

# Stigma and labour: remembering Dalit Marxism

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AMBEDKAR'S relationship to Marxism is a persistent and unresolved issue for those interested in his thought. It is clear that Ambedkar had a long and contentious engagement with the Communists during the 1930s and 1940s, and that this struggle defined postcolonial Dalit politics in Maharashtra as it tried to manoeuvre between the Maratha Congress, the Communist Party, and later, the Shiv Sena.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the precise nature of Ambedkar's engagement with Marx's thought remains understudied. This essay uses the recent screening of Anand Patwardhan's film, *Jai Bhim Comrade*, as an occasion for engaging the longer-term trajectory of Dalit Marxism in Maharashtra, including B.R. Ambedkar's complex engagement with caste-class. The essay argues that the critique of labour exploitation enabled its ironic opposite: a more complex representation of the 'difference' of caste.

1. For an important discussion of Dalits and Communists in late colonial Bombay, see Gail Omvedt, 'Non-Brahmans and Communists in Bombay', *Economic and Political Weekly* 8(16), 21 April 1973. For an analysis of the divergences between Buddha and Marx in the Dalit Panther period, see Anupama Rao, Chapter Three, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*. University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 2009, pp. 182-216.

*Jai Bhim Comrade* had its inaugural screening at the Bombay Improvement Trust chawls in Byculla on 9 January 2012. The occasion was the death anniversary of Bhagwat Jadhav, who was killed at a protest rally in 1974, during riots between the Dalit Panthers and Sena supporters in the BDD chawls at Worli and Naigaon. The film was an apt choice for commemorating lost worlds and lost lives. *Jai Bhim Comrade* pays homage to Dalit martyrs, known and unknown, though the focal point of the film is *shahir* (balladeer) Vilas Ghogre, of the Avhan Natya Manch (associated with the M-L far left), who committed suicide in the aftermath of the July 1997 police firing in Ramabai Ambedkar Nagar.

Patwardhan's film is an archive of Dalit Marxism: the film recalls affinities between the critique of *labour as exploitation* and *caste as degradation*, but it also indicts the party which expelled Ghogre, humiliated by lifelong poverty, for 'left deviation'. Some may argue that the film elides the complex inter-dynamics, and ideological inconsistencies of Indian Communism with regard to caste. (Patwardhan represents Dalit Marxism as caught between the betrayal of upper caste Communists on the one

hand, and opportunistic Dalit leaders on the other.) However, *Jai Bhim Comrade* also provides occasion to extend, rather than to reproduce the long-standing caste-class debate, and to ask what that binarism forecloses. The film is poignant witness to the end of an era in Maharashtra's Dalit politics, defined by the struggle to represent a complex Dalit political subjectivity caught between caste-as-labour, and caste-as-identity.

Though Patwardhan's film is resolutely contemporary in focus, the screening's location recalled the importance of central Bombay as the home of working class radicalism, and Ambedkarite politics. The chawls of the Bombay City Improvement Trust, constructed in the aftermath of the notorious plague of 1896, and of the Bombay Development Directorate (1919-1926) were important sites of Dalit life, labour, and political activism. These included: marches and political processions of the *Samata Sainik Dal* (formed in 1924 by Dalit military pensioners to protect Ambedkar); the first celebration of Ambedkar Jayanti on the BDD chawls' *maidan*; study circles organized by Dalit Communists associated with the *Delisle Road Friends' Circle*; performances of Ambedkari *jalsa*, especially by the Scheduled Caste Federation, and the establishment of the offices of the Independent Labour Party, and the Municipal Kamgar Sangh in the area. Indeed, central Bombay was Dalit Bombay: Ambedkar lived here until he moved to Dadar's Hindu Colony, and almost all of his organizational and publishing efforts were localized in the area.

