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Caste Away:

Recalcitrant Affects and Social Reproduction

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This paper focuses on affective dimensions of social identity and the psychic structures, through which these affects operate to perpetrate forms of social othering and violence. The era of global multiculturalism expects social exchange and relationships to rest on a commitment to an ethic of mutuality and respect for differences, as well as a rationality governed by a considerable degree of open-mindedness. Yet, from time to time, the fabric of this collective ethic is rent apart through an eruption of hate and violence. These instances stage extreme forms of social disorder through which communities assert their opposition and antagonisms. On closer inspection, one can find underneath this sudden upheaval, continuities with everyday forms of oppression that often go unregistered and unrecorded. In this paper, I deconstruct how we become perpetrators without *knowing* it. We *speak* equality, and we *feel* otherwise. Our response to others is mediated by affects that operate at a prediscursive level. Because affects are not regulated by intention, there is a need to go beyond representations in explicit speech and gestures, in order to understand the psychology of, processes of discrimination and othering.

The paper specifically examines the institution of caste in the Indian context. While caste as a social institution is widely condemned as divisive, it is not uncommon for a moral justification for it to be drawn from the discourses on performance and division of labour. I will argue, how we perform caste not just through labour, but also through affect. The first part of the following paper describes my social location and a brief autobiographical sketch of the academic journey that brought me to the question of caste and affect. In the subsequent parts, the lens of postcolonial critical psychology and psychoanalysis are used to open up the question of how the affect of disgust circulates in interpersonal relationships, and

the ways in which it contributes to the recalcitrance of historical forms of othering and oppression.

Ten years back, as a student of Psychology, and then Anthropology, when I first encountered in my readings, the thematic of the psychic life of power, I was struck by cautionary note by Derek Hook, a scholar and practitioner of Psychoanalysis. He described what for me was a new convergence between psychology and politics - 'Psychopolitics'- as "an understanding of both how politics impacts upon the psychological and how personal psychology may repeat, internalize, and entrench political effects at the level of identity." (Hook, 2004)

For a long time, I thought about the inversion of the inside-out model of the self and the world, that these words had inaugurated for me. I had come to grow dissatisfied with the mainstream psychological discourse which reified the individual as an asocial a historical coordinate of personality complexes. Nevertheless, there was something of the 'psychological' that I still wished to resuscitate in this inversion. I wondered: what does it mean to be *critical*. What kind of 'psychological' could one find in this 'critical'? How does one inhabit a position that could be critical both of the discipline of Psychology, whilst also retaining it as a mode of critique of society? Dhar (2013) urging us to think of the critical tradition in India, reminds us that it is not enough to culturalise Psychology in order to make it critical. Similarly, a psychoanalytic critique of mainstream Psychology, when it comes to India, would need to intersect with two registers of critique: one coming from culture, and the other coming from Critical Psychology. Dhar's model of conceptualizing these three traditions in India as three inextricable rings of a borromean knot has been invaluable for me in thinking through the question of Caste in Indian Psychology.

To begin with, this model required of me to locate myself in my autobiographical social ethos. I had grown up in a middle class, *Savarna* Hindu family in the urban metropolitan capital of New Delhi, in which the structure of caste seemed to constitute no part of my *lived* experience. As an adult, I saw myself as an academic migrant between two disciplines, repeating and perhaps sublimating the painful past of geographical dislocation that my grandparents were forced to undertake during 1947. A period when Independence of India from the British was accompanied by the violent Partition of the sub-continent into India and Pakistan. India came to house a majority of the Hindu population while the Muslims, majority

were forced to flee to Pakistan. The inter-generational trauma of this cataclysmic event is only now beginning to be understood (Mehra, 2014; Brasset &Vaughan-Williams, 2012; Das 1996). Raj (2000) notes, how Punjabi Hindus in Delhi came to constitute a community post Partition that both saw itself as historically disenfranchised, and also instrumental in the making of modern India. For me, my grandparents remained distant mythical figures that had survived horrible trials, yet heroic in how they nurtured and paved the future that was to come. Their labour and sacrifices shaped my parents, whose mission in turn was to provide their children with all that which they themselves had seldom been able to afford. We were a small, single-income family, in which my brother and I were fortunate to have the privilege of excellent public school education. I knew my education was expensive, so I worked very hard to earn scholarships that could offset some of the expenses. The celebration around my accomplishments became sombre as the successes became more routine. To not be among the top three students in my class was equivalent to failing, and failing meant disappointing all the expectations that rested on me. Failing meant falling. I could not wear my achievements lightly. The desire to succeed was the desire to somehow emancipate myself from the weight of these internalized expectations, one day, someday.

