THE POLITICS OF BELONGING IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

Anxiety and Intimacy

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ANTI-CASTE COMMUNITAS AND OUTCASTE EXPERIENCE

Space, body, displacement, and writing

Dickens Leonard

Intimacy and belonging seem deceptive in the context of a civilisational violence that schemes with criminal silencing. Indeed, pogroms that immunise and sanitise space and time actually launch intimidation and loss. And caste has been one of the most violent civilisational machinations that have brutally destroyed intimacy and belonging. In this context, Dalits could be understood as an embodiment of shadows that travel.[1] A compartment of bodies, when outcaste – particularly dehumanised and violated – may be usually associated with static immobility, or un-change. But engendered caste gaze is secondary to essential mobility – 'travel' or displacement of those very bodies is precedent to violation and violence. I argue that space and caste are intricately linked, as caste is also about embodied space – it is a spatial location of people into a locked hierarchy.

The caste question with regard to the outcaste – taking a cue from increasing caste violence, Dalit and/or minority lynching, as a continuity in India – is mired within the social category of spatial power relations, bodily (dis)locations and displacements. An outcast, in that sense, is a dislocated and displaced being. Body and shadow, even as metaphor, captures the travails of the most oppressed by caste, whether they are static or mobile[2]. Besides, however violent the displacement and/or disembodiment may be, they imagine a home 'in-place' and 'in-time,' critically and creatively through writing and practice, which constitutes anti-caste values, even when reduced as shadows (Guru 2009, 2011). I would like to conceptualise this as 'communitas'[3] of/from/towards the outside.

This chapter is divided into two sections, and the sections are further divided into three parts each. The first section looks at continuous displacement, migration, and (lived) experience as categories that create anti-caste emancipatory thought in Dalit writing. It demonstrates how historical movement is a prerequisite for emancipatory thought, especially for disenfranchised communities such as Dalits. This is done by exploring the reports on migration of indentured labourers to other

parts of the world during the colonial period in order to understand how socially despised communities become silent movers of a 'shadow modernity.' Subsequently, the travel reports of Gandhi and Ambedkar are compared to argue that ideas of space and experience contribute distinctly to emancipatory thoughts on community. The third part explores theoretical ideas on space, experience, and death by reading Ambedkar to understand how writing can contribute to the idea of anti-caste communitas.

The second section is a study on Iyothee Thass's *Indhirar Dhesa Sarithiram* (*IDS*, History of the Indhirar Country). It demonstrates that though 'caste gaze' literally lynches the outcasts, Dalits have historically reversed the gaze and have challenged their reduction to caste-shadow by embarking into writing. Moreover, this section also suggests that marginalised minds and bodies have domesticated local and global space through their labour and have indeed turned it in their favour as 'place.' They find home in time, irrespective of the casteist's shadow and destruction. The section underlines how Dalit and subaltern thought uses interpretation as a method to intertwine ideas of experience and thought, so as to produce a critical and creative idea of casteless-ness.

Outcaste: displacement, indentured labour, and shadow modernity

> An ideal society should be mobile, should be full of channels for conveying a change taking place in one part to other parts . . . There should be *varied and free points of contact* with other modes of association. In other words there must be *social endosmosis*.
>
> – (Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, emphasis mine)

Historical studies on Dalits (Viswanath 2014; Mohan 2015) state that continuous displacements among the outcastes had destroyed an essential notion of human as a unique space – as identity – for pressing historical reasons. A-place-at-home was vulnerable to violence and intimidation, and the human as a unique space was denied. Hence outcastes had to move in and out of places, mostly with their families in large numbers, in search of a home and livelihood. Men and women migrated and worked together. Differences among the marginalised were rejected in the enslaving gaze of both the colonial and local masters. They were reduced to a unified comportment of shadows. Produced only as shadows, they were sought to be distanced. Apparently, the real and the reflected space – body and shadow – became one and the same. In other words, even in travel, the outcaste body as a unique body in presence is rejected, and is reduced to a not-yet-space, which does not embody a unique human presence in relation with the other.

For instance, historian Raj Sekhar Basu studies the migration pattern of the Parayar community, formerly 'untouchables,' in Tamil Nadu during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in his work *The Nandanar's Children* (2011).[4] He historicises

their 'search for fresh pastures' (111) through internal and overseas migration that was accelerated by the colonial governance. He contends, by accounting historical resources that large populations migrated as indentured labourers to Ceylon, Malaya, Burma, Fiji, Mauritius, South Africa, and to some of the French colonies from the early nineteenth century to the late twentieth century. Dalits migrated in large numbers and an essential sense of self was not fixated.

The large number of migrants, who were Tamil coolies, belonged mostly to the 'untouchable' and 'lower' caste backward communities. They travelled to work in the tea estates and plantations. The large-scale migration by these communities was a huge recruitment network that worked across countries and sea routes, which tremendously consolidated the local as well as the colonial configuration of power through violent authority on face value.

Basu notes that people migrated internally to the emergent industrial towns such as Mysore and Madras. Moreover, a large section of Parayars also joined as soldiers in the Madras army since the 1760s and 1770s. They were more popularly known as the 'Queen's Own Sappers and Miners' (Basu 2011: 161). But after the 1857 revolt, Basu mentions that the colonial government's military recruitment policy changed drastically, and it went against the Parayar regiment. The government did not get involved in the religious matters of India, say recruiting 'untouchables.' However, as late as the 1890s, Parayars enjoyed a virtual monopoly of the dangerous yet menial jobs as 'Sappers and Miners' in the Madras army (Basu 2011: 159–161).

Indeed, hardly any historical research is found that is completely devoted to study the links between the army and the mobilisation of the 'lower-caste' groups in pre-independent India. Manas Dutta concurs that though the army played an important role in the lives of the Dalits as a means of immense social and occupational mobility, 'very little work has been done on the role of the "marginalized" or "untouchable" or "labourer castes" in the army' (Dutta 2016: 58). He argues that the Madras army, amongst the three presidency armies, particularly maintained the policy to make the army a viable ladder for social mobilisation for caste groups that were in need (57–71). He points out that the Madras army consisted mainly of low-caste Hindus, untouchables, and converted Christians who were particularly noted for 'the lack of religious prejudices and local attachments' among others (61). This exclusive preferential policy to recruit untouchables as soldiers earned the Parayars an important place in the army.[5] They incorporated themselves in the colonial army not only to explore their physical ability but also to earn maximum respect in the society (Dutta 2016: 62). As Dalits deserted the lands and farms, many more landlords complained bitterly that their 'agrestic slaves' had enlisted as sepoys in the company army. Further, Madras as a colonial town began to grow and the prospect of urban employment increased, particularly to the 'lower castes' (Dutta 2016: 63).

As Madras emerged as a presidential city, Dalits also became menial servants of the British. In this attempt, they escaped agrarian bondage and ritual degradation. Indeed, Parayars and Pallars became butlers, cooks, attendants, keepers of horses, etc. They were employed in Buckingham and Carnatic Mills, Kolar gold mines, the expanding railways, the constructional and transport sectors in and around Madras.

Particularly, British army's military adventures across the globe enabled the Parayars to cross the seas and work as British soldiers. Thus, they travelled all over the world bringing home not only money, but also new ideas, values, and determination (Aloysius 1998: 34–64).

They were also the first to be recruited as manual labourers in the Railways for construction work. In fact, huge deployments were sent to Burma, Uganda, and America; many died and some never returned (Basu 2011). They worked in Kolar Gold Field, tanneries, leather factories, Ice Houses, tea estates, and plantation farms in deplorable conditions during the colonial period. Many worked as cooks and ayahs to British officers and Christian missionaries. Dutta mentions that they worked as 'menial domestic servants' such as – 'butlers, butlers' mates, cook's mates, roundel boys, coach men, palanquin boys, house keepers, grass cutters, dry and wet nurses, water wenches, scavengers, cart drivers, tots, women sweepers, and lamp lighters' (70). They were, perhaps, the foot soldiers of a colonial modernity – probably similar but not congruent to 'conscripts'[6] of civilisation and/or modernity (Diamond 1974; Asad 1992; Scott 2004) – that marched for three centuries in the Indian subcontinent, though worst affected by it. They were neither recognised for their contribution nor given claim over these material spaces of industrial modernity, as social justice and recognition were denied to them historically (Patterson 1982). However, this calls for a separate research all together.

