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Purchasing Power, Stolen Power, and the Limits of Capitalist Form: Dalit Capitalists and the Caste Question in the Indian Anglophone Novel

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Abstract: Over the last ten years, a growing number of Indian Anglophone novels have featured a low-caste or Dalit protagonist who is depicted as a fraud or a con artist. Simultaneously, there has been a rise in studies that have criticized these novels for extolling neoliberal values and lacking political vision. This article analyzes one recent novel about caste—Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* (2011)—by situating it in the same entrepreneurial culture as the real-world self-fashioned "Dalit capitalists." "Dalit capitalism," a term coined by Dalit writer and activist Chandrabhan Prasad, refers to aspirational encounters between Dalits and the forces of global capital. With a desire to narrativize a life unmarked by caste, both the Dalit protagonist of *Serious Men* and the Dalit capitalists imagine power as unlinked from caste. This article positions conflicted performances of this fantasy as inherent critiques of capitalist forms. Despite their seeming political ineffectiveness, these fantasies resonate with the growing cleavage between Left and Dalit Ambedkarite politics in contemporary India.

Keywords: Indian Anglophone novel, caste, capitalism, Dalit, Ambedkar

I. The Portrait of a Hero as an Entrepreneur

In her book *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (2009), Anupama Rao poses the titular question to examine how the "reorganization of caste under political modernity" illuminates a "constitutive

relationship between Dalit emancipation and Indian democracy" (xi).[1] This essay takes seriously Rao's argument that the history of India's political modernity is also a history of the term "Dalit" and asks the following questions: Is there a similarly constitutive relationship between the Dalit literary subject and a modern literary form like the Indian Anglophone novel? How have the Indian Anglophone novels of the last ten years imagined Dalit characters and caste-marked life as the subject of literature? To answer these questions, this essay begins with a short detour.

On 14 April 2005, as many across India celebrated the birth anniversary of Bhim Rao Ambedkar—father of the Dalit Buddhist movement and chief architect of the Indian Constitution—there also took place a meeting of Dalit activists, entrepreneurs, and bureaucrats.[2] These members of the Dalit community cut about 250 pounds of birthday cake and announced the launch of the Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry Venture Capital Fund (DICCI),[3] a for-profit company aimed at supporting Dalit entrepreneurs and producing "100 Dalit billionaires" (Prasad qtd. in Jerath 1). Dubbed "Dalit capitalism" by the Dalit writer and activist Chandrabhan Prasad (qtd. in Jerath 1), this move was celebrated as the realization of Ambedkar's commitment to the economic advancement of Dalits.

Founded by Milind Kamble, himself a Dalit entrepreneur who was championed by Prasad, the venture capital fund was motivated by the simple observation that there were only a few entrepreneurs among the Dalits. The venture capital fund was guided by the rationale that by supporting some Dalits' entrepreneurial enterprises, "capitalism itself could be made bearable" for Dalits (Prasad qtd. in Gatade 1). At first glance it may seem that Kamble and Prasad unimaginatively endorse capitalism as a path toward social advancement. But by coming together as a community of Dalit entrepreneurs to invest in more Dalit entrepreneurs, the fund marshals capitalism to make caste more maneuverable. Historically, Dalits have been landless laborers. Moneylending and trade have been the prerogatives of upper castes. With fewer paths for a Dalit to start a business, the communal investment in Dalit entrepreneurs emerges as a useful strategy to circumvent caste-marked paths of social mobility (Kapur et al. 2).

The Dalit capitalists' mission statement exhorts Dalits to "fight caste with capital" and to "be job givers—not job seekers" (*Dalit Indian Chamber*). In promoting these messages, the Dalit capitalists reject their corporal regulation in caste-ordained roles as well as the humiliating predictability of state-sponsored avenues of mobility. With their entrepreneurial schemes, they also challenge traditionally held liberal and secular Leftist expectations of anti-caste activism. In this way, the Dalit capitalists share their strategies of social advancement with the new generation of low-caste or Dalit protagonists of Indian Anglophone novels such as Vikas Swarup's *Q&A* (2005), Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), and Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* (2011).