*Jai Bhim Comrade* does not engage this past; neither does it address the complex reception of B.R. Ambedkar as a theorist of caste-class. Instead, the film begins with the

stark bodies lifting waste at the Mulund garbage dump, a major site of Dalit activism where Ghogre's musical talents were first discovered. The film then takes us on a tour of subaltern urbanity through places of waste, refuse, and informalized existence where Dalit critique 'lives'. Dalit critique lives as sound, and especially as song: *Jai Bhim Comrade* traces the development of Dalit critique through the musical traditions of *tamasha* and *jalsa*, Ambedkari *geet*, and the performances of Ghogre and the recently banned *Kabir Kala Manch*. Indeed, the film begins where Patwardhan's earlier film on urban demolitions, *Bombay Hamara Shahar* ends, with the unforgettable voice of Vilas Ghogre, who offered a stinging indictment of state violence and caste dispossession in life, as in death. Ghogre chalked his suicide note on the wall of his *zhopadi* like it was graffiti, that quintessentially urban form of insurgent, subaltern speech, 'I salute the martyred sons of Bhim. Hail Ambedkarite unity. Shahir Vilas Ghogre.'

As Patwardhan tries to understand what produced Ghogre and others like him, Ambedkar becomes central. This is an insurgent Ambedkar, who remakes Dalit self and community. It is true that this audacious thinker of Dalit universality struggled with caste and class, stigma and labour as supplemental, yet *incommensurable* categories. To anticipate my argument in this essay: it seems worth reminding ourselves that ultimately, the struggle for Ambedkar was with specifying caste (and untouchability) as a peculiar kind of *body history*. Ambedkar addressed this complex (and elusive) form of dehumanization by taking recourse to terms such as class and labour, but always to forefront the 'difference' of caste, and the specificity of its social experience.

Despite extensive differences within Marxism, it seems possible, nonetheless, to argue that the theory assumes a unique (and ethical) relationship between labour and political subjectivity. In Marx's account, the proletariat, as living labour, compensates for a history of indifference and the misrecognition of their dead labour – now congealed in the commodity – through the work of politics. Labour universalism is by definition antagonistic to the global and universalizing force of capital, though produced by it.

Ambedkar engaged labour universalism in his famous 1917 essay in the *Indian Antiquary*, 'Castes in India: Their Genesis, Mechanism, and Development', where he described caste as an 'enclosed class'. Ambedkar held the regulation of female sexuality responsible for producing caste as a deformed version of class; it was this biopolitical element of caste that differentiated it from class.

In later writing, Ambedkar specified Dalit identity as it emerged from a conflictual relationship with Hindu history, and argued that the Dalit was a negated subject of historical violence; that she was a form of remaindered, detritus life produced by the historic conflict between Buddhism and Brahminism in subcontinental history. From efforts to specify the civic disability of caste (and untouchability), Ambedkar's later writings expanded to cover a millennial frame: Dalit dehumanization was located in the Indic past, but disaggregated from what might appear to be the *shared history* of Buddhism and Brahminism in order to give the Dalit an agonistic role in Hindu history.<sup>2</sup>

2. Ambedkar was especially keen to challenge the perspective put forward by Hindu nationalists such as Tilak, regarding the role of Vedic India, as well as the *Bhagavad Gita*, in incubating ideas of social equality, and non-violence. See e.g., Tilak's *Gita Rahasya*, and *Arctic Home in the Vedas*. Therefore,

Ambedkar distinguished his account from Shudra history, which was the story of the birth of a fourth *varna*, the Shudras, from a class of degraded Kshatriyas excluded from the right to perform the *upanayanam* (thread) ceremony. Ambedkar understood Shudra identity to be unstable because Shudra critiques of caste came from a desire for incorporation into the caste Hindu order, rather than from the position of symbolic negation, as was the case with Dalits.

Dalit critique was also unstable, but for a different reason: Dalit history could only become a ground for a Dalit future as negative example. Stigmatized identity produced a gap between history and the future because stigma could not become the ground for political organization; unlike labour, it could not be ‘in’ and ‘for’ itself. Or, one might argue that stigma is a limit concept in Ambedkar’s thought because it is a form of embodiment that cannot be abstracted, or universalized.<sup>3</sup>

What do we mean? Like labour, stigma *was* history, yet it could not be detached or abstracted from the body.<sup>4</sup> Stigma could not be valorized like value-producing labour. Rather than deriving a model of emancipation through labour as Marx proposed,

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Ambedkar dates the Bhagvad Gita to the post-Buddhist era, in his essay, ‘Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India’.

