

# Towards a Caste-less Community

## Dalit Experience and Thought as 'Movement'

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The concept of *communitas* as against caste is discussed. Information from recent historical research on indentured labour in the colonial period is analysed. Contemporary critical theory that foregrounds experience as a prerequisite to emancipatory sociopolitical thought is discussed. By studying conversion as a movement, this paper concludes that displaced subjects, say Dalits, who are perennially positioned out-of-space (outcaste), search and move towards an imagined home continuously. However violent the displacement and/or disembodiment may be, they conceive a movement towards a caste-less community.

Rohith Vemula<sup>1</sup>—an aspiring writer and academic—became an iconic catalyst for a movement against caste in contemporary India, but not before signing off his death desiring radical movement: “from shadows to stars” (Vemula 2016). Dalits indeed could be understood as an embodiment of shadows that travel.<sup>2</sup> 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 only to essential mobility, that is, movement is primal in anti-caste thought. Displacement of those very bodies is also precedent to violation and violence. In that sense, caste is intricately linked with space as caste is also about embodied space—it is a spatial location of people into a locked hierarchy—and Dalits have to move against caste spatially.

The caste question about the outcaste—taking a cue from increasing caste violence, Dalit and minority lynching, as continuity in India—is mired within the social category of spatial power relations, bodily (dis)locations and displacements. An outcaste, in that sense, is a dislocated and displaced being. Body and shadow, even as metaphor, capture the travails of the most oppressed by caste, whether they are static or mobile.<sup>3</sup> Besides, however violent the displacement and/or disembodiment may be, they imagine a home “in-place,” critically and creatively through writing and practice, which constitutes anti-caste values envisaging a caste-less community, even when reduced as shadows.<sup>4</sup> This paper conceptualises this as *communitas* of/from/towards the outside.

*Communitas*, a Latin loan word, has been theorised in cultural anthropology and social sciences, 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, 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, Jean-Luc Nancy, Maurice Blanchot, and Roberto Esposito particularly trace *communitas* to anti/post-Nazi and Stalinist thought.

### Communitas against Caste

The Dalit experience in India has been primarily about what it is to become and emerge as an autonomous embodiment—that is, 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

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Rohith Vemula.

Comments on an earlier draft by M T Ansari, Rupa Viswanath, Gajendran Ayyathurai, P Thirumal, Sumeet Mhaskar, Nathaniel Roberts, Manju E P, and the anonymous reviewer are gratefully acknowledged. Earlier drafts were presented at Hyderabad and Göttingen, Germany; the ideas expressed here owe a great deal to the responses at these forums.

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rejection of autonomous space, a-place-at-home, continues to map the power of the socially dominant castes. And in the absence of the Dalit body recognised as an equal-subject-in-presence—regardless of difference and autonomy—it is excluded/lynched to 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 to belong to that is inscribed through birth. The anti-caste imagination gestures towards an autonomous embodiment, beyond just restricted, being 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 the experience, understands social inheritances and anchors the living present with a conscious community through civilisational memory.

“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/towards the wor(l)d? Could there be a counter-look to caste—an oppositional gaze—where it 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).<sup>5</sup> 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. 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 and is understood as spacing or writing, must produce community that can never appear. 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). Vitality, 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 for 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.<sup>6</sup>

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 an anti-caste 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 variably means gift, debt, and obligation could relate to the Tamil Dalits establishing *sangams* and *sabhas* in 19th and 20th 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 to their own communities. 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 avoiding 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 within a larger individual—what a critique of the all-pervasive *Manusha in Varnashrama 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*.<sup>7</sup> However, historical movement as experience is primal for Dalits to inaugurate such a caste-less *communitas*, many a time as silenced movers of shadow modernity.

### Historical Displacement and Indentured Labour

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*. (B R Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, emphasis mine)

Historical studies on Dalits (Basu 2011; Viswanath 2014; Mohan 2015) state that continuous displacements among the

outcastes had destroyed the essential notion of the 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 compartment 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 19th and 20th centuries in his work *The Nandanar’s Children* (2011).<sup>8</sup> He historicises their “search for fresh pastures” 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 19th to late 20th centuries. 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 involve itself 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: 159–61).

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-independence 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. 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. This exclusive preferential policy to recruit untouchables as soldiers earned the Parayars an important place in the army.<sup>9</sup> 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, especially 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 Fields, the expanding railways, the constructional and transport sectors in and around Madras. Particularly, the 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. They worked in the 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, housekeepers, grass cutters, dry and wet nurses, water wenches, scavengers, cart drivers, tots, women sweepers, and lamp lighters.” They were, perhaps, the foot soldiers of a colonial modernity—probably similar but not congruent to “conscripts”<sup>10</sup> 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. However, this calls for a separate research altogether.