The central characters in these novels also prize upward social mobility and deny the influence of caste on their fates. Like the real-life Dalit capitalists, they desire to make caste less determinant through class ascension. To borrow an expression from Snehal Shingavi, they want to overwrite their castes with the fantasy that "the poor can act like the rich" (3). These characters are portrayed as enterprising, ambitious, cynical, and amoral. They are clever and resourceful. However, almost as if typifying the extreme obverse of the respectable Dalit capitalist, they succeed in class ascension not because they are necessarily meritorious or deserving—attributes that are already politically loaded—but because they resort to deception and crime. These characters generally achieve success by pretending to be what they are not. The narratives suggest that they are entrepreneurs at best and con artists at worst.

As they flout expectations around what a Dalit character should be like, they do not earn any sympathy within the text or from its readers outside the text; their abjection is not romanticized like Bakha's in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) or Velutha's in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997). They act alone, are their own advocates, and tend to be unapologetically dishonest, violent, insincere, and misogynistic. Very much "modernist anti-heroes" (Gajarawala 149), as Toral Gajarawala characterizes them in *Untouchable Fictions* (2013), their worldly successes seem like larger moral failures.[4]

This essay examines one such literary character—Ayyan Mani, the Dalit Buddhist protagonist of Joseph's *Serious Men*—in relation to the Dalit capitalist as imagined by Kamble and Prasad. *Serious Men* focuses on Mani, an intrepid father who invents the false story that his son is a child genius. Both Mani and the Dalit capitalists scoff at well-meaning efforts and cultural-political scripts intended to uplift them. Instead, they insist on taking matters into their own hands by producing child prodigies and entrepreneurs, respectively. Bringing together fictional and real figures, this essay uses the discourse of Dalit capitalism as a lens through which we can read the caste question in the Indian Anglophone novel more sharply, at times by analogy and at times in contrast to that discourse.

Scholars have read discourses on both the Indian Anglophone novel and Dalit capitalism as lacking a sophisticated understanding of either caste or class. The Indian Anglophone novel in fact has been criticized for confusing caste with class, and Dalit capitalism has been understood as a fundamental misreading of economic conditions under capitalism.[5] If we read *Serious Men* in light of the caste-focused Indian Anglophone literature that precedes it, the novel confirms the imaginative and political failures of the Indian Anglophone novel with regards to the portrayal of caste. However, such a dismissal thwarts the possibility of exploring the dynamism of caste experience in contemporary India.

Thus, rather than rehearse the argument that the Indian Anglophone novel is a politically deficient representation of sociality or assess Dalit capitalism as a failed political collectivity, this essay juxtaposes the Indian Anglophone novel and Dalit capitalism to argue that figures like Mani and the Dalit capitalists illuminate each other as they both negotiate the master narrative of caste with different kinds of fictions—not least of all the abstracted fiction of capitalism itself that reduces labor to its use value. Both Mani and the Dalit capitalists respond to the bodily and cultural regulation of the casteist nation-state with the performative and sometimes haphazard discipline of the self-managing capitalist subject. Comparing these figures to each other highlights their similarities and thus diminishes the notion that either is particularly idiosyncratic or

exceptional. By reading *Serious Men* in the mutually illuminating context of Dalit capitalism, this essay neither invokes Dalit capitalists as proof of the novel's political vision nor furnishes the novel as an example of Dalit capitalism. Instead, it presents Dalit capitalism and the new Indian Anglophone novel as contiguous and contentious sites where capitalist accumulation promises but fails to overwrite caste in postcolonial India.

Serious Men's narrative structure reflects a tension between the competing worlds of what is likely for a Dalit and what is desirable—through conflicting possibilities in fantasy and reality. In the novel, Mani lies and tricks on the *savarna* world around him. These lies, narrated in the third person, constitute Mani's attempt to craft his own story, even when that story remains in tension with the possibilities that the Anglophone novel has afforded Dalit characters. The lies make the story somewhat fantastical and out-of-the-ordinary. They add a sense of thrill but also present a Dalit character as not simply a victim of the caste system.[6]