These changes during the colonial period caused an exorbitant change in values and attitudes back home. The Dalits entry into education was largely assisted through the missionaries, the early theosophist society, and the provincial government. The urban educated Dalits took up the cudgels on behalf of their less fortunate brethren by organising themselves through social organisations and movements. This is reflected in the emergence of newspapers and journals, which were one of the favourite media forms of the emerging subalterns. Printing presses seem to have become the centres for discussions, planning, and collective activities. They created the myth-histories of the Subaltern communities appear in the public, and created their own print-world as a social and political space (Aloysius 1998: 98–125).

It is in this context that the Dalits had started a new and autonomous religio-social movement right in the centre of the city of Madras in the early twentieth century (Aloysius 1998: 57). They had expressed the opinion that the emancipation of their community members could be successfully achieved by organising a Buddhist mass movement. The movement had started branches in Bangalore, Royapettah, Pudupet, Adyar, and Mylapore with the help of railway employees and enlisted army personnel, especially from Queen Victoria's own Madras sappers and miners.[7] They also opened branches where the Subaltern groups migrated as indentured labourers in the over port Natal in South Africa and Eticola, Rangoon in Burma. The postal services, railways, and the journal print that were made available by colonial modernity were effectively used to promote unity and carry forward the movement.[8]

I suggest that this shadow modernity – the most oppressed communities' engagement with colonial modernity – which provided opportunities for new

employment made travel conditional, and displacement was a prerequisite to search for a-place-at-home and a sense of self.[9] The migration, both internal and overseas, brought about certain changes in the economic conditions of the Parayars in some of the Tamil districts of Madras presidency. However, it did not provide a wide scale improvement in the sociocultural conditions. They remained indigent, socially despised communities who, just like today, received violence from the socially dominant castes. As Rupa Viswanath states there was antagonism and sustained opposition to Dalit welfare. There were united efforts in the 1910s to thwart the demands for civil rights of Madras' first Dalit political representatives (Viswanath 2014: 248).

Despite the long working hours in plantations and health hazards posed by factories to the coolies, some became independent cultivators, as there was overall improvement in their socioeconomic conditions. However, there was constant social opposition from the landed castes (Basu 2011: 164). The migration, or displacement experience, showed visible signs of growing self-respect, thrift, and hopefulness in the community (Basu 2011: 181–182). While travel displaced them significantly, it conditioned them to essentially imagine a-place-at-home, in relation to a sense of respectful-self as a unique space. This history of Dalits' engagement with British colonialism and modernity could be explored more and in detail beyond the frames offered by postcolonial and Subaltern Studies' scholars on colonial modernity. In this context, and on a divergent note, perhaps, this is best synthesised conceptually in two scintillating travels – by Gandhi and Ambedkar.

Gandhi and Ambedkar: space, travel, and thought

Gandhi and Ambedkar travelled for a major part of their lifetime. They embodied different kinds of sociopolitical and cultural thought, which is intrinsically linked to the spaces they belonged to and occupied; even as they animate their post-life now in the country. There are stunning similarities in the travel experiences of these two men, essentially differentiated by the spaces they habituated, as both spent considerable time outside India, before they jumped into politics in India.

M.K. Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar travelled abroad and spent their formative years in England, South Africa and America. Gandhi spent 24 years abroad, of which 3 were in England and 21 in South Africa. Ambedkar spent 8 years abroad, mostly for studies, of which 5 were in America and 3 in England. Travel and journey, as experience, played a crucial role in their distinct political practices of their times as they returned to India. Gandhi became Mahatma, whereas Ambedkar became Babasaheb, in contrasting styles (Ambedkar 1993). Wherever Gandhi was, in the words of Jawaharlal Nehru, it was the capital of India, whereas Ambedkar had to apologetically confess to Gandhi that 'I do not have a homeland' (Ambedkar quoted in Guru and Sarukkai 2012: 71).

Their travels were of contrasting styles in the trajectory of their post-life in the country. The places that they started from, travelled to, moved into, mobilised in, worked at and stationed in were culturally constituted spatial phenomena. As both were spatially located and enshrined in foregrounding the nation state, they also

became ambiguous and confessional in the journey of the nation state. The spaces that these icons occupy and animate today evoke dichotomous trajectories of cultural practice that reproduce their memory and presence. These practices, I argue, are engendered by violence and violation of their embodiment and memory. Desecration and demolition of, and slipper garlands to somebody's statues; whereas, spatial reprints of somebody's face on rupee notes are intrinsically linked to the reproduction of power relations mapped through spatial memory. To foreground and examine this idea further, let us closely study and understand travel as spatial phenomena by comparing Ambedkar to Gandhi.

Ambedkar's life was marked by multiple sojourns to hierarchical spaces of many a kind. The sense of 'a-place-at-home' was a distant dream for him. He writes in the Columbia University Alumni News, Dec. 1930, that he experienced social equality for the first time in Columbia University. And some of his best friends that he had in life were some of his class mates and professors at Columbia (Ambedkar quoted in Natarajan and Anand 2011: 64). His travels resuscitate memories that embody the violence inscribed in a caste-space that is homeland that was never homely to him. For Ambedkar, a sense of spatial homeliness and camaraderie was only felt outside of 'home.' Though out-of-space as an outcaste at home, he searched for a home-apart nevertheless. Ambedkar's sojourn in the *bastis* of Bombay presidency and elsewhere, so as to mobilise the depressed classes, and eventual conversion to Buddhism, ensured a homeland for his statured presence in his post-life amongst Dalits in India.

It is worthwhile to recount Ambedkar's tragic travel accounts of his life in India. He reminisces about the train travel from Satara to Goregaon to meet his father, along with his brothers. As a 10-year-old, he recounts, they were forced to face the full reality of caste. He writes 'he was forced to learn how caste could force a human being to deny his body's needs and feelings, even so elemental a feeling as thirst' (*ibid*). His experiences in search of lodging at Baroda – a place to live in a city – immediately after he returned from London, forces one to associate experience as a prerequisite to emancipatory sociopolitical thought.

These experiences generally, excruciating as they are, reduce and reject the person embodied in presence, as abominable and inhuman – a mere shadow. Caste as experience is 'un-freedom' as it enslaves and rejects the needs of bodily senses – such as touch, thirst, and taste. Engendered through caste, Ambedkar's sociopolitical thought gave content to emancipatory movements across spaces. Experience sourced through displacement, which produce self-reflective, out-of-space subjects, precedes meaningful, transformatory, political action. However, the conditions that produce out-of-spaces need to be thought critically and contingently.

On the other hand, though on a different note, Gandhi's experience of being discriminated in South Africa gave a radical content to his politics, so as to lead a nationalist movement in India. However, for us, his experiences are markedly different from Ambedkar's, as the space he habituated in Indian subcontinent, and elsewhere, was ontologically distinct. Gandhi, all the while in Africa and India, was supported by rich businessmen and powerful Congress men. Recent works on

Gandhi's 21 years sojourn in South Africa have clearly indicated that his struggles sought to secure separate political rights to Indian traders and merchants who held land in India, distinct from that of the native Black Africans.