In my family, I was the first generation of women who had gone to college. I grew up without much knowledge or experience of caste as part of my identity. While as an adult, the discourse of caste entered my world, this desire for emancipation took the shape of my psychological identification with the oppressed. I taught myself to write, because to write was to do a labour of a particular kind, to address myself to a particular audience, and to enter a particular contest *against* the passivity of being written about. Homi Bhabha (1992) discusses how writing is one among the several "unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world." I saw writing as expression and emancipation. As the contours of this paper were forming in my mind, a male colleague, himself loudly Savarna, was quick to remind me of my *Savarna* identity and the dangers of appropriation of representation. Yet others wanted me to reflect on how the language of care concealed within itself the language of control. They somehow ‘heard’ this attempt as an attempt to write about Dalit experience, rather

than a reflection on my own location, and the relationalities it made possible or foreclosed.

Amidst this din, there was an immense resistance to writing. This is not a paper I *wanted* to write, but a paper I *had* to write. I tried to make sense of this resistance by taking recourse to the psycho-political register, and locating it within the affective body. My fingers would fail to respond to the instruction to write. I thought about the training of mainstream Western Psychology that ran in the veins of my fingers and slowed me down. My hands had also internalized voices that would often reproach Psychology for adopting a lens; too individualist, positivist, and reductionist. How was one to begin?

My undergraduate training in Psychology had coincided with the turn of century. When I finished my undergraduate studies, India had seen a decade of economic liberalization. It was first introduced in 1991, which had expanded the role of private and foreign investment in the country. Even as we continued to read the paradigmatic texts from Western Psychology, a wave of critical reflection had set in, at least theoretically, problematizing the segregation of individual experience from social context and relationships. The "individual" of textbook abstraction was increasingly being reconfigured as always already social, marked by social relationships, cultural practices, and institutional structures in its very formation. This was also in line with the postmodern turn in the social sciences, wherein older notions of stable identity through which this individual was examined were no longer available. As claims to truth became more widely contested through a decentred access to information, there was a significant epistemic shift happening in Psychology on the Indian terrain.

The erosion of foundational texts set up within the academe a climate of a highly insecure knowledge system on the one hand, and an exaggerated accountability on the other. A discipline that foregrounded the "individual" in the Indian context was both special as well as precarious. This focus on the "individual" stood in sharp relief to the denial of psychological individuation- always in the interest of the collective- that was promoted by the traditional cultural emphases. Under these circumstances, the sense of political agency founded from *within* the discipline was difficult for any conscientious psychologist to build.

There was still something more, something which has to do, perhaps, with the peculiar position that Psychology occupies within the social sciences, for the import of its discourse, and for what is seen as its mysterious purchase on madness. This import makes it all the more crucial to examine its underlying ideological assumptions. The gaze of the psychologist is held in awe, fear, and dismissal, all at the same time. For the psychologist herself, both the expertise projected onto her, and the felt lack of it, are experienced intensely. She finds herself repeatedly located within the affective currents of simultaneous privilege and marginality that the discipline is founded on. On the one hand, Psychology is never sufficiently scientific enough. On the other hand, as a logos of the 'psyche,' it's concern with 'soul' 'spirit' 'mind' suggests a special insight into the realm of human experience that is often cast aside by the discourses of rationality. It would be quite correct to suggest that we live in a 'psychological culture' - a culture in which as psychology is disseminated, it comes to function as a manner of speech, a cultural resource. Psychological discourse here informs common sense, as well as self-understanding and subjectivity.