### Shadow Modernity

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 was one of the favourite media of the emerging subalterns (Leonard 2017). Printing presses seem to have become the centres for discussions, planning, and collective activities. They created the myth-histories of the subaltern communities appeared 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 20th 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.<sup>11</sup> They also opened branches where the subaltern groups migrated as indentured labourers in Overport, Natal in South Africa and Etilola, 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.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup> 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 socio-economic 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: 181–82). While travel displaced them significantly, it conditioned them to essentially imagine a place-at-home, in relation to a sense of respectfulness 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 post-colonial and subaltern studies' scholars on colonial modernity. In this context, and on a divergent note, perhaps, this is best synthesised conceptually in the scintillating travel of B R Ambedkar.<sup>14</sup>

### Dalit Experience and 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, transforming, political action. However, the conditions that produce out-of-spaces need to be thought critically and contingently.

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.

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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, first, violence is physical as it annihilates the corporal being—the presence—of Dalits. Second, 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 the 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 walk out 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 organise 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.<sup>15</sup> 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 theorising” 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.<sup>16</sup> 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 centralising categories” that would seek “epistemic departure” that foregrounds *movement* from the existing categories due to inadequacy (Guru and Sarukkai 2012: 121). Two premises seem to outlay such an effort. First, the Dalit experience as movement aspires for a more universal, egalitarian alternative as it attempts to produce an alternative “moral hegemony.” Second, thought as social experience is “an inter-subjectifying experience,” where individualities are transcended and transformed—through debate, persuasion, and public exchange of arguments—and moved into collective yet subversive subjects (Guru and Sarukkai 2012: 127). This is exemplified in Rohith Vemula’s moving letter and the movement that he left behind.

### Conversion as Movement ‘From Shadows to Stars’

Vemula wrote in his departing note that for some birth is a curse, and, his birth is a fatal accident (Vemula 2016). Is there any birth that is not a fatal accident, one wonders? One could also extend whether the birth of a nation, the birth of what is to be human, who is an untouchable—are they not accidents? If they are indeed just accidents, why is the value of a person never treated as a glorious being made out of stardust? Why s/he is reduced to an identity, to a number, to a vote, to a thing? Desiring to be a writer of science, Vemula became a ghostwriter of sorts in his eventual death.

Vemula’s gesture against violence—his sacrifice, his gift of life and death<sup>17</sup>—is perhaps against caste that “things” human beings to their immediate identity and nearest possibility. A question of values against the notion of “what it is to be” was raised. Did Vemula’s death signify the death of a community? Or did it signify the political valency of the community of deaths? Is death, an offering to the community, a gift? What about the death—a living social death—before the physical death, which is inscribed in the corporal experience of an untouchable Dalit-ness? Is death a gift then, for a community to come? Did Rohith’s death embody the lack or failure of an anti-caste community, located and positioned from an out-caste ontology, especially in modern spaces in this country?

Can (caste) death be one’s own? As births are never treated as fatal accidents, deaths too are never incidents of choice. Perhaps, there is nothing in caste that transcends one’s death from birth. Defiantly, Vemula’s departing note is about the life of death as an incident of choice and a lack-of-choice. It is a gift—that communities’ give and take—where death defies and refutes one’s own birth and becomes an open call for a movement to come. This is a movement—a conversion—towards a caste-less community for anti/post-caste possibilities.

When not given a proper burial, where his body was taken away and burnt on a pyre in haste, his kith and kin decided to have a Buddhist funeral ceremony in an Ambedkarite fashion.

On his 27th birth anniversary (30 January 2016), around 8,000 people clad in white walked in silence from Deekshabhoomi to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh headquarters at Nagpur in protest. Besides, Ambedkarite Buddhists received students throughout the train stations from Hyderabad to Delhi, when students travelled to Delhi to seek justice for Vemula. And on the 125th birth anniversary of B R Ambedkar—on 14 April 2016, Vemula's mother and brother—Radhika and Raja Vemula converted to Buddhism in Mumbai, thereby inaugurating another debate on conversion and caste. Perhaps death raises the question of community, sociality, and fraternity much more intimately for the Dalit community, as a social death precedes an eventual death.