In a public meeting at Bombay in 1896, Gandhi delivered an address on the grievances of the South African Indian community, while giving vent to the prevalent prejudices about the native Africans:

> Ours is a continual struggle against a degradation sought to be inflicted upon us by the Europeans, who desire to degrade us to the level of the raw *Kaffir* whose occupation is hunting, and whose sole ambition is to collect a certain number of cattle to buy a wife with and, then, pass his life in indolence and nakedness.
>
> *(Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi [CWMG] Vol. 1 1999: 410)*

And adds in 1908 on 'my experience in gaol' for *Indian Opinion* that 'the *Kaffirs* are as a rule uncivilised – the convicts even more so. They are troublesome, very dirty and live almost like animals' (*CWMG* Vol. 8 1999: 199). In a petition he drafted in 1899 concerning the designation of an Indian location near the native African settlement, he protested:

> Your petitioner [i.e., Gandhi] has seen the Location intended to be used by the Indians. It would place them, who are undoubtedly infinitely superior to the *Kaffirs*, in close proximity to the latter.
>
> *(CWMG Vol. 3 1999: 76)*

In an open letter to the members of the Natal Legislature in 1894, he wrote: 'the Indian is being dragged down to the position of a raw *Kaffir*' (*CWMG* Vol. 1 1999: 193 and 431). In other words, he protested against Indians being treated like 'raw Kaffirs' – a derogatory word for native Black Africans – in Apartheid South Africa[10].

His experiences of racial discrimination, at the now famous train journey, where he was thrown out of a first-class compartment is as much an issue of racism by the whites, as it is to do with his reluctance to travel with native Africans. He struggled for a non-violent, dignified, partial solution to the treatment of (dominant caste land-holding) Indians in South Africa markedly different from that of native Africans (Reddy 1999). In 1906, he comments on 'the tram case' thus:

> You say that the magistrate's decision is unsatisfactory because it would enable a person, however unclean, to travel by a tram, and that even the Kaffirs would be able to do so. But the magistrate's decision is quite different. The Court declared that the Kaffirs have no legal right to travel by tram. And according to tram regulations, those in an unclean dress or in a drunken state are prohibited from boarding a tram. Thanks to the Court's decision, only clean Indians or coloured people other than Kaffirs, can now travel in the trams.
>
> *(CWMG Vol. 5 1999: 235)*

Hence his *Hind Swaraj* (1908) written during the sea voyage between England and South Africa symbolises diasporic anxiety. Gandhi carried fond memories of a homeland, as he spatio-politically reproduced it abroad. This is the essential difference between Gandhi's spatial sojourn in comparison to that of Ambedkar's. Perhaps, their bodies as spaces are symptomatic of the corporeal homeland they imagined, distinct from each other, in their sojourns. Gandhi's was always in-place, and Ambedkar's constantly out-of-it, and in search.[11]

In studying space as a culturally constructed phenomenon in India, Guru suggests that the dominant social groups historically structure and restructure a given space through spatial hermeneutics of caste. And violence seeks to restructure space in a specific way in the caste society. Hence, Guru invokes Ambedkar to state that caste-based violence is civilisational violence, which reacts to the Dalit struggle that transgresses boundaries, so as to liberate the rigid caste spaces. Dalits pay a heavy price, as violence is defined by the simultaneity of both the 'presence' and 'absence' of the victim of violence (Guru and Sarukkai 2012: 83).

In this civilisational violence, firstly, violence is physical as it annihilates the corporal being – the presence – of Dalits. Secondly, certain groups, such as the untouchables, are eliminated – made absent – from social and culturally active relations. The simultaneous 'absent-presence' thus provides the full definitional conditions for civilisational violence, or so argues Guru. Untouchables, at the zenith of civilisational violence, 'remain untouchable, uncrossable, unseeable, unhearable, unapproachable, and uncommunicable.' As mentioned earlier, they are pushed outside time and space, to embody 'a shock-absorber existence' (Guru and Sarukkai 2012: 83–88). Interestingly, this civilisational violence marks its document on the body, reminding one of Walter Benjamin's seventh thesis on the philosophy of history – 'there has never been a document of culture which is not at one and the same time a document on barbarism' (Benjamin 1969:256).

Guru positively suggests that different spaces yield different concepts, especially when spaces are hierarchically segregated. For Gandhi, self-rule is the main point of contention; however, for Ambedkar, it is self-respect and social justice that acquire central importance. One conceptualisation indicates the limits of other's imagination, due to the experiential space from which it emanates. Guru argues that experience – *anubava/m* – as a category is a primary epistemological resource to produce alternative categories for the politics of emancipation for Ambedkar. Hence, the Ambedkarite movement is an attempt to walkout from constraints, and get a fair chance to enter a new and liberating experience. Guru calls it as an attempt to become 'placeless individuals who then would organize their social protocols with others on an equal basis' (Guru and Sarukkai 2012: 90).

But the process of modernity, as it unleashed in India, only rigidified caste boundaries. Untouchables were seen as mobile dirt, and dirt is considered as mobile untouchability. Guru suggests that there is a spatial dimension to this ontology that continuously produces and reproduces mobile dirt; and thus, untouchability is a particular kind of spatial ontology even in modern urbanisation.[12] For instance, the role of print media in India was ironically significant not in terms of imagining the

nation, as Benedict Anderson would passionately argue, but it just consolidated the hold of caste over financial spaces. Guru justifies this observation by stating that the dominant castes wanted 'to recover in tradition the confidence that they were likely to lose in modernity' (Guru and Sarukkai 2012: 93).

Moving from experiential-spatiality to 'ethics of theorizing,' Guru states that experience could be treated as a middle term in between 'social being and social consciousness' (Guru and Sarukkai 2012: 111). Guru does not assign discursive treatment to experience, rather he disputes such an effort.[13] He sees in experience a conceptual possibility for radical, political, and philosophical use. This reference to concrete experience becomes a necessary epistemic resource for the progression of concepts; not a mere journey of concepts that refer other concepts alone. Hence, it is necessary to study the philosophical foundations of emancipatory movements and their idea of experience that are historically produced.

These theoretical principles that look forward to bringing the category of experience to the centre stage also try, rather vigorously, to frame 'the Dalit experience as having the ambition to produce centralizing categories' that would seek 'epistemic departure' from the existing categories due to inadequacy (Guru and Sarukkai 2012: 121). Two premises seem to outlay such an effort. Firstly, the Dalit experience/movement aspires to a more universal, egalitarian alternative as it attempts to produce a discrete 'moral hegemony.' Secondly, social experience is 'an intersubjectifying experience,' where individualities are transcended and transformed – through debate, persuasion, and public exchange of arguments – into collective yet subversive subjects (Guru and Sarukkai 2012: 127).

Anti-caste: lived experience and communitas

The Dalit experience in India, despite gaining material progress partially, has been essentially about what it is to become and emerge as an autonomous embodiment – an intimate longing-to-be-in-the-world. The Dalit body, when violated as an out-of-space subject, bears an ontological wound, and is reduced to a mere shadow. Even today, this rejection of an autonomous space, a-place-at-home, continues to map the power of the socially dominant castes. And in the absence of the Dalit body being recognised as an equal-subject-in-presence – regardless of difference and autonomy – it is excluded/lynched to a space elsewhere through the caste gaze. Genealogically isolated through the loss of heritage and right to pass on their ancestry, the Dalit body becomes a playfield of 'social death' and not social endosmosis. Dalit deaths are a reminder of a phenomenon that reduces the Dalit subject to its shadow.

However, one needs to weave a conceptual terrain to suggest a positional critique of ascribed intimacy, and belonging that is inscribed through birth. One can argue that the Subaltern thought in India that belongs to the anti-caste tradition, uses interpretation as a tool to reconfigure notions of space and time that is open, creative, and resistant. They inaugurate and constitute a millennial anti-caste communitas, of a kind, as creative opposition and history against caste immunitas. This

has relevance, as resistance, for the rampant violence and humiliation that oppressively institutionalise the body and mind today in India.

'Communitas' as a concept is immensely useful and is inspired from anti/post-Nazi and Stalinist thought, tracing particularly through Jean-Luc Nancy, Maurice Blanchot, and Roberto Esposito. I ask what could be the Dalit experience of mobile community in India? What is the idea of 'intimate be-longing' (as a longing-to-be) for Dalits, in/toward the wor(l)d? Could there be a counter-look to caste – an oppositional gaze – that treats the 'untouchable-being' itself as an Other? How do the Dalits challenge their reduction as a shadow against caste?