This historical disjunction between the psychological (the turning inwards to the self, psyche, its affective figurations and symbolic contours) and the political (the turning outwards to the affairs of the polis) is taken up persuasively by Hook (2004, 2012) through his turn to a hyphenated relationship of psycho-politics. As he sees it, there is a three-fold task that Psycho-Politics is confronted with: To outline the ways in which Psychology is political; to outline the ways in which the political is replicated in the psyche; and to outline the ways in which the experiential informs resistance. Critical Psychology and Politics are to exist in a relationship of mutual critique, underscored against the focus on the problems of personal identity that emerge in the violence of the colonial encounter. In Hook's writings, works of Franz Fanon, Steve Biko, and Homi Bhabha offer rich insights to engage with that extremely pressing and disturbing predicament of the persistence of racism in the West, in the midst of vast social and institutional change and liberal discourse that no longer reward such discrimination.

The question before the psychologist, then, is how does one understand the recalcitrance of social oppression? How is one to understand the gap between the enlightened mind and the racist tongue? The continuance of social discrimination and violence cannot simply be explained away through recourse to the rational social

scientific tropes of "ignorance, objectification or inter-group antagonism" (Hook, 2012). Instead, it demands a new conceptual vocabulary that goes beyond the injunctions of legal and social policy. Hook discusses in great detail how much of this racism operates at a pre-discursive level, leaking out symptomatically in the "unintention" of customary attitudes, habits, and reflexive avoidance of groups. Some of the conceptual mapping of this pre-discursive is made available through theorizations in Psychoanalysis, primarily through the works of Freud, Lacan, and Kristeva, whose works are instrumental in teasing out the contemporary relationship between the psychological and the political. In the following sections of the paper, I explore this relationship in the context of the caste system in India.

E(c)llipses of Enlightenment: Caste in Contemporary India

India in the 21st century is a multicultural nation. The Preamble to the Constitution of India pronounces it as a "sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic Republic." Article 15 of the Constitution prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. Legal sanctions against caste based discrimination inform the liberal citizen's discourse. Overt references to caste identity are often considered socially improper and objectionable. However, in the last seven decades since Independent India adopted its own Constitution, it certainly cannot be said that long held caste prejudices have simply disappeared. Liberal discourses of equality and justice can be found alongside deeply internalized affects and images around caste-based identity.

In many instances, older forms of caste based discrimination disguise themselves and resurface in modern secular discourses of merit. One can easily bring to mind the Anti-Reservation protests of 1990, in which many students participated to protest against the implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission for reservations in government jobs based on caste. The underlying apprehension many of these students were carrying was that in an economy marked by high degree of unemployment, these reservations would further usurp jobs that were *rightfully* theirs. These anxieties were masterfully exploited by the larger political currents, by invoking the discourse of merit, and projecting reservations as anti-merit, a trope that has continued till date. Bourdieu (1984) challenges this

concept of meritocracy in education by exposing how seemingly objective indices of individual talent and merit ideologically conceal and invisiblise the mechanisms of social and cultural capital that are transmitted historically and inter-generationally. The setting up a binary of reservation versus merit in case of the anti-Mandal protests was based on the assumption that education was a level playing field, a democracy of equal opportunities for all, whilst completely overlooking the fact that the 'starting line' in this playing field was not the same for everyone. Several generations of social deprivation and discrimination that the lower caste had suffered had exacted material, social, economic and cultural costs which in turn adversely affected the chances of success in education.

At a macro level, the caste system of contemporary India reflects the shadow that British imperialism cast and how Independence from our colonial past is still rid with its afterlife. Traditional forms of caste as well as the British bourgeois ideal promoted through modern Westernized education both privileged intellectual pursuits over manual labour. Political psychologist Ashis Nandy (1983) has widely critiqued the project of Western modernity as one that was sponsored out of violent colonial plunder. He writes…

> "Mastery over men is not merely a by-product of a faulty political economy, but also a worldview which believes in the absolute superiority of the human over the non-human and the subhuman, the masculine over the feminine, the adult over the child, the historical over the ahistorical and modern or progressive overt the traditional or the savage."

Nandy further puts forth the argument, how this spectre of imperialism in post-independence India hovers long after the institutional apparatus of territorial conquest has ceased to exist. After the political retreat of colonial forces, the British bourgeois ideal continues to replicate itself in the cultural capital embodied in a small minority of educated elites and bureaucracy. Modern Westernized education replaces hierarchies of traditional order with secular hierarchies, camouflaging within its rhetoric of progress, a powerful tool for social control.