Throughout India, the majority of converts out of Hinduism today, as in the past, are significantly Dalit, and the present Indian legal and political system *minoritise* both Dalit and women in this context—in the sense that they are not fully capable of making their own decisions and therefore require supervision (Roberts 2016: 7). Moreover, religious conversion is portrayed in the national discourse as an attack on Indian culture and the innermost essence of the nation itself. Community, however, is conceptualised very differently by Dalits from those imagined by the nationalist public sphere. In thorough borrowing of tropes and inspiration from various religions and regions across the world, and through a radical articulation from different cultural resources, Dalit experience and thought seem to set a different discourse on conversion as a movement towards caste-less community. This is in the context where anti-conversion laws advocate that conversion disrupts social

cohesion; and Christianity and Islam are portrayed as converting religions which are made responsible for communal conflict (Adcock 2014). They seem to counter this argument completely and turn the gaze on caste as ultimately responsible for creating conflict and violence.

The mass conversion of 5 lakh Dalits to Buddhism in October 1956 under the leadership of B R Ambedkar, just seven weeks before his death, has been the single-most defining moment of conversion in history “outside the fold.” Since then, many Dalits in the subcontinent had converted to *Navayana* Buddhism as “a mass communicative action” in the Ambedkarite sense. The new Buddhism prescribes “the creation of a new collective body, in spirit and in letter” (Choudhary 2017: 18). Ambedkarite Buddhism emerges from the perspective of “annihilation of caste” or as an assertive “rejection of rejection” (Guru 2009: 212). Thus, contemporary anti-caste movements would also consider conversion as a movement towards an embodied ethical community that is caste-less—a “becoming” that could transform the “Dalit rage” and enlighten “the shadows” adequately.

This paper through a variety of writings wove a conceptual terrain, so as to explore caste-less community and caste experience in India. It proposed that the Dalit experience and thought contest existential brokenness by reconfiguring notions of space that are open, creative, and resistant. It puts forward that Dalits inaugurate and constitute a millennial *communitas*, of a kind, as creative opposition and history against caste through *movement*. This has relevance, as resistance, to the rampant violence and humiliation that oppressively institutionalise living-deaths in India, today.

## NOTES

- 1 Rohith Vemula, a fellow scholar and friend at University of Hyderabad, before committing “suicide,” wrote in his departing note, on 17 January 2016, that for some birth itself is a curse; and his birth is a fatal accident. Despaired after struggling against social boycott at the university, Vemula's death sparked off widespread protests across the world, where Dalit movement converged with students' and social movements against caste-discrimination in higher educational spaces in the country. His death was considered as an institutional murder. In the eye of the storm was Vemula's haunting philosophical note, which mentions he always wanted to be a writer. And all he got to write was this “last letter for the first time” (Vemula 2016).
- 2 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.
- 3 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).

- 4 Caste-lessness, though in present debates, has come to mean “merit” and “anti-reservation,” largely by a section of dominant castes and elites in contemporary India, who specifically call for caste-blind enumerations (Deshpande 2013). I do not suggest such an argument, but turn it around to suggest that caste-lessness is an ethico-political principle which was mooted by the most oppressed of caste to suggest an alternative for everyone.
- 5 Nancy was troubled by the Nazi 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?
- 6 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 Derridian 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.

- 7 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 armors 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 Pappaccone 2006: 49–56).

- 8 *Nandanar's Children* is one of the very few scholarships in Indian Social History, that 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: 111–64).
- 9 The colonial army during the second half of the 18th 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 19th 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 (p 65).
- 10 The term "conscript" refers to someone who is compulsorily enrolled or drafted for service. The phrase "conscripts of civilisation" was used by the eminent anthropologist Stanley Diamond. He refers it to the "primitive" cultures that engage in the "civilisation" project becoming "conscripts of civilisation, 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, the content is not congruent and agreeable to the same.
- 11 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 Ayyakkannu 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 20th 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-20th century (Gowthaman 2004: 72).
- 12 It is in this context that Dalit migrations to South Africa, Burma, Ceylon, Fiji, Mauritius, Singapore, Malaysia, Tanzania, and other lands during the 19th and 20th 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 against 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).
- 13 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 thesis. 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).
- 14 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, December 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 "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.
- 15 Ravichandran Bathran 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: 31–2). 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" (p 32).
- 16 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).
- 17 Sasheej Hegde's "The Gift of a Life and Death" (2016) purports that Rohith's life and death demands an answer from all of "us." Drawing from the works of Marcel Mauss, Jacques Derrida, and Olly Pythinen, he understands Rohith's life and death as a "gift." However, he states that this gift is challenged by an inherent sociality as well as transformative radicalism of thought and action. Hence, he forcefully argues that a pervasive sociality can constrict the idea of "gift." He asks, alternatively, can one transcend the limits of the frames of caste-sociality in a lived sense, as a free-standing "gift"?

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