3. Thus efforts to define waste management as Dalit labour, and offer government protection for *safai karamcharis* are a violence committed in the name of labour abstraction: their effect is to universalize Dalits’ association with waste, rather than defining all labourers as Dalit. Ambedkar’s struggle was for the latter, of course, beginning with the establishment of the Independent Labour Party in 1936.

4. One of the more significant histories of stigma we live with is the narrative of Jesus’s crucifixion, and the idea of suffering ‘for’ others. Addressing caste as stigma enacts a move away from this burdened history. I am grateful to Aniket Jaaware for noticing (and emphasizing) this shift in my argument.

Ambedkar argued that without a regime of rights, outcaste labour was fated to be marginalized and hyperexploited. The response to Dalits’ dilemma did not call for politicizing labour as such via the general strike. Rather, it required, as a first step, the dissolution of Dalit-ness by bringing Dalits into the domain of the labour contract. Capitalist modernity was to be applauded because the ideas of abstraction and equivalence that were central to it also enabled Dalits to cast off stigma: by bringing Dalits within a field of abstract mediation, capital also took them outside the culturalism of caste.

For this reason, Ambedkar supports socializing capital and redistributing resources, rather than annihilating the capitalist state; he understands the wage labour contract, like liberal rights more generally, as an instrument that abstracts and universalizes. The claim to the universal – as with claiming wages, instead of performing customary labour – is what allows one to mark the stubborn materiality of stigma which resists abstraction, and which cannot be ‘scaled up’. Indeed, the moment of politics lies in laying claim to the universal while marking the non-identity of the subaltern subject of rights from the normative, universal rights-bearing subject. We may note here that Ambedkar is a profound thinker of the power of the negative: he marks the intimacies of caste by describing the Dalit as *non-Hindu*; as a subject who is *dehumanized* through contact with caste Hindu ideology; and as *negated existence*, or detritus life.

Ambedkar thus engaged the political universal as a way to insert Dalits into a global history of dehumanization. In addition to addressing caste in a millennial frame, Ambedkar made repeated reference to slavery in the Greco-Roman period, and to American plantation slavery; he would often use

the example of Balkanization in the interwar period to discuss the perilous politics of minority rights. These efforts speak to his sense that a global, comparative perspective opened up critical possibilities foreclosed by a resolutely Hindu, upper caste cultural nationalism. Though important, the critique of nationalism (and its sociological base) was not enough: Ambedkar’s commitments to eradicating Dalit subalternity in all its manifestations required engaging a global history of ‘stigma’, if by this we understand a form of embodied antagonism situated somewhere between the biologism of race, and the affective claims of territorial nationalism.

On another plane, the engagement with the idea of proletarian emancipation was critical, but it was also not sufficient. Labour was political because the identity of labour derived from its antagonism to capital. Thinking stigma through labour appeared to be productive and useful. Yet, to fully transform caste into class would ignore caste’s history as (Hindu) violence. Like religion (and Hinduism), labour too was ultimately only a partial force in accounting for Dalit dispossession. Here we should recall that Ambedkar would have been well aware of the tradition of eastern Marxism, for instance, Lenin’s extension of the model of class struggle to anticolonialism based on arguing that imperialism was the highest stage of capitalism. This foreclosed the question of politics *within* aspiring nations in colonial territories, as much as it appeared to create novel, global linkages *among* them with respect to the imperial centre.<sup>5</sup> While new political connections were forged between colonized nations, the

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5. This is the classic debate between M.N. Roy and V.I. Lenin, on the ‘national and colonial question,’ and earlier, between Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin on socialist internation-

internal problem of how to render caste 'political', that is, of how to think its proximity to labour without rendering 'caste' into 'class', became impossibly difficult.<sup>6</sup>