In valuing intellectual labour above manual labour, this creolization finds an elective affinity with old forms of caste discrimination. In the traditional ordering of the varna system, a system of social stratification, there are four varnas. The *Brahmin,* at the very top, functions as the moral-intellectual keeper of society,

followed by the *Kshatriya,* renowned for warrior skills and strength, The Kshatriya is followed by the *Vaishya* or the trader who is involved in economic activity, and finally the *Shudra* and those below him, who must tend to all manual labour, especially that of scavenging and maintaining cleanliness. At the very base of this hierarchy are the Dalits, who are considered to be outside the varna system and are subjected to practices of untouchability. Caste operates structurally as a specialized occupation group that is socially reproduced through caste endogamy.

Ritual and moral superiority is attached to the Brahmin as custodian of intellectual activity within this traditional order. Manual labour and toil of all kinds is placed at an inferior status in comparison to intellectual labour. Hindu religious scriptures such as the Manusmriti discuss at length the customs of prohibition around commensality and practices of touching to be observed in order to maintain purity of the self and prevent its pollution. Notions of purity and pollution are critical in maintaining the distance between castes, and can be found abundantly in the Hindu religious discourse. The discourse of modern secular education, on the other hand, substitutes ritual superiority and caste rank with notions of merit and status. It is little surprise then, that despite the social and institutional reforms India has witnessed in the last seven decades, there still exists a caste divide that overlaps with class distinctions.

Politics of Affect, Politics of Representation

In turning to the politics of affect, I shall first turn to a dream-image, which visits me as a sensorial experience. The sensorial turn in politics encourages us to approach the sensorium as a multi-layered phenomenon which ties together the body's biological make-up and elicitations with the surrounding institutions, practices, and traditions (Tonder, 2015).[1] This sensorial elicitation being invoked here draws from a lived experience, a 'brushing' encounter I had with a little beggar girl on the road. One summer evening, on way back from work in an auto-rickshaw that had stopped at a red light, I was approached by a beggar girl who did not seem

[1] Of relevance here is the model of micropolitics as given by Deleuze and Guattari, that focuses on the sentient existence that is below the threshold of consciousness, and enables connections and identities that exceed the categories of identity and difference as we usually understand them.

more than 6 or 7 years old. This girl, with skin and hair that had been burnt from the sun and weathered from neglect, smiled mischievously as she asked me for money. Perhaps emboldened by my smiling back at her, she went on, with an air of defiance, to place her hand around my wrist. This moment was electric. Both of us suddenly became aware of the disapproving look shot at her by the driver, who was visibly displeased at the breaking of this touch barrier. Unsuccessfully he tried to shoo her away, while she stood on, gallant in her defiance, her grip was soft but firm. I became conscious of my own sensation of pleasure, in opposition to that of disgust which was customary of such 'transgressions.' The traffic light turned green and we moved on.

This girl returned to me in a dream as a figure of caste, while I was working on this paper. In the dream-image, I knocked hesitatingly at a door, behind which stood this subject - a subject de-politicized and de-psychologized. As a psychologist-researcher, I faced this girl—with her calloused hands and tired eyes, a girl that could not read, could not write, could not narrate her incitement. In this meeting, a fantasy slowly got cultivated between the two of us by a tacit promise—the promise of mutual salvation.

Later as I re-experienced sensorially the moment when the calloused dark hand grasps the slender fair wrist, alien in its softness and its suppleness, I thought to myself: was there a promise of contact? What was this promise? And who was it a promise to? It was only through metabolizing this dream-image, that I could finally begin work on this paper. The moment of contact was a moment of both dread and intoxication, an inaugural proto-moment of writing, a writing of a critical psychology whose hands are not free.[2]

I am aware how the representation of the Dalit subject in the fantasy above draws from the social imaginary which constructs this subject largely as an object of pity. As an object of pity, the Dalit goes from being a social subject to an affective object. This is true of much of the writing by upper caste authors, who while being sympathetic towards exposing caste atrocities, also end up painting caricatures of the Dalit as pitiable and pathetic. One of the foremost novelists of Hindi and Urdu literature, Munshi Premchand, much feted for writing against the ills of feudalism, communalism and casteism in 20th century India, is the most glaring example in this

[2] Is it also an act of colony in research?

regard. While Premchand is in some ways exceptional among his generation of writers to speak up against the oppression and hypocrisy in Hindu society, his works do not discuss Dalit movements of protest against Brahmanical hierarchy. Instead, the Dalit character in most of his stories—Kafan to name the most famous—is a tragicomic character, lazy, lost, drunk, feeble-minded, and ultimately pitiable.