Both Mani and the Dalit capitalists are products of post-Mandal Commission and post-liberalization India. Their scandalizing lack of interest in political solidarity can perhaps be traced to what Christophe Jaffrelot calls the "plebianization" of politics in post-liberalization India (xvi). In 1990, as the welfare state economy gave way to a neoliberal economy, Prime Minister V. P. Singh's government accepted the suggestions made in the Mandal Commission's report that twenty-seven percent of opportunities in state administration and all public sector undertakings be reserved for socially and educationally backward groups lumped together as Other Backward Classes (OBCs). This category did not include those who were not already recognized as belonging to disadvantaged caste and tribal groups. As a result, the Mandal Commission Report was protested by upper-caste members of society as well as some Dalits. In fact, Prasad, who believes that the Dalits have been more oppressed than any other social group, argued that reserving employment for others was not only misdirected but would further disadvantage Dalits by directing attention to a relatively upper caste (Vij). Jaffrelot writes that while the Mandal Commission Report initially brought the various low castes together in solidarity against the upper castes,

"by the turn of the 1990s, OBCs tended to vote together and for their own people, leading to a plebianization of politics that led to the rise to power of a couple of important low-caste political leaders" (xvi). However, once mainstream parties like Congress started to endorse the lower-caste agenda and alliances between a variety of castes were put under pressure, the solidarity of the OBCs began to decline (xvi).

Since the publication of the Mandal Commission's report, the English word "quota" has also become a tool in upper-caste discourse to delegitimize the achievements of low-caste individuals; the word is often used to insinuate that the beneficiaries of reservation policies succeeded only because of the unfair advantage of the quota. This is despite the fact that there are new reports every day that show how positions reserved for the lower castes are rarely filled and many qualified lower-caste members still find themselves unemployed because of prejudice.[7] The Dalit capitalists and Mani protest this humiliation and chart alternative paths to weaken the stranglehold of caste.

In *The Theory of the Novel*, György Lukács argues that the "problems of the [modern] novel" mirror those of "a world gone out of joint" (17). According to him, the novel receives its "inner form" (70) via the process of the alienated individual "journeying towards himself, the road from dull captivity within a merely present reality—a reality that is heterogeneous in itself and meaningless to the individual—towards clear self-recognition" (80). Fictional Dalit entrepreneurs like Mani capture the historical predicament of Dalit capitalists: Mani and his real-world analogues find themselves in a world that cloaks caste in capitalist democracy—a world out of joint—and thus are forced to fashion a story that accommodates their aspirations to social, economic, and political equality and empowerment.

II. Serious Men and Stolen Power

Serious Men begins and ends by the Arabian Sea at the Worli Sea Face—a public space in Mumbai, India chiefly occupied by brisk walkers and furtive lovers seeking privacy. The lovers' quest for fleeting anonymity and the walkers' desire to shed a part of themselves infuse the novel as a whole. The opening and final scenes at the beach depict Mani and his

son conspiring to play elaborate pranks on those around them. These scenes capture Mani's instinct to disrupt the plots available to him in favor of alternative narratives to the fiction of caste and the fiction of meritocracy; they also call attention to how the Indian Anglophone novel often upholds a casteist reality. Mani's willingness to challenge master narratives guides his anti-caste agenda as he orchestrates small rebellions, introduces minor variances in the caste-determined practices of daily life, and asks seemingly harmless questions of upper-caste people who are in power.

Mani is portrayed as someone who is uninterested in upending caste hierarchies or any kind of collective resistance. Invoking an elaborate conceit of transport, he describes the rich upper-caste members of society as the fast-moving cars on the road, and the lower-caste people as the bicycles and pedestrians. With this metaphor, Mani imagines himself as a bulky bus that can block any fast-moving car.[8] As someone who cannot (afford to) be an upper-class, private car, Mani would rather be a large and formidable bus than a vulnerable pedestrian. In fact, he does not seem to really believe that it is possible to shed one's caste identity entirely. Instead, he is simply concerned with strategically and momentarily loosening the grip of caste on his life. Mani invents the role of hustler for himself and child prodigy for his son and imagines an exaggeratedly level playing field. However, his efforts prove futile—the novel returns him to the status quo, with a deep awareness of the inadequacy of his best-laid plans.