Nancy develops sturdily the thought of being as 'compearance' – to co-appear as the most notable condition for the possibility of the political. He suggests that singular beings exist only in an originary 'sociality,' but 'finite being always presents itself "together," and severally' (Nancy 1991).[14] Communication is at the origin of the community as an originary sociality. It consists of constant exposure to an outside, in the sharing with the others all the limits, the borders of finite beings (Nancy 1994; Agamben 1993). For Nancy, the political would signify a community disposed to sharing. A community that is conscious of its constitutive, communicative experience. Caste perhaps then is the most anti-social, anti-communicative, and anti-communal invention as it sanctions non-fusion as a law.

However, death too disrupts the ontological project of fusion. Hence an 'originary or ontological sociality,' which Nancy calls an 'arche-community,' is understood as spacing or writing about the 'traces' of the community that are 'unrepresentable,' 'unavowable' and 'inoperative' (Gaon 2005). In contrast, for Blanchot, the theme of death is used for the service of the ethical relation to the other. While, caste founds social death; 'Death founds community,' argues Blanchot, 'in the sense that death of the other takes me out of myself and this exposes me to the radical alterity of an outside that thought cannot master' (Blanchot 1988: 12). Vitally, both these reflections on community offer something beyond the traditional model of the social bond. They interrogate community to undo identity and commonality as such. They open the chance of a political to emerge that is otherwise foreclosed. Beyond or before understanding the social bond as a relationship among the previously constituted subjects; they attempt to question, through an ethical-ontological register, the philosophical suppositions of a political community.[15]

Dalit intellectuals seem to conceptualise community as beyond the traditional model of the social bond – caste. They interrogate community to undo caste and Brahminism as such. They open the chance of a political to emerge that is otherwise foreclosed. They question, through an ethical-ontological register, the philosophical suppositions of a caste society through a deconstructive understanding of community. Consequently, this opens – a deconstructive opening indeed – a possibility for a caste-less community. The discussions on community implore that ethics and ontology are fundamentally linked with ideas of community. The attempt to engage with the other, so as to conceive the community as related with the other, has been Nancy's and Blanchot's attempt to theorise the community.

In addition, Esposito's communitas as *munus, communis*, and *itas*, which mean gift, debt, and obligation, respectively, could relate to the Tamil Dalits establishing *sangams* and *sabhas* in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Their engagement with Buddhism was about belonging to a community against caste in the vernacular both in the global and local context. In the colonial and nationalist context, it must have enabled them to belong to a world-community and at the same time with their own communities. It inscribes a negation and exscribes an affirmation whereby it becomes both a traditional and an elective community at once. A 'communitas' as a 'totality of persons united not by a property but precisely by an obligation or a debt; not by an addition but a subtraction' (Esposito 2009: 6). This anti-caste communitas is an exposure and it is characterised by the other, by a voiding to alter oneself. The community appeals as it withdraws from caste and Brahminism, by differentiating itself from immunitas. Sophisticatedly, Esposito suggests that community cannot be thought as a corporation or a body, where individuals are found in a larger individual – what a critique of the all-pervasive *Manusha*in *Varnashra Dharma*, where the head, shoulders, thighs, and feet stand for a corporal hierarchy of a people.

These theoretical gestures are intrinsically linked. This could be expanded and extended to understand how the oppressed, importantly the Dalits, in particular contexts view and constitute community – textually – and question the philosophical supposition of the political in caste-*immunitas*.[16] Iyothee Thass's texts are examples that undo the presupposition of the social bond, which is constituted through caste-subjection and immunisation, to reconstruct community through an ethico-ontological communitas with anti-caste values. Experience, as an instituting category, frames this conceptual terrain to understand community (Ansari 2001).

The Tamil intellectual Pandit Iyothee Thass[17] (1845–1914) ran the magazine *Tamizhan* (*T*1907–1914),[18] which revived interest on Buddhism as an anti-caste religion. A man of anti-caste ideas, he was a major leader, intellectual and activist whose life, work, and legacy have regrettably remained neglected by historians until recently.[19] In many ways, a precursor to towering anti-caste figures like Periyar E.V. Ramasamy (1879–1973) and Babasaheb Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), Thass was the first to develop an anti-caste narrative by espousing and writing on Buddhism (Rajangam 2016; Rajesh 2011, 2013). He was a practitioner of *Siddha* medicine, who during the 1881 British-India census, appealed that the *panchamas* (*ex-untouchables*) were not Hindus and that they must be recorded as original Tamils – *Adi Tamizhar* (Aloysius 2015: 69). He used Tamil literary resources and palm-scripts, so as to field anti-caste, Tamil literature, and folklore-based explanations on Buddhism.

Thass was an intellectual – an expert reader, referee, writer, polyglot, publisher, and organiser; and he initiated a resistant knowledge practice, by using journalism, as a tool to gain inroads into the print public sphere, which was undeniably caste-ridden. Forty-two such Tamil journals – by Dalits – were run from 1850 to 1947 in the Madras presidency (Balasubramaniam 2016, 2017). Such an event in print history is erased in public memory and it calls for a serious enquiry. Particularly

the role of academics and history-writing in India must have a critical anti-caste perspective. This revisit would re-evaluate that historical moment of erasure, and could capture the prolific Dalit participation and contribution to emancipatory knowledge practice in print-language (Leonard 2017).

Iyothee Thass and *Indhirar Dhesa Sarithiram*

> *Sasthirathirkotra anubavamum, anubavathirkotra sasthirangalum avargalidam kidaiyavam. They do not have that knowledge which suits their experience, and that experience which suits their knowledge.*
>
> – (Pandithar 2010: 148)

Thass ran the Tamil journal *Oru Paisa Tamizhan* (later *Tamizhan* or *The Tamilian*) from June 19, 1907 to April 29, 1914 – incidentally the year Mohandas Gandhi returned to India from South Africa and Dr. Ambedkar was in the middle of his research in Columbia University, New York. Compared to other radical, anti-race, African-American magazines such as *The Chicago Defender* during the same time, *Tamizhan* ran similar radical contents against caste, health columns, local and international news; and it also had a wide reach among the marginalised (Ayyathurai 2011: 21–22). Thass pioneered the Buddhist movement in the cities where Dalits migrated as coolies, such as Kolar Gold Field, Bangalore, Rangoon, and Durban. He devoted time to start separate *vihars*, worship practices, festivals, libraries, schools, burial places, and marriage customs. These were done to reconstruct Dalit history through a Buddhist framework in the vernacular. Not only did he work for the religious identity of the Dalits, but also for their political, social, and economic needs too (Aloysius 2004, 2007).

Thass reconstructs Tamil Buddhism through a counter-cultural enquiry into religion, history, community, and identity, primarily, against the institutional codes of Brahminism. His attempt at a hermeneutic historiography, subverts, and creates a space outside, or against caste as history. Thass uses the reserves of Tamil language as an archive of history, in the context of an emergent Tamil-print public sphere in Madras Presidency, in the early twentieth century. Defying formal institutionalisation of historical time and space, he attempts an interpretative history and community as practice.

IDS, his serial accounts in 65 parts published between August 1910 and November 1911, in the journal *Tamizhan*, is an attempt to reconstruct a Buddhist history of India (published as a book in 1912, 2nd edition in 1957, and later in 1999 by the Dalit Sahitya Academy). It is a reconstructive social history that politically and culturally counters the established 'story of caste.' It is imperative to study Thass as someone who de-institutes as well as constitutes a *Sarithiram* in Tamil. While it bemoans a genealogy of loss due to civilisational violence, it embarks into civilisational memory as a pre-history of caste, so as to inaugurate an anti-caste millennial communitas.[20]

Thass treats history, or much simply researching the past, as an ethico-ontological pedagogy. Thass, in his preface, states that the intent to publish *IDS* was 'to explain and to remove problems' (*vilakudhal . . . allalai neekudhal*) the stories that were preached as history. He counter-reads stories that were being established as history to reconstruct a counter. He requests 'to research history and reject everything else' (*sarithira aaraichi ininri sagala vatraiyum usaava vendugiren*)[21]. *Villakudhal*, the Tamil word, in fact stands for both interpretation and explanation. In fact, it is instructive to read this practice of research, in the light of Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology, where understanding and explanation are treated as an ontological aspect of interpretation. It seeks to 'bring into language an experience, a way of living in and of being-in-the-world.'[22]