Labour offered a metaphor – but not a formula – for associating the identity of a collective, with their experience of dispossession.<sup>7</sup> Instead, naming became a technique for specifying social oppression: from Ambedkar's description of the class-like character of the Depressed Classes, to addressing them as Dalit or *paddalit* (crushed underfoot), *non-Hindu*, and Buddhist, naming connected social experiences through analogy, rather than equivalence.<sup>8</sup> This was similar to the manner in which labour was described in the period in its concreteness through such terms as *dari-dryata* (impoverishment, destitution), *bekaar* (unemployed, worthless), or *bhukekangal* (pauperized). Viewing naming and description as a form of theorizing allows us to appreciate the importance of lit-

alism. For an important reading of this debate, see Sanjay Seth, *Marxist Theory and Nationalist Politics: The Case of Colonial India*. Sage, New Delhi, 1995; and more recently, Kris Manjappa, *M. N. Roy: Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism*. Routledge, London and New Delhi, 2010.

6. The writings of Maharashtrian Marxists – from S. A. Dange, to D.D. Kosambi, D.K. Bedekar, and more recently, the Marx-Phule-Ambedkarvad of Sharad Patil – has involved efforts to historicize caste and/as capital. Gail Omvedt's extensive writing on this subject also belongs to this tradition.

7. No doubt Phule's category of the shudratishudra already encoded within it a critique of labour exploitation, e.g., in *Shetkaryacha Asud*. Ambedkar's Dalit was distinguished from the broader category of shudra-atishudra partly, I argue, through Ambedkar's engagement with theories of value, abstraction, and equivalence, not to mention the explicit insertion of Dalits into global history.

8. Marx explains the disconnect between class position, and political agency in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, by describing the heterogeneity of the poor and working classes. The literary theorist Peter Stallybrass has argued

erary and cultural production for the development of Dalit Marxists.

In his famous address at the Dalit Sahitya Sammelan of 1958, the Mangshahir Annabhau Sathe, one of the founders of the Lalbavta *kalapathak* (Red Flag performance troupe) associated the invisibility of outcaste labour with the devaluation of labour more generally. Sathe argued that Dalit's capacity for struggle and hardship, *kashtha*, produced wealth: because Dalits' labour created the world, it also made Dalits the *malaks*, or proprietors of that world. In his famous words, '*Hi Prithvi Dalitancya Talahatavar Tarleli Ahe*.' (This world turns/dances to the Dalits' tune) While the economic basis of exploitation was clear, Dalit marginality and stigma was distinctive. Thus, if Sathe's Marxism allowed him to forefront outcaste labour as a particular instance of the general invisibility of labour, it is to Bhimrao that he attributes the inspiration to change the world in his famous novel, *Fakira*.

The famous Dalit writer, Baburao Bagul (1930-2008) acknowledged Sathe as a founder of Dalit literature. However, Bagul's exposure to race and African-American literature<sup>9</sup> – not to mention the keenness of his urban eye – marked his singular ability to represent what Aniket Jaaware

that the lumpenproletariat are a sartorial category for Marx. We will remember, of course, that Frantz Fanon described the colonized as the damned, or the wretched of the earth precisely as a way to specify the complexity of the colonial encounter beyond class oppression.

9. One of the founding members of the journal *Asmita*, M. N. Wankhede, Professor of English at Milind College (Aurangabad) had been to the United States as a Fulbright Fellow, completed a Masters at Indiana University (1962), and received a Ph.D in English from the University of Florida-Gainesville, in 1965. Wankhede, who was exposed to the African-American literary canon – including the writings of Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and LeRoi Jones – exhorted Dalit

terms the 'unbearability' of (caste) ethics.<sup>10</sup> Bagul's depictions of slum life in *Maran Svast Hot Ahe* (Death is Becoming Cheaper) present the space as teeming with visual difference: the mob, or the lumpenproletariat here appear as so many life forms – deformed, drunk, violent, and violated; but also capable of giving 'care' to others equally dispossessed and downtrodden. Slum here attains thick description, and begins to exist as a form of life: in the hands of those Dalit cultural producers who also identified as Marxists, caste existence had increasingly morphed into a critique of urban life, and of stigmatized existence more generally.