Serious Men features a fictional government-run research center in Mumbai called the Institute for Theory and Research, a stand-in for the predominantly Brahmin-dominated institutes of scientific research in the country. In keeping with India's policy to reserve jobs in government institutions for members of lower castes, a place like the Institute would have seats set aside for Dalits, although most of the allotted slots would be filled at the lowest level of employment. Mani, "the son of a sweeper" (Joseph 117), is angry and frustrated at such caste-based exclusions. Rejecting the expectation that accounts of caste experiences always be stories of caste oppression, the novel never identifies Mani's exact caste. Still, the suggestion that caste identity limits Mani's and his

family's horizons is central to the plot. Even though Mani has an IQ of 140 and a membership in Mensa, he can work only as an administrative assistant to the Brahmin director of the Institute. Mani resents his caste-ordained lot and the limitations of state-sponsored affirmative action that shortchange someone as intelligent as he is. To the readers' delight and the scientists' confusion, this means that Mani attributes anti-Brahminical views to scientists like Albert Einstein and Isaac Newton as he writes out the "Thought for the Day" on the Institute's welcome board. In one such statement, he declares, "Rebirth is the most foolish mathematical concept ever," an axiom he attributes to Newton (78). This mocking is one of the ways in which Mani amends narratives of history that reproduce Brahminical supremacy in India. It is also one of the ways in which Mani "has fun" (24) since he does not restrict himself to the merit-based opportunities of Dalit advancement sanctioned by the liberal state.

The most important way Mani challenges caste-based restrictions and loosens the grip of caste on his life is with the help of his son. While Mani is intelligent and well-read, Adi, his ten-year-old hearing-impaired son, is neither. Mani reads all the scientific research papers that arrive at his boss' desk. He shares this information—as attention-grabbing factoids—with Adi so that his son can blurt them out during class at his elite school. This carefully managed charade is geared toward solidifying the fiction that Adi is a child prodigy, a "Dalit genius" (21). Mani pays journalists to print false stories of his son's achievements and natural proclivity for science. As Adi becomes a local celebrity by virtue of his apparent prodigious scientific interests and gives interviews, Mani prompts him by whispering intelligent answers through his hearing aid. Mani's ambitious fiction culminates in the bold plan that Adi sit for the extremely competitive entrance exam required to enroll in the Institute as a student. Taking advantage of a shift in power at the Institute dubbed the "war of the Brahmins" (25, 109, 238), Mani is able to acquire both the questions and answers for the written exam and, as a result, Adi performs exceptionally well on it. However, just as the news of Adi's genius spreads across the country, Mani calls a press conference to declare that his son will not be appearing for the next stage of interviews. He cites

two reasons for this decision: that he wants his son to have a normal childhood and that the Institute is infested with anti-Dalit sentiment. The novel reveals that Mani has tapped into the phone lines in his boss' office and possesses recordings of telephone conversations in which the organization's senior professors make disparaging remarks about Dalits. Mani has also been in touch with the local Dalit politician. The general public protests after they learn of the Institute's anti-Dalit sentiments and the novel ends with the father and the son planning the next trick they intend to play on Adi's teachers at school.

All the little lies that Mani tells his Brahmin bosses, the many secrets he asks his son to keep, and the elaborate narrative of his son's genius are geared toward challenging Brahminical supremacy, righting the wrongs of casteism, and feeling for a fleeting moment what it is like to be unmarked by caste. Mani rejects available scripts that further seal his fate of indignity and foreordination. For instance, as a Dalit Buddhist he refuses to convert to Christianity at the behest of the principal of Adi's school, who offers incentives like free computers for "poor Christians" (92), because it reinforces his disempowered position. Mani also mocks the smug superiority and self-serving social work of the rich schoolchildren who come to teach English to the residents of his low-caste and low-income neighborhood; he finds laughable the notion that English-language skills are all they need. Instead, Mani relies on stealing exams and fabricating stories that call out the enduring narrative of Brahminical supremacy. He wants his son to be known as a genius in part because, under the existing system, his own intelligence remains unrecognized. The fact that Mani steals the exam reminds the reader of the caste privilege students need to both prepare for and succeed on it. As he informs the principal of Adi's school,

> [t]he Brahmins were three thousand years in the making, Sister. Three thousand years. At the end of those cursed centuries, the new Brahmins arrived in their new vegetarian worlds, wrote books, spoke in English, built bridges, preached socialism and erected a big unattainable world. I arrived as another hopeless Dalit in a one-room home as the son of a sweeper. And