For instance, the title calls for an interesting reading. *Indhirar* in *Indhirar Dhesa Sarithiram* is the Buddha for Thass. *Indhiram*,[23] for him, comes from the word *ainthiram* or *aimpori*(*ainthu* + *thiram* – five + senses) – the five senses – of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. And the one who controlled and conquered the five senses for practicing *aram* – ethical action or conduct is *Ainthirar* also *Indhirar*. Siddhartha, the king of Magadha country who became the Buddha, and preached this method to his followers, was called by that name. *Sangha*s were established in his name to propagate this thought-practice of learning through five senses; these *Sangha*s were called *Indhira Viharangal* – the *Vihars*. The land that teaches, practices, and remembers the *Indhirar* through *Indhira Vizha* was called *Indhiyam*, *Indhiram*, and *Indhiya* where *Indhira Vihars* were constructed. People who lived there and followed the path of *Indhirar* were called *Indhiyargal* – Indians. The word *Indhiyam* is interpreted to generate a variety of new meanings to constitute a resistant concept for understanding nation as space and time. And the land particularly was linked to the idea of practice that trains the five senses (Pandithar 2010: 5).[24]

This mode of thinking questions the idea of community as a given identity and problematises its limits. An originary sociality that is ethico-ontological in principle seem to contest the simple theme of the human as an essential being or the nation as a constructed space in time. Community is underlined as an act – one singular being with another singular being. Finitude exposes itself as a gift and exists as communication in this relationship. *Indhirar Dhesam* and *Aindhirar* co-appears or 'compears' together as space and time – of 'Being Singular Plural' (Nancy 2000).

Thass interprets and explains the verses that were quoted and interpreted from *Arungalai Seppu*, *Manimekalai*, *Tolkappiyam*, *Veeracoliyam*, *Silapadhikaram*, *Valayapathi*, *Kundalakesi*, *Sivaka Sinthamani*, and *Soolamani* – fourth-century AD Tamil texts – through speculative etymology. These were palm-scripts that he personally possessed, and he uses them to derive meaning and describe his idea of India. The formations of the languages signalled a significant shift from the oral to the written word, Thass claims. The three languages Pali, Sanskrit, and Tamil were structured only to spread the Buddhist values far and wide. Through etymological connections, Thass' writings rivet the reader to read India's past as originally Buddhist.[25]

This practice of history is a creative exercise – one of hermeneutic extrapolation. That is through a speculative yet referential etymology. He transfers meaning

from one word to another, using available sources, as a deconstructive act, for an alternative construction of community. He neglects and discounts all other available explanations of the word, to derive a new one. This mode of hermeneutics is like what Ricoeur has suggested. On reflecting more on interpretation, Ricoeur argues that reading takes place within a community which displays presuppositions and exigencies. And it is in language that the cosmos, desire, and the imaginary reach expression. Hence this practice of hermeneutics is also an attempt for self-understanding by means of understanding others. Ricoeur categorises interpretation as an existence and an operation of thought, adding that existence then is interpreted existence.[26]

Sarithiram as interpretation: critical/creative communitas

Thass' history research, through the dispersal of meaning in Tamil language, is an act of delimitation as well as limitation. For instance, he explains why India is called *baratha gandam* – the Bharath continent. As *Indhiram*, *Indhiyam*, *A/Indhirar*, and *Indhiyargal* were interpreted to treat the Indian nation geographically by an action principle where the way of the Buddha is practised; the Buddha – the *Aindhirar* – was called as the *Varadhar*, a derivative of the word *barathar*, as he preached *ara varam* – a gift-giver of ethical treatise – to his followers. The land was called North and South Bharath, where *varadhar*'s ethical treatise was preached across lands that spoke, at least, 20 languages – including Chinese, Sinhala to Konkani and Tulu, along with Sanskrit, Pali, and Dravida (Tamil), among others. There are two aspects in this historical reconstruction. The first is reading resistantly a given story (deconstruction), and the other is to constitute an alternative cosmology (reconstruction). Names were particularly used to reinterpret a geography of place as practice, to fundamentally counter the meaning attached to locate the caste of a space in India.

In the subverted story of India, Thass knits a web of referential textuality to reconstruct a narrative through delimitation. Firstly, he rejects that India is caste-Hindu in content. While, one may understand that his exercise is neither an anthropological nor a sociological enquiry; it is but a textual communication. By reconstructing Buddhism, he constitutes a textual imaginary. Thass' practice of history subverts, significantly, the idea of institutional history. He de-institutes the definition of space and time as a quantifiable reference to construct a nation. He constitutes his *Indhirar Dhesam* through locating thought-practice as history. Thass locates as well as dislocates his *Indhiyam*, spatio-temporally, by limiting and delimiting the idea of nation and history.

It is limiting because he works to produce his alternative 'history research' in Tamil, though accessing at least four different languages and resources – Tamil, Sanskrit, Pali, and English. He develops a referential, descriptive, prose-register, which shares space with poetry, compendiums and epic-narratives that are transcribed into journalistic print space. He creates a space for knowledge practice, through en-textualisation, so that it is published and spread across, as Tamil prose, within a limited boundary.

The limitation is, also, fashioned by the attempt to create an alternative history, through reading and referring sources that are in contention with the 'authorized' versions of history and historical practice. It competes with other powerful hermeneutics of caste – that of colonial census, and missionaries namely – Christian, Hindu Vaishnavaite, and Vellala Saivaite cosmologies. Thass' methodology, then, is also an attempt to democratise power and practice it, in his own way, to hegemonise an alterity. In his attempt to reconstruct the history of Buddhism through Tamil print, Thass works with concepts and myths in the language to reconstruct meaning by liberating it from a limited history. Thass, while working within a limitation, delimits temporality and spatiality, and plays with these concepts by rendering them into an anti-caste communitas.

For instance, while researching the history of the *Indhirar Dhesam*, Thass delimits the spatial definition of the idea of nation, and goes beyond to construct it as a community identified by practice. In this, his attempt was not to recreate the history through a linguistic, neither Vedic, nor a temporal description of India. Taking for granted, the Buddhist location of his resources, caste-lessness, he argues, is Buddhist, hence, it predates and is against Brahminism. He considers the idea of India as against something, describing it – pre-empting Ambedkar – as a historical conflict between Brahminism and Buddhism. Hence his delimiting as well as limiting practice of history is an ingenious attempt to describe who Indians are. For Iyothee Thass, it is anyone who is outside and against caste immunitas.

Thass' interpretative methods and evidences involved a fusion of philosophical concepts of Buddhism, Buddhist geographical locations, metaphysical descriptions, and Buddhist literatures that were poetic and fictional. However, his interpretative method also seems to bear the mark of a dialectics between Brahminism and Buddhism as a history of conflict. Temporal linearity and spatial description are creatively explored. For instance, he interprets the Vaishnavite myth of Vamana and Bali to reconstruct a different history. Thass locates Mahabali in historical time and space – in the seventh century CE, at Mahabalipuram, through his references. He rejects the Hindu Vamana-Bali myth – the Vishnu avatar story of victory over the *asura* king, out rightly, and does not even discuss the same in his description. For, Thass, this myth is a content to be re-read to create an alternative history.

Thass states that Mahabali is a Buddhist king from Mahabalipuram, who ruled the southern *Baratha Gandam*, 1,200 years ago. He constructed Buddha-*sangha Vihars* throughout his country and towards his later years, attained *nirvana* on an *ammavasai* (lunar eclipse), in the Tamil month *Puratasi*, at the Vengadam hills (now Thiruppathi). As source references, Thass provides information from rock edicts and plates excavated from Vellur (*T* Vol 2 1999: 40–41). For Thass, this recovery of history/interpretation does not stop here. From this information, he reconstructs the dialectical history of conflict between Brahminism and Buddhism, through the references from the Tamil epic *Manimekalai*.