It needs to be noted that over the last few years, especially since the media frenzy around the suicide of the Dalit student scholar Rohith Vemula, in January 2016, newspaper and magazine reportage has begun to focus on Dalit rage, marking a significant shift in the mainstream representation of the Dalit subject. On April 2nd, 2018, following a protest calling for a Bharat Bandh against a Supreme Court ruling from a fortnight ago that had watered down the provisions in the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, the TV screen was filled with images of street violence and clashes with police and upper caste men. Subsequent reportage on the protest called it "an explosion of pent-up resentment, a sort of climax to a steady build-up of mistrust between Dalits and upper castes in various parts of the country, a violent manifestation of fear that the entire 'system' was conspiring to pull them down again, and strip them of their constitutional rights." The protesters also noted how how demonetization introduced by the Modi government and the violence by cow vigilantes has targeted the Dalit community (Deka, 2018).

I want to remind the reader here of the work of Franz Fanon which showcases the centrality of the affect of rage, in the representations of the black man in literature as well as in popular psyche. Fanon (1952) uses psychoanalysis to deconstruct this stereotype and reflect on rage as a response to discrimination and violence that the black man has faced historically. He describes in the black man an *affective erythism*- a nervousness and perpetual nearness to rage that marks the oppressed. This is a rage that marks all those who have suffered the sentence of history. Hook (2012) explicates this affect of rage as "an awareness not only of the affects of the continual dissonance, within the colonized subject, between ego and culture, self and society, but also the inevitability of coming to think and act subjectively as white, of experiencing oneself as a 'phobic object', and thus of hate coming both from without and from within," (Hook, 2012).

Further, in Fanon's reworking of Freudian psychopathology within the context of colonialism and racism, the neurosis of the individual is understood as being due to the internalization of the inequalities, violence, and complexes imposed by the socio-economic processes. Psychopathology is a representation itself of the conditions of existence of the individual in his group and an internalization of social conflict, instead of being an expression of conflictual instincts, as in classical Freudian theory. Rage is not instinctual to the human, as much as being an affect born from the imposition of lack of liberty for the black subject.

A structural comparison between the figure of the black subject and the dalit subject in the description above reveals how cultural semiotics and media representations operate to shape affective responses towards the marginalized. If the black protagonist that Fanon recovers is a phobic object, the Dalit man for much of Savarna history is an object of pity and disgust. In proximity to deadness and the abject, in the misery and fear that enshrouds him, there is no fantasy of muscle prowess or sexual virility. There is instead a fear of contagion and pollution, a fear that has clear roots in Brahmanical ideology. According to Dumont (1970), the contrast between Brahmins and 'Untouchables' is represented through notions of purity and impurity- Brahmins occupy the most superior rank, while the Dalit untouchable is often kept segregated outside villages, not even granted access to village wells or Hindu temples. According to the Brahmanical ideology, impurity is temporarily contracted by a Hindu during the course of his organic life. Events such as birth, death, menstruation are associated with impurity and render people as such, for a prescribed period of time. Those people who specialize in such impure tasks get classified as permanently impure. Thus, "in the setting of the opposition between pure and impure, the religious division of labour goes hand in hand with the permanent attribution to certain professions of a certain level of impurity." (Dumont, 1970, p. 79) The Dalit barber, funeral priest, tanner, manual scavenger, cow carcass remover, are all permanently impure, ritually inferior, and any contact with them through practices around food or touch is to be strictly monitored and regulated. Once this construction is complete, the Dalit becomes an object of avoidance and disgust, and an emotional economy around felt notions of 'comfort' and 'discomfort' serves to keep such avoidance in place.