> they expect me to crawl out of my hole, gape at what they've achieved, and look at them in awe. What geniuses. (22)

Mani contrasts his life with the history of Brahminical privilege and entitlement—a contrast that is emphasized by his repetition of the phrase "three thousand years." His sentences about the Brahmins are all active—they "built," "preached," and "erected." Mani's own life and past are diminished to make space for the overwhelmingly public history of the Brahmins. Out of the six sentences in the passage, only one is about Mani; the rest all have the Brahmins as the subject. Mani arrives in this world from the outside, already devoid of hope. He "crawl[s] out of [a] hole"—as if a rodent—expected to "gape . . . in awe" at the Brahminical achievements in architecture, politics, language, and literature—all of which are made possible by the systemic subjection and exploitation of people like him. Yet the ironic and deadpan tone of the last sentence, which is structured like an exclamation, suggests that the Brahmins are not geniuses. They are foolish and hypocritical for thinking that this inequality merits them praise or power. Mani deems the "three thousand years" of Brahminical privilege cursed, suggesting perhaps that the curse could be broken in the present time.

In fact, Mani's crime of stealing an exam is a sharp retort to the "three thousand years" of institutionalized theft in the caste system as well as to the Brahmins' self-righteous lesson on socialism. *Serious Men* suggests that compensating centuries of exploited labor is the only rightful way to bridge the divide that exists between the different castes and the only way to level the playing field. In making this argument, Mani hijacks the liberal discourse of meritocracy and education as well as that of anti-caste resistance. The "great story" (Joseph 242) of exceptional Dalit achievement and merit idealized in mainstream liberal narratives and novels like *Untouchable* and *The God of Small Things* as well as in Dalit capitalism is replaced by fraud and scheming. Mani never pushes his son to work hard at school or capitalize on opportunities based on his talent. Instead, he encourages dissimulation.

Early in the novel, the principal at Adi's English medium school schools Mani. She says: "Discipline. That's the word. And that's all there is to

education" (Joseph 21). Yet education is not merely a liberal doctrine of personal optimization to be sanctimoniously mouthed by the principal but a fundamental right guaranteed in the Indian constitution that is consistently denied because of caste and gender biases. Mani and his son subvert the principal's advice. They *are* disciplined as they manage the fictional narrative of a child prodigy, and yet, regrettably, Adi does not deserve the acclaim and attention that he receives because of his father's efforts. Instead, the fiction of his genius calls into question the abstraction of human life experience inherent in the notion of a level playing field.

Still, *Serious Men* suggests that not all fictions are the same. The novel has two vastly different plots: one of Mani's lies in which he is able to momentarily shed his caste-identity and another recounted by an omniscient narrator. There is a tension between the plot of the novel—the story as told by the narrator—and the story as Mani the character would want it to be. These different plots are based in expectations of caste and what a caste-marked individual is able to do in life. The difference between these plots is the sharpest when, just before the end of the novel, Mani ponders his son's success on the entrance exam to the Institute and feels like a character in his own life story. As Mani and the reader await the consequences of Adi's incredible criminal success on one of the most competitive public academic exams in India, the narrator observes:

> [Mani] felt like a character in an art film. Nothing happens for a while, and nothing happens again, and then it is over. There was no goal any more in life, no plot, no fear. It was a consequence of choosing to be a good father. He had to put an end to the myth of Adi's genius. It had to end before the boy went mad. The game had gone too far. In the place of its nervous excitement was now the ordinariness of the familiar flow of life, the preordained calm of a discarded garland floating in the sewage. (233)

Mani imagines himself to be a character in an art film who has no agency. The film that Mani finds himself to be a part of has a very slow narrative. Things happen to him, and he does not respond or cannot respond meaningfully. The foreclosure of any further action with the

decisive statement "then it is over" simulates movement but remains devoid of action. Short and simple sentences, and words like "familiar," "ordinary," "floating," "discarded," and "preordained" further emphasize Mani's sense of fatalism and the inefficacy of human actions. By contrast, in the game in which he has embroiled his son, Mani's imagined life within the story, the protagonist has absolute agency in moving the narrative (as opposed to being moved). While the image of a garland seems odd in this context as it brings a sense of something fresh or festive, it is simply floating in sewage—calling to mind the job of scavenging many Dalits have to take on and to which they lose their lives. This particular moment in the novel is chilling not only because of its clarity and poignant paralysis but also because of its metonymic reminder of Dalit deaths that take place every day because of caste-determined jobs. Though Mani says that this purposeless drifting minimizes any fear and that he has chosen it, this passage reads more like a manifestation of fear because it is evident that he really does not have a choice.