With reference to the untouchable saints within Saivism and Vaishnavism – the Nayanmars and Alvars – Thass recovers a Buddhist history. He takes two untouchable saints – Thirupaanar, the Alvar, and Nandanar, the Nayanmar. Paanar, Thass

clarifies through the references, is the son of Mahabali, a Buddhist Bhikku, who was usurped into Vaishnavism as an Alvar. While Nandan, a Buddhist king, was subsumed into Saivism as a Nayanmar – but both only as untouchable Parayar saints. It is a co-option, explains Thass. He places this co-option in the year 1814, where, in a fight over temple rights and social position, the Brahmins and *Kammalas* (the artisan-craftsmen, sculptors, and metal workers in temples) divided the caste society into right- and left-hand castes[27]. Thass describes, that for want of majority, the Parayars were included into the right-hand castes along with the Brahmins. The Buddhist figures from all castes were co-opted as Alvars and Nayanmars, but for the Kammalas, who were in opposition and were co-opted into the left-hand castes. Thus, Thass explains, there are no Kammala Saiva and Vaishnava saints.

Thass, while mixing his resources to construct a Buddhist history of conflict with Vaishnavite and Saivite Hinduism, also plays with temporality. He links the seventh century with the nineteenth century, back and forth, to do a resistant reading of a myth to make it an alternative imaginary and history. He delimits the concept of time by playing with it imaginatively. He re-converts the Alvar and Nayanmar saints into Buddhism. He recovers them for a Buddhist imaginary. His anti-caste hermeneutics treat folk deities such as Muthan, Muniyan, and Karuppan – as names of figures that had an inherent link with the Buddha. Female folk deities such as Kannagi, Kaali, Neeli, Sintha Devi, and Amman were Buddhist nuns, and they were remembered for their service to the community through festivals (Thass cited in Gowthaman 2004: 139–159). Thass temporally divides the history of the country as a space into seven stages of a language, namely – sound period, script period, grammar period, poetry period – that coincided with the *sangham* period, couplets period, epics period, and lyrical period (*Aadhina Kaalam).* Historical time (Kosseleck 2004) was treated as the time (or the evolution) of a language – here Tamil, as Thass interprets time as language.

His historical project, interestingly, re-converts Jesus Christ, Isaiah, Elijah, David, and Moses – all Semitic figures[28] – as those who preached the *Dhamma* ethics, and who were primarily enlightened Buddhist teachers (*T* Vol. 1 1999: 570). He compared the Dalits with the oppressed Jews. Old Testament, particularly the Genesis chapter, was given a Buddhist re-reading by comparing and using content from *Ashtanga* and *Kundalini* yoga. They explained the meaning of the Biblical miracles (*T* Vol. 1 1999: 567–569). His Buddhist interpretation is one of freedom, imagination, and speculative rendering, while comparing the Biblical verses with the Tamil literary verses.

Thass interpreted the Bible through an experiential hermeneutic, where the Dalits could relate with what he wrote. Even if this could have been a translation from works in English, of this kind, during this period, as there were similar Christian–Buddhist comparisons, Iyothee Thass's exercise with space and time was to create an anti-caste cosmopolitan – a communitas which is primarily a gift and an obligation that belongs to everyone and no one owns it. The hermeneutics, embedded in this act, seeks to achieve multiple possibilities. 'The History' of the most oppressed by the caste system is interpreted, by Thass, as antithetical to, but

also, independent of Brahmins, or any caste group that would privilege itself by marginalising the outcaste as its/their other.

Hence, for Thass, I argue that interpretation is resistant creativity. In this imaginative exercise he plays with historiography, especially, with concepts such as space and time. He brings together Buddha, Bali, Nandan, Paanan, along with Moses, Isaiah, and Jesus Christ but also different folk deities as well as Vedic heroes in his creative *sarithiram*. He brings them as a part of Buddhist-Jaina-Siddha civilisational legacy against Brahminism. He reinterprets most of the Indian festivals through a Buddhist lens by working on the words and their meaning. He splits them, plays with them, and creatively make them a meaning against caste and Brahminism[29]. It is simultaneously an active re-reading and writing through affective research. It is linked with the creation of a textual imaginary that shares space with memory, loss, and dislocation along with biographical and creative speculation. In this, it is an attempt, from the 'Dalit-Subaltern' political, to gain inroads into historiography, while, dislocating and transforming the Brahminical caste-Hindu regime and location of knowledge practice.

For instance, Thass does not accept the socio-anthropological constitution and description of the word *Parayar*– that they were meek and weak, or they were untouchable, poor, and socially ostracised. These narratives were scientifically premised on descriptive accuracy and evidential historicity. These were, for him, to be rejected and reinvented. In his history research, *Paraya* as a concept is to be derived and reconstituted to nullify the available category. Hence, he works with the word and interprets it imaginatively. He argues that the word *Parayar* is a derivative of the word *piraiyar* or *pirar* (*others*). He argues, through references, that they were 'Others,' the ancient Buddhists – *purva bouddhargal* (*purvam* means ancient as well as holistic), who did not accept the Brahminical caste differences and therefore were condemned by *vesha Brahmanas* (*deceptive Brahmins*) as untouchable Parayars.

Thass claimed that the 'knowledgeable Dravidian Buddhists' were defeated by the 'crooked machinations of *arya mlechhas*' and were relegated falsely as untouchables (Thass cited in Ravikumar and Azhagarasan 2012: xvii). But he also suggests that Parayars were the ones who spoke the truth – *parai* is to speak. Hence anyone who speaks the truth and exposes falsehood were called as the *Parai-yor*. Thass claimed that they were 'moral leaders of the people who relentlessly intervened and exposed the interloper's trickery, greed, and falsity' (Thass cited in Aloysius 2010: 249). A dialectical hermeneutic as a history of conflict between *vesham* and *purvam* through Brahminism and Buddhism as immunitas versus communitas was creatively woven.

Conclusion

Thass' critical exercise with thought, imagination, and history to create an alterity is closely linked with the idea of a 'political community'[30] in practice, emerging from the Subaltern constituency with their own resources in the early twentieth century. Thass reversed the gaze on caste society from the point of view of the outcastes as a Buddhist – *Pirar* – 'the other' who is pre-caste and primarily caste-less. He did not

concede Sanskrit as the language of the Brahmins/Aryans and Tamil as the language of the Dravidian stock, as Caldwell and other Oriental philologists, as well as Dravidian nationalists had argued. For him both Sanskrit and Tamil are sister languages of Buddhist origin with Pali as their common source. Thass interpreted that Pali, the language of the Buddha, remained an oral language, but Sanskrit and Tamil became written languages through Panini and Agastyar to spread the words of Buddha.

Thass perhaps sees Tamil, Sanskrit, and Pali as envisaging an anti-caste 'Vernacular Cosmopolitanism' that conjoins notions of local specificity for a universal enlightenment. Thass profusely uses all these languages – Tamil, Sanskrit, and Pali – to create a Buddhist history of India, while not collaborating with the 'British Discovery.' He just uses the available myths, history, folk-narratives, and literature in Tamil. His effort to read history from within the reserves of Tamil language available to the marginalised community, not only strengthens their agency, but also opens new ways to interpret and understand 'culture' beyond caste, and as part of a collective community of experience.

As someone who organised his community in the name of *Sathi Betha Matra Dravida Mahajana Sabha* (*Casteless Dravida Mahajana Sabha*), Thass gave content to the idea of caste-lessness, Buddhism, and Tamil community. This is a concrete agenda that relied not only on self-identification as an emancipatory process, but also was created on the idea of anti-caste communitas as a cosmic imaginary, in early-twentieth-century Tamil society. It was a Buddhist universal, whose material was the local, limited, finite, every day, and untouched.

The anti-caste 'communitas' of Dalits, in the word, gestures towards an autonomous embodiment, beyond just being restricted as a shadow. It counter-looks caste with an oppositional gaze, with a resistant touch, with an act of annihilation. Its struggle against civilisational violence unravels caste's direct, insidious violence, and its chronic inalienable dishonour. It, hence, fashions a 'genealogy of loss' that integrates experience, understands social inheritances, and anchors the living present with a conscious community through civilisational memory.