Kakar (2007) in the 'Inner Experience of caste' suggests how in an overtly modern egalitarian Indian social order, the revulsion around caste contact can be understood psychologically, as something that operates not through an explicit transmission of caste prescriptions and proscriptions, but rather as pre-verbal knowledge—a feeling that writes itself into the psyche of the infant, as it experiences the kinaesthetic tension in the embrace of the mother/father carrying the infant, when they see an untouchable approach closer. "He has registered their expressions of disgust, unconsciously mimicking them in his own face and body at any threatened contact with an untouchable." (Kakar, 2007). Similarly, an individual's outburst at a seemingly minor slight is not just an individual expression, but may in that moment express the historical resentment shared by his entire caste as a whole, and passed down inter-generationally. The narcissistic injuries endured by members of a caste are often displaced by finding yet another caste which is still inferior, thus producing a hopelessly entrenched hierarchical structure.

In the same vein, in approximating an analysis of caste, I find it instructive to draw from the analysis of race offered by Lane (1998) that urges attention to the *psychical representations* and *physical embodiment* of race. Who is the racial other, what skin does he reside in, what smells does his embrace carry, what confusions does his smile signal? What intimacies can I permit myself with him and where do my repulsions surface? This otherness is not simply a cognitive dissonance pliable to educative correction. It erupts as if of its own accord, in the affective agency of the body which feels intensely subjective and alien at the same time. In the next section, I sketch how it is this immunology of disgust that 'repeats, internalizes and entrenches the political effects' of caste at a personal reflexive level.

Immunology of disgust

The documentary 'India Untouched: Stories of a People Apart' (Stalin, 2007) documents the prevalence of caste discrimination and untouchability across different parts of India. In one scene, the interviewer reminds a Kashi Brahmin priest about the secular constitutional realignment of caste in independent India. The towering priest balks. Caressing his rotund greasy belly, furrowed by the *janeu* (religious thread) that he wears, the priest roars: "You all talk of us as one. I agree! The

body *is* one! So, this index finger, which is yours, you put in one orifice (*points to the nostrils*). Put it! Now I ask you. I ask you now to put it in another orifice (the mouth)." He waits for the man's reaction. "Why do you stop now? Now you are repulsed? Why? I say, do it! Do it now! Why this practice of "untouchability" towards different parts of your own body?"

For the priest, the analogy serves as a mirror. In a clever manoeuvring, the discourse around the body is stapled on to the discourse of caste, such affects that are generated closer to corporeality, and are harder to interrogate cognitively, get transferred to the affects around caste purity and pollution. The rhetoric of caste-based equality is too rife with logic. Once the body is invoked in this equation, it short-circuits this logic to activate its own boundaries, and disgust erupts as a primitive and visceral affect that alerts to the threat of violation of these boundaries.

This allegory clearly typifies Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject: those stimuli which immediately trigger border anxieties and dread, by threatening to overwhelm and contaminate the subject resulting in a dissolution of the ego. The abject makes boundaries permeable and exposes the fragility of the substantive self. Contact between the Brahmin and Dalit flesh is made to be nauseating in the same way as the exchange of fluids between the orifice of the nose and the mouth. The homology that the priest draws between the structure of caste to the surface of the body is not incidental. The Hindu Savarna moral code includes discussion of bodily substances and fluids which are considered inseparable from code of conduct, in other words "the cognitive non-duality of action and actor, code and substance" (Marriott, 1979). Instead of the Dumontian opposition of purity-impurity, for Marriott, South- Asian persons are made of permeable boundaries, allowing for a transfer of substance through birth, food, sexual intercourse etc. Substances that are whole, unmixed are ranked above substances that are non-generative, mixed ones. Much of personal action is devoted to maintaining one's natural substance by not 'mixing' with that which might alter you unfavourably. The 'abject' here constitutes all those substances that are 'risky' and inferior as they make boundaries permeable.

Hook (2004) points out,

> "for psychoanalysis, the body is the multizonal site for the earliest instances of cultural exchange and socialisation, a 'surface of experience', the template for the developing ego. Amongst the most primal (and powerful) abject 'objects'

> (or stimuli) are those items that challenge the integrity of one's own bodily parameters – blood, urine, faeces, pus, semen, hair clippings, etc. – those bodily products once so undeniably a part of me that have subsequently become separate, loathsome. These instances of the abject are those 'things' which straddle the dividing line between where the 'I' of my body (and hence also the ego) ends, and where the 'not I' of external objects begins. In this sense, the ego's attempt to achieve autonomy through separation-individuation is always a struggle against exactly those borderline 'objects' that defy me/not-me categorisation and threaten to dissolve the newly founded integrity and separateness of the ego's identity, along with the broader social system of identity of which it is part."

