram village. The film was not allowed to be screened in many villages and *Krishna Patrika*, a Telugu daily, published many articles on the controversy from 8 October to 5 November in 1938.
- 28 See Vakulabharanam Rajagopal, "The Rhetorical Strategy of an Autobiography: Reading Satyavati's *Atmacaritam*," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 40, 4, 2003, pp 377–402.
- 29 Most prominent political activists and writers, both Brahmin and non-Brahmin, wrote their autobiographies, for example, Tripuraneni Raswamy Chaudhary, Thapi Dharma Rao, N G Ranga, Chalam and many others.
- 30 Also see Chinnaiiah Jangam, "Desecrating Sacred Taste: The Making of Gurram Jashua—The Father of Dalit Literature in Telugu," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 51, 2 (2014), 177–98.
- 31 See Subbachari, P, *Telugulo Kula Puranalu: Asrita Vyavastha* (Caste Myths and Dependent Caste System of Telugus), 2000.
- 32 Quoted by Chakrabarty from Ilaiah's article in *Subaltern Studies*, p 158.
- 33 In reality untouchables were forced to walk in the villages by tying brooms behind their backs so that the higher caste people would not have to be "polluted" by walking on the same path that the untouchable walked on. It can also be read symbolically as an attempt to a continual erasure of the untouchable's past and lineages. The dominant castes/ideologies do not want the oppressed caste and untouchables to have any positive historical narratives or images. Therefore Ilaiah's strategy helps reinforce the agenda of the oppressor rather than carry the emancipatory potential of the oppressed.
- 34 Especially the Chapter 2 on Inequality, Instability and Voice is a fascinating reflection on inequality and identity in the context of pluralism and tolerance for difference in India.
- 35 In the last two decades many political scientists working on Indian politics saw the growing presence of Dalits and other oppressed castes as a positive outcome in engendering the idea of democracy. For example, see works of Ashutosh Varshney, Sunil Khilnani and Christophe Jaffrelot and others.

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