This chapter through a variety of writings in English and Tamil, wove a conceptual terrain, so as, to explore anti-caste communitas and outcaste experience in south Asia. It proposed that the subaltern thought uses interpretation as a tool to reconfigure notions of space and time that is open, creative, and resistant; hence a critical way to imagine dignified-life from the given position. It puts forward that Dalits have inaugurated and constituted a millennial communitas, of a kind, as a creative opposition to and history against, which has relevance as resistance, the rampant violence and humiliation that oppressively institutionalise living-deaths in the nation today.

Notes

1 Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai's illustrious book *The Cracked Mirror* (2012)is the inspiration for the phrase shadows that travel. The shadow, as one knows, of socially despised castes were also considered polluting in some parts of the Indian subcontinent. However,

in violence and rape, one may understand that, the phenomenon of shadow pollution is cracked, or conveniently broken. Paradoxically, it eludes that in violation 'untouchable' shadows are not really polluting for the dominant castes, as they remap their ideal shadow or the shadow of purity through violence.

2 Gopal Guru uses Henri Lefebvre's category of experiential space and shadow, so as, to illustrate conceptual links between space, body, travel, and caste. Lefebvre argues that space is actually experienced in its depths, as duplications, echoes, or reverberations. He suggests that space is inscribed in the body and then becomes the body's counterpart, as its 'other' (Lefebvre 1984: 184). In other words, it becomes a mirror image or a shadow. Guru underlines that this category is relevant to understand the shadow of an 'untouchable's' body. He clarifies that an untouchable's body as space doubles up as both corporal substance and its shadow. Thus the real and the reflected – the body and the shadow – become equally powerful in mapping the space, in favour of the socially dominant castes (Guru and Sarukkai 2012: 81).

3 *Communitas*, a Latin loan word, has been theorised in cultural anthropology and social sciences, so as to refer to an unstructured community where people are equal, or to the 'spirit' of community. Victor Turner rendered an anthropological use of this term, in order to capture the interplay between social 'structure' and 'anti-structure.' He conceptualised that liminality and communitas are both components of anti-structure in his third chapter (Turner 1969). However, 'communitas' here is inspired by anti/post-Nazi and Stalinist thought, tracing particularly Nancy, Blanchot, and Esposito.

4 *Nandanar's Children* is one of the very few scholarships in Indian Social History which studies a Dalit community's mobility during the colonial period in India. A chapter titled 'Search for Fresh Pastures: Overseas and Internal Migration Patterns of the Tamil Paraiyans in the 19th and 20th Centuries' brilliantly recounts and captures the colonial 'travels,' or displacement of the Tamil Parayars (Basu 2011: 111–164).

5 The colonial army during the second half of the eighteenth century started to form an army establishment in the South, which served both the Parayars and the British. The Parayars since the 1760s and 1770s had constituted the bulk of the foot soldiers in the company army. They found employment in the following years as military depots started functioning from Madras and Trichinopoly (Dutta 2016: 64). Significantly, in the early decades of the nineteenth century, the recruitment in the British army brought about important changes in the self-perceptions of the Parayar soldiers (Basu 2011: 160).Serving the company's army provided the Parayars an opportunity to experience the civic equality enjoyed by other subjects of the company. The performance of military rituals and drills instilled in them the idea of belonging to a martial race. The prestige associated with a military uniform paved way to hope that all forms of caste discrimination, the bonds of exploitation and servitude would be eliminated. Dutta argues that these important changes in their engagement with the British army revolutionised the social and political outlook of most of the untouchable castes in the country (65).

6 The term 'conscript' refers to someone who is compulsorily enrolled or drafted for service. The phrase 'conscripts of civilization' was used by the eminent anthropologist Stanley Diamond. He refers it to the 'primitive' cultures that engage in the 'civilization' project becoming 'conscripts of civilization, not volunteers' (Diamond 1974: 204). This is, however, a unilateral view. Although large populations under colonialism could be understood as conscripts, the case with some – like Dalits – seems to have been complex, critical, voluntary, and engaging. Therefore, though the conditions could be theorised as conscripts, but the content is not congruent and agreeable to the same.

7 During Iyothee Thass' time, Mysore and Kolar Gold Field particularly played a very significant role in not only spreading Buddhism but also to start many educational ventures. Dalits in Kolar Gold Field, particularly M.Y. Murugasen, E. Gurusamy, and A.P. Periyasamy Pulavar started *sangha* activities in Marikuppam, (Kolar Gold Field) by 1907. E.N. Ayyakannu started a library and a Buddhist research centre in Kolar Gold Field. These Subaltern activists became pioneers in caste rejection and self-respect marriages in

the early twentieth century. The Siddhartha Printing Press also played a very major role in this emergence. It could be argued that this Dalit movement paved the way to create content for Periyar's self-respect movement in the mid-twentieth century (Gowthaman 2004: 72).

8 It is in this context that Dalit migrations to South Africa, Burma, Ceylon, Fiji, Mauritius, Singapore, Malaysia, Tanzania, and other lands during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries produced interesting shifts for the community. Apart from that, a caste-less cosmopolis was in the making even through internal migration within the subcontinent. It was in the backdrop of the educated and industriously employed in the Madras city, those who were enlisted in the Bangalore cantonment, the miners of Kolar Gold Field, the railway workers of Hubli, the plantation workers of Mercara, the army men of Secunderabad along with the indentured labourers who migrated to other countries, that Tamil Buddhism, the anti-caste public sphere, and the Dalit print could emerge as a movement in the region (Aloysius 1998: 183).

9 When compared, this is similar and significantly in tune with the experience and condition of Blacks and migration. Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) applies a cultural studies approach and provides a study of African intellectual history and its cultural construction of this condition. Gilroy's theme of 'double consciousness' studies how Blacks, due to the cross-Atlantic migration, strive to be both European and Black. Such a scope is beyond the purview of this chapter. However, Gilroy's book offers insight to understand the Dalits' engagement with colonial modernity. In fact, the term 'double consciousness' as a concept developed by the African-American sociologist and intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) to describe the felt contradiction between social values and daily struggle faced by Blacks in the United States. Being Black meant, Du Bois argued, being deprived of a 'true self-consciousness.' Blacks often perceived themselves through the generalised contempt of White America. Being a Black as well as an American raised contradiction between American social ideals, which Blacks shared (Du Bois 1903: 1–14).

10 As more studies are recently done on Gandhi's sojourn in South Africa as a subject for critical research, Joseph Leleyveld's controversial book titled *Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle with India* documents Gandhi's life in South Africa. Largely research on this period is few but for an early article by Dr. James D. Hunt on 'Gandhi and the Black people of South Africa' in *Gandhi Marg*, New Delhi, April–June 1983 which appears to be an important study on this subject. An article by Les Switzer, 'Gandhi in South Africa: The ambiguities of Satyagraha' in *The Journal of Ethic Studies* 14(1), touches on this subject.

11 It is to be noted that Gandhi's idea of 'ideal Bangi' is an attempt to confine the Dalits into the space of toilet literally. And that is probably the lowest point he stoops down to in his understanding of Dalits, losing his humanity forever. He was in fact far removed from understanding Dalits and Africans. This reflects his ghettoising mentality and pretentious universal tendencies.

Even Gandhi's self-toilet-cleaning public stunts, now reinvigorated as 'Swachh Bharath' by the government of India in 2015, reduces Dalits as mere scavenging bodies, forgetting in the process his own food would have been cultivated by their sweat and blood. Perhaps, Gandhi's infantilising and hegemony over Dalits were in fact attempts to deny a level playing human space to Dalits. This is similar to his de-sexualization and subordination of women, through his asexual experiments. In a discussion with Dr. Gajendran Ayyathurai.

12 Ravichandran Bathran's asks searching questions on the many omissions of 'Dalit' as a concept, and also explores the practice of Indian architecture as an embodiment of caste. He asks why toilets are constructed where they are in India, and argues that 'there has been much discussion on toilets, but their location has never been touched upon or discussed' (Bathran 2016: 31–32). Moreover, he states that 'toilets are built in congested or uncomfortable positions while the bathroom and living room are given good attention.