Namdeo Dhasal's *Golpitha* (1972), was the iconic text of insurrectionary speech, and the power of renaming and resignification.<sup>11</sup> Dhasal embraced an aesthetic politics, and a politics of the street in his representation of informal livelihoods and lumpen lives.<sup>12</sup> Dhasal's investment in violent visibility challenged the logic of bourgeois valuation. In this, Dhasal was also implicitly challenging the regime of value and visibility that Ambedkar had earlier championed: bringing Dalits into

writers to emulate this radical literary tradition. Prabuddha Bharat, '*Dalitano Vidrohi Vangmaya Liha*', (Dalits, Write Revolutionary Literature!).

10. Aniket Jaaware, *Kale-Pandhare Asphut Lekh*. Hermes Prakashan, Pune, 2011; 'Destitute Literature', delivered as the Mahatma Phule Lecture, Bombay University, 4 December 2011.

11. It is worth noting that the prostitute appears more generally as a symptom of Dalit urbanity. She is represented in Dhasal's writings, as well as in Prakash Jadhav's famous poem, 'Under Dadar Bridge', as a symbol of detritus life, her body sucked dry and left to shrivel, and die.

12. See Namdeo Dhasal's political autobiography, *Ambedkari Calval Ani Socialist, Communist*, (Ambedkar Movement And Socialists, Communists) for an account of how his political critique developed.

the framework of contractual liberalism in order to place a value on stigmatized labour so as to underscore its productivity. Instead, Dhasal and the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra emphasized the symbolic efficacy of violent language, not to mention the instrumental efficiency of street fighting.

Dalit precarity and informality – rather than an aberration from the narrative of class formation – increasingly enabled Dalits to assert their right to the city because they existed as a form of political life or stigmatized humanity whose claim to recognition was the mere fact of their survival. That they existed on a continuum with the city’s detritus (excreta, garbage, scraps) – scarred by human violence (theft, rape, child abuse), and excised from sanctioned circuits of production and reproduction – enabled a set of associations between Dalit life and urban form. (I suggest that Jai Bhim Comrade also addresses this critical tradition of naming and describing, albeit in sound and song: Dalit Marxism draws inspiration from the critique of labour, but it simultaneously acknowledges its limitations through the turn to aesthetic politics.)

Ambedkar’s long-standing engagement with the project of Dalit emancipation is well known, at least in the form of a schematic political history, from his demand for separate electorates to constitutionalism. What I have tried to do here, however, is to mark a productive and unresolved tension regarding adjacencies between labour and stigma; to argue that we think of the analogy between caste and class as a strategic move on Ambedkar’s part to resist the depoliticization of caste by labelling it ‘Hindu’. This helps challenge the reduction of these

complex forms of thought to an ‘either-or’ position on caste and class, which ensues from focusing solely on party politics. As we have argued, Ambedkar’s engagement of the dual logic of exception and universality allowed him to mark the unique historical status of Dalits by laying claim to the Dalit-Buddhist, as the universal subject of rights. Indeed, Ambedkar’s Dalit critique was the practice of agnostic thought, it was radical democratic thought.

We might then ask how Dalit critique allows us to reframe an enduring preoccupation of colonial and postcolonial history with the problem of ‘difference’. As is well known, the critique of colonial knowledge has consisted in challenging the adequacy of European concepts for understanding Indian social forms because of the ideas of progress and development surreptitiously encoded in the former. Dipesh Chakrabarty’s signal call to ‘provincialize’ Europe is among the most compelling articulations of the inadequacy of European concepts to non-western forms of life.<sup>13</sup> Chakrabarty’s account is compelling because it presumes the putative universality of Europe as the frame within which critique is possible in the first place, while simultaneously marking the structural exclusion of Europe’s periphery. Thus, ‘provincializing’ Europe is both necessary, and impossible.

This kind of double bind is also evident in the positing of Dalit identity as caught between (political) universality and (historical) exception. And yet, and perhaps because Ambedkar succeeded in viewing European problems as analogous to the Indic problematic, it might be more apt to suggest that Dalit critique took as its project to use caste as a universalizing optic rather than a means of provincializing Europe.

13. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2000.