According to the caste-based division of labour prescribed by the Brahmanical ideology, all the 'abject objects' are carriers of impurity and are to be attended to and dealt with by the Dalit, who then in turn is impure. The physical psychical and symbolic response of abjection maps itself onto caste-based division of labour thickening the dominant regime of representation. What is felt at an affective and corporeal level finds sanction and rationality in the traditional Brahmanical ideology.

Once again the voice of the priest in the documentary quizzes the viewer: 'Would you put your life in the hands of a Dalit tanner? What if he were to replace the pilot in the cockpit of a plane and assume charge? The plane would fly into death. I say, *he has no right to play with our lives*!"

No right to play with lives. In fact, no right to play. What then is the rightful location of the Dalit? What can he legitimately be expected to assume charge of? Manu-Smriti, considered to be the most authoritative of the books of Hindu traditional code, in its Chapter 1, Verse 91 reads: "The Lord assigned only one activity to a servant: serving the other classes without resentment." Chapter 10, Verse 129: "A servant should not amass wealth, even if he has the ability, for a servant who amasses wealth annoys priests." Chapter 3, Verse 239: "Neither a 'Fierce' Untouchable, nor a pig, a cock, a dog, a menstruating woman, or an impotent man should watch priests dine." All these representations reinforce the defensive manoeuvrings of a discourse where the modality of negation is similar to that found in perversions. According to the Lacanian structure of perversion, we find here an obstinate adherence to the Law, such that the will of the Brahmin subject is not his own, he obeys not for his pleasure, but for the pleasure of the Big Other, Manu, the primordial law-giver.

On a careful rereading of the subtext in the priest's discourse, we find terms that set up an ideological forcefield of criss-crossing justifications, from an appeal to the science of differential skills and knowledge, to a more covert complex that evokes the displaced imagery of plane crashes, hijacking, and terrorism. Shared forms of suffering and enjoyment constitute themselves as libidinal economies that lubricate the cycles of discursive repetition of certain signifiers.

What is Untouchability?

Cultural practices and habits often operate at the level of what Giddens (1984) describes as practical consciousness. Practical consciousness is pre-discursive, it is the motor behind our social routines and habits that operate "automatically" and purposively. To ask the question what untouchability is, to trouble this pre-discursive habitus and momentarily unhinge its mechanicity. The question is bizarre, stupid even some may say, and in the quick recovery from one's stupefaction, the answer is codified in terms of naturalized norms of everyday social actions that regulate access and proximity.

When asked 'what is untouchability', the children in the documentary respond thus: "*It means not sharing vessels. It means not sitting in the front row in the classroom. It means cleaning toilets while others study. This is how it is. This is how it has always been."* In several instances, there is in the voice of both the oppressor and oppressed the invocation of the ideology of "*maryada*" or honour and respect for social hierarchies that must be obeyed in the interest of communal harmony and interdependence. Once again, the Kashi priest thunders forth, to enlighten his naive student blinded by Western intelligence: "Do you see this foot, this toe? If it is stubbed, what happens? It feels pain. But it is the head that cries out in pain. It is the hand that reaches out to comfort and soothe the toe. It is like this that the varna system operates, as one body, working in tandem, in unison. This is the law of nature, of the Vedas, it must be followed. How foolish of you to want to invert it; could the feet, however much you try, ever stand atop the head?" Once again, we note the Lacanian structure of perversion, and an adherence to the Law - of nature, of the Vedas- such that order can be maintained for the pleasure of the Big Other.

The sentiment of "*maryada*" when echoed in the Dalit psyche, expresses the fervent hope that a respectable adherence to social codes of conduct would ensure entry into the sociometric of respect. Like blackness negates the metaphysics of positivity associated with whiteness, the Dalit man is a condemned man, a degenerate sinner from previous life, whose atonement resides in the solemnity of his suffering. If the black man carries a fantasy of lactification (Fanon, 1952), for the dalit, Sanskritization as an imitation of upper caste consciousness in its affective register of 'earning respect' is what keeps social order further in place.