In a tightly paced novel, this anxious plotlessness befitting Mani's life as a Dalit is jarring. Contrary to Mani's claim that "nothing happens" and "nothing happens again," Mani's life in the novel is adventurous. At times, Mani refers to himself as a character in the "great story" (254) of Adi's genius. It is almost as if in the above moment, Mani is able to collapse the two plots to force the reader to consider their incompatibility. In the face of systemic oppression, a Dalit can never dare to determine the future of his family. Mani's frustration with his predicament is echoed in the cyclical nature of the novel's structure.

Despite the many twists and turns of the plot and Mani's reckless scheming, things end where they began. Even though the "war of the Brahmins" (25, 109, 238) provides Mani some momentary leverage, and he is able to orchestrate which Brahmin wins, the conflict still results in a victory for a Brahmin. Mani and his son go back to plotting their deceptions. In essence, Mani's plotting in the novel remains at odds with the main narrative, and Mani as a character is not delimited by his caste as the charade goes on. Yet Mani's fiction and Joseph's novel both unfold within Joseph's novel, even if Mani's narrative gestures, referentially, to a world beyond Joseph's text, that is, a world not limited

by Mani's caste. The bottom line is unmistakable: the nexus of caste and poverty that Mani wishes to escape is inescapable. Far from reveling in the possibilities for an individual unmarked by caste under capitalism, the narrative emphasizes the impossibility of such a situation. Indeed, although the novel ends with an affirmation of the social power of mass solidarity, it also seems to reject that political avenue by embracing a mass protest opportunistically.

Mani's approach remains in line with his desire to be the bus that can block expensive cars on Indian roads. He understands that in a casteist society, a poor low-caste individual has a limited set of choices: to be normal, to be a genius, or to be mad. Being a normal person requires following caste-mandated rules, which is a specific kind of fiction. To be a genius is to know how to escape it every now and then and to be mad is to believe that one can do it forever. There are moments when Mani is defeated in the face of the knowledge that the fiction of Adi's genius is merely a fiction and, ultimately, futile. As he contemplates the "normality" of his naïve wife, Mani acknowledges that "there was a time when he thought he could save her from [their poor caste-marked life] and everything else, that love alone could make him superhuman and somehow take them to better life. But that did not happen, and it probably was never going to happen" (16). The narrator describes as superhuman Mani's hope that he will one day be able to remove his wife from the poverty of their lives together (14). His hope is a fantasy and so comes to naught.

An impossible story of a child prodigy is perhaps the only homoeopathy by which Mani can occasionally and briefly escape his caste-marked life. Mani's deceitful behavior, then, is not the same as the fraudulent behavior of corporations that is often normalized as the right way to do business; nor are his fraudulent schemes aimed at personal glory. Mani's ploys seek only to open up the world a little more for his family, for a little while. The novel introduces only one other story of Dalit success. Waman, the Dalit political leader, gives a speech in which he fêtes Adi's success. In that speech, he recounts that "when he was as old as Adi, he was tied to a tree by Brahmin priests because he had committed the crime of entering a temple. 'They left me like that the whole night,' he said. 'Next morning, I ran away from my village and came to Bombay

with nothing, not even ten rupees in my pocket. Not even a pocket actually'" (280). It is stories like these—rooted in everyday experiences of violence—that introduce the breathtaking idea that one can come from nothing. Waman's mode of storytelling errs on the side of hyperbole and responds to the audience's imperative to furnish accounts of caste-based adversity. Emerging from caste-based oppressions, both Mani's and Waman's stories court the ridiculous before inviting pathos and anger. Both stories are also carefully managed and carefully told within the confines of familiar genres. Mani feels compelled to engage in deceptions, but he also understands that to keep up the deception forever would be disastrous. Even when Mani plots to advance and strengthen the fiction of Adi's genius, he simultaneously worries that his wife and son will not be able to keep up the charade and will go mad.