I call the toilet (a place for filth) an outcaste in architecture, which needs an outcaste (untouchable) to always clean it. The stigmas attached to both are closely related to the caste system' (32).

13 However, in a different context Joan Scott, to criticise the category of experience that was mooted in the context of feminist and race studies, contests that 'experience is at once always already an interpretation and something that needs to be interpreted. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, and always therefore political' (Scott 1991: 797).

14 Nancy was troubled by the Nazist and Stalinist dictatorship that enounced 'socialist communes' in the garb of totalitarian regimes. He raised doubts philosophically about the political nature of communities. He asked, hugely inspired by Heidegger and Derrida, how the community without essence can be presented as such. What might a politics be that does not stem from the will to realise an essence? For details see Nancy 1994.

15 Both Nancy and Blanchot produce a deconstructive understanding of community. They depict that community as 'communality' undoes identity and commonality as such. Consequently, this opens – a deconstructive opening – in an essential way a possibility of politics. Apparently, in the western political thought, community as 'communality' is the pre-originary socius which unsettles the contemporary 'being.' Thus, it is the trace of community, in a Derridean way – an arche-community. Without this politics and community are not possible at all, both Nancy and Blanchot seem to theorise. The discussions on the question of community, as that of ethics and ontology, implore the question of community as fundamentally philosophical. The attempt to engage with the other, so as, to conceive the community as related with the other, has been Nancy's and Blanchot's attempt to theorise community. For contemporary philosophical renditions on community and modernity see Little (2002), Lyotard (1986), and Hall (1997).

16 Esposito also poses the idea of 'immunitas' as a contrary or the reverse of communitas, by foregrounding the opposition between community and immunity. Immunitas derives its meaning from a medical-legal language that suggests self-protection and safeguard. Like one immunises oneself against a danger from outside. However, he underlines that the idea of immunity, which is necessary to protect life, when pushed beyond a limit basically negates it. It at once protects and negates life, in a sense suggesting that protection is negation. Hence he states that protection, when pushed beyond a certain limit, forces life into a sort of prison. It armours life so heavily, in that what one loses is not only freedom, but also the real sense of individual and collective existence. Immunity is posed as opposing the spirit of community, according to Esposito. It limits social circulation and exposure. Through this opposition, Esposito, frames communitas as the constitutively exposed character of existence, and not protection (Campbell and Paparcone 2006: 49–56).

17 Iyothee Thassa Pandithar (1845–1914) was born a Dalit from the Parayar community, nevertheless, he contested the category Parayar throughout his life. He floated alternative, open identities such as *poorva Bouddhar* (*Ancient Buddhist*), *Jaadhi pedha matra Tamizhar/Dravidar* (*Caste-less Tamils/Dravidians*), and *Tamil Bouddhar* (*Tamil Buddhist*). Iyotheethaasa Pandithar (*Pandit*) is also termed as Iyothee Thass and Thass in this chapter.

18 Thass' quotations from the *Tamizhan* archives, including those cited in Gowthaman (2004), and from the book Iyotheethaasa Pandithar's *Indhirar Dhesa Sarithiram* (2010) are translated into English by me. The references from *Tamizhan* archives are taken from Aloysius' three edited volumes (1999 and 2003), and they would be cited as *T* with their corresponding volume number and page numbers in this chapter.

19 Likewise, many such figures seem to have worked similar to Thass during the same period in the vernacular regions. Narayana Guru (1856–1928) from Kerala, Bhima Bhoi (1850–1995) in Orissa, Poikkayil Yohannan (1878–1939) in Kerala, and a little earlier Jyotirao Phule (1827–1920) created a hermeneutic of anti-caste communitas in writing.

20 Thass' *Sarithiram* has a unique tale to tell. His narrative of India is originally a Buddhist nation. The very first part of the *Sarithiram* functions as a political template of Buddhist historical materialism, so to speak, which prefigures his examination in later parts of the

series, of the emergence of *mlechhar* (Aryans), their Saivism and Vaishnavism, the destruction of Buddhist kings such as Nandan and Iranyan, the radical opposition of the lay-Buddhists against the pseudo-Brahmins, and the ascension of Manu Dharma Smriti and its dehumanisation of Indian society to the present.

21 *Sarithirangalai aaraichi seiya vendumaeandri karpanaa kadhaigalai alla . . . sarithira aaraichi-yininri sagalavatraiyum usaava vendugiren* [Research just history, not fantasy stories . . . and research nothing but history] (*T* Vol. 1 1999: 573).

22 Ricoeur, through his seminal works, argues that the attempt to structure time through the use of language, in history as well as in fiction, fulfils a narrative function that ultimately leads back to the question of self. The interrelation of understanding and explanation is, thus, described as an ability to reconstruct the internal dynamic of the text, and to restore to its ability to project itself outside itself in the representation of a world that one could inhabit. Hence interpretation, for Ricoeur, is a dialectic of understanding and explanation at the level of sense immanent to the text. Discourse, thereby, never exists for its own sake, for its own glory. He states that in all its uses it seeks to bring into language an experience, a way of living in and of being-in-the-world which precedes it and which demands to be said (Ricoeur 1983: 154).

23 Thass starts his book with the sentence – *indhiram ennum mozhi ainthiram ennum mozhiyin thiribam* ['the word *indhiram* is a reconstructed from the word *ainthiram*'] (Pandithar 2010: 15), but mozhi also means language, in Tamil, and *Thiripu* may mean, to insert and derive.

24 See, Iyothee Thassa Pandithar, *Indhirar Dhesa Sarithiram*. Chennai: Tamil Kudiarasu Publication, 2010.

25 Language, for Thass, becomes the tool through which the thoughts of Buddha were recorded, preserved, and spread. For this purpose, Pali was used as an oral form, and they were transcribed in Sanskrit and Tamil. These languages – one from the Aryan and the other from the Dravidian family of languages – were not fundamentally opposed to each other, for Thass. *Panchsheel* was transcribed into Tamil and Sanskrit. Figures such as Janagar, Vaamadevar, Nandhi, Romar, Kabilar, and Panini were trained in Sanskrit, whereas Agastyar was trained in Tamil. They spread the thoughts of the Buddha in all the four directions. Language was a tool to access different regions and a community of practice. According to Thass, Janagar went to the North, Agastyar to the South, Thirumoolar to the West, Satta Munivar to the East (Pandithar 2010: 6–7).

26 Ricoeur brings the hermeneutic problem onto the phenomenological method. His theory of hermeneutics is inspired by an ontology of understanding and an epistemology of interpretation that treats language as symbol- a structure of signification which a direct, primary, literal meaning designates; and in addition, another meaning which is indirect, secondary, and figurative which can be apprehended only through the first. Hence interpretation, he claims, unfolds the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning (Ricoeur 2005: 12–17).

27 Right-hand (*Valangai*) and Left-hand (*Idangai*) refer to a caste-based dual classification and division of communities in South Indian society. It was in vogue, arguably, from the eleventh century to the nineteenth century. The *valangai* faction was made up of castes with an agricultural base, while the *Idangai* was made of castes with a manufacturing base. Reportedly, the right-hand faction was numerically superior and politically organised than the left-hand faction in the nineteenth century (Ghurye 1991: 359).

28 It is to be noted that the Buddha, the Christ, Prophet Muhammad – and other Semitic figures – drawing on the sources from the three religions, are the most compared during the twentieth century discourses on world religion, especially in the context of emergent textualities from/on the 'Orient' (Gwynne 2014).

29 Buddha's birth, monk-hood, Enlightenment (*Nirvana*) and death (*Parinirvana*) were all interpreted to be celebrations on *vaikasi pournami*, *maasi pournami*, *panguni pournami* and *margazhi pournami* – days related with the calendar of the moon (*T* Vol. 2 1999: 355).

30 Political community is generally referred as the republic (*res publica*, in Latin, means a public-legal community in relation to Nation-State). However, in the Subaltern context

of resistance, the 'political' implies a field of struggle where contesting groups vie for hegemony. It is 'the antagonistic dimension that can be given a form of expression that will not destroy the political association' (Mouffe 2005: 52).

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