At the material corporeal level, the trade in corpses and fecal waste, considered to be impure substances, must be made invisible to the social eye. This materiality is internalized as the experiential that is unable to rid itself of the odour of death. Its epidermalization writes this odour on the surface of the skin mummifying the subject in a living death. This symbolic association with corpsehood and deathliness points to the possibility of a transgressive liquidation of the ego in a way which must be fiercely guarded against. The Dalit subject is thus constructed as social refuse, the stench of whose putrefaction is really a reminder of the decay, of that which hangs like loose skin between life and death.

The black man seethes with his inferiority complex, his fantasy of lactification, of doubling. Blackness is a visual absence, a void that Fanon grasps and populates in his writing to create the contours of a social body that can shadow box the White enlightened Man. The Untouchable is an epidermic absence, a leprous pockmark, a taboo against touch. How does this untouchable get in touch with the self? What language of corporeality does the hyper-embodiment of untouchability demand?

Unlike the rural hinterlands of India where expressions of untouchability are blatant, in urban India, discrimination is more subtle and high tech. Texts, curricula, pedagogy and membership in educational institutions remains highly Brahmanical. Caste identifications are upheld in the name of community and cultural differences. Desire is folded into conventionalised affective forces to create a peculiar distillate of ambivalence. This high-tech discrimination, naturalized as cultural relativism, is counter-posed against the reflex horror the urban citizen experiences on learning about caste-based atrocities and cruelties in the distant rural. This rural, distant both in space and time, is the colony whose barbaric vestiges have not yet been exhumed. Horror forecloses engagement, it is instantaneous, and it produces semiotic effects

that function to cement the urban de-casted self as impenetrable. The reflexive avoidance of groups along caste lines now becomes insidious through “unintention” and thus continues to be perpetrated in everyday practices. Of unintention, how does one assume responsibility?

Cultivating Response-Ability: Knowing Dirt

'I can without lying plead limited responsibility'

-Jean-Francois Lyotard, Libidinal Economy

James Clifford (1986), in his introduction to ‘Writing Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography’ underscores writing as an artisanal activity, a worldly act, an art in the sense of eighteenth-century usage of the word which refers to skilful fashioning of useful artifacts.

I write this piece as an artisan. The hand that writes this piece has a mind that cannot be domesticated by the mind elsewhere. To write of the materiality of abjection does not necessitate an apologia of writing, for this is not a voice *for* the subaltern, as Spivak posits it (Spivak, 2010). It does not ask ‘Can the Sub-altern speak?’ or claim that ‘the sub-altern speaks, do we listen?’—claims that often resound with the ventriloquism of a ‘leader.’ Writing here is an act of making contact with the abject, of narcissistic survival, of becoming active against the currents of the contemporary, where one is always already being written of. It is also writing about the discipline of Psychology and the praxis that emerges from it when the ‘individual’ is no longer the unit of analysis. It is a writing that is uneasy with a humanism which is subtractive of the political, or care which is subtractive of protest, or change which is subtractive of transformation.

Lyotard (1974) who warns of the totalitarian dangers of language of mastery views writing as unstable, polysemous, not a battle of words but a tension that attempts to grasp the texture of the material, a form of resistance precisely because it is not premised on affiliations with a political group. For me, writing is an entry into the new, the unknown, into the unthought known of the question. This question is a question of a new Psychology, a psychology that is attentive to caste. The new, like the untouchable, cannot enunciate its relevance.

I want to conclude with a remark and observation of a Dalit student of mine a couple of years back. She spoke to me, one day, of friendship, as we both shared our struggles, albeit from very different locations, of having been first generation college goers. She said how she found herself growing quiet each time she would sit in the classroom, and hear her classmates—most of them upper caste—make passionate speeches against caste-based discrimination. She could not understand this advocacy, this rhetoric, its furore. It felt alienating, and not supportive. She did not need support. What she needed was friendship. And when she observed who was friends with whom, an old familiar sadness would return. All friendships around her seemed to be along the lines of caste proximity.

"True friendship", she told me, in a way that I will never forget, a way that was ordinary and sage-like, "is knowing someone's dirt intimately and not feeling disgust."

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