Even though the novel is focused on the lie Mani tells for Adi, the boy figures only in actions prompted by Mani. Both Adi and Mani's wife, Oja, exist only to advance the ploy plotted by Mani and not as characters in their own right. Mani's love for his family, and Oja in particular, is tinged with misogyny. As proof of the deeply homosocial nature of *Serious Men* and the rebellions imagined in it, Oja remains in the dark about Mani's schemes. She knows her husband and son are up to something but has no clue about the substance of their plans. She is resigned to the family's social and economic fate and does not approve of an "abnormal" (45, 82, 118) life for her son. The narrator's casually lewd and sexist remarks mirror Mani's misogynistic and homosocial attitude. Mani's anti-caste activism is further compromised by his refusal to acknowledge or include other low-caste figures in his schemes. For instance, at his son's elite school, Mani does not talk to the watchman or acknowledge any similarities they might share. It is impossible to shake the sense that Mani's gesture of political solidarity with Waman is crass opportunism—a convenient embrace of identity politics—rather than commitment to a collective political cause. Mani and his son's continued plotting, which the end of the novel hints at, underscores the idea that Mani is merely appropriating the political discourse of Dalit identity and struggle. Much in the way that the epithet "Dalit" both modifies and justifies capitalism for the Dalits, Mani's revolution remains

double-edged in its embrace of the neoliberal investment in individual advancement.

Serious Men presents a strange and sobering fantasy and expresses its disenchantment with the novel form. While somewhat concerned with the development of a child, Mani's son, it is not a *bildungsroman* that ratifies liberal frameworks of incorporation and assimilation of those at the margins. No one grows by the end of the novel; nothing changes; no one is any the wiser; and there are no repercussions. Beginning as a story of individual exceptionalism, the novel ends with a rejection of both individualism and exceptionalism via the public protest that Mani stages. Mani has been operating unilaterally without any collective politics. His need to consort with the local politician and leverage a mass protest to challenge the upper-caste hold over the Institute shows that his individualistic ethic was not sufficient as anti-caste practice.

In the span of the novel, the only writing by a Dalit character involves Mani's son, who has to write "I won't talk in class" (84) two hundred times after he disrupts his class with a challenging science question that Mani made him memorize. The punishment is a poignant reminder of the fraught relationship between writing and writing one's fate. It makes visible how caste determines the narratives one can script and what kind of narratives they can be, how difficult and rare it is to belong to a specific caste and to be able to script one's life on one's own terms. By the time Mani is able to rouse an anti-caste riot against the Institute, he has harnessed this humiliation, quite like the Dalit capitalists who, however controversially, do not want to let go of the "Dalit" prefix. *Serious Men* holds on to the "plotlessness" of Mani's caste-marked life in the novel to fuel "a great story" at the level of personal fantasy.

III. Novel Vision

Serious Men was met with a largely positive reception in India. Critics remarked favorably on the novel's depiction of its Dalit protagonist, which Joseph renders with care and without condescension. In the novel, Mani is an English-speaking, clever, and intelligent Dalit man—apparently, so rare a thing that book-award juror Shashi Deshpande complimented Joseph's ability to make the whole conceit "authentic . . .

without making it grotesque" (qtd. in Page). This praise of the success of a Dalit character in a novel as a feat of the writer's imagination, Joseph claims, is a "class thing." According to him, most readers are prejudiced in their assessment of Dalit characters because of their own and the characters' class positions. Joseph argues that

> most Indian readers of literary fiction written in English are of a certain class, and one of the recreations of the Indian upper class is compassion for the poor. I think the poor in India are increasingly very empowered, and the time has come when the novel [form] can portray them in a more realistic way. Ayyan is still an underdog but that is due to his circumstances, not due to his intellect or aspirations. (qtd. in Page)

Joseph is right about the reception of caste-marked heroes of Indian Anglophone fiction.[9] Still, in his remarks, the caste question quietly slips into a "class thing," and his idea that "the poor in India are increasingly very empowered" misunderstands the nature of political courage and outrage. Dalit struggle has a long and well-documented history, and Joseph's remark that Dalits are now more empowered seems to ignore and erase that history.

More and more fictional narratives like *Serious Men* center on a vaguely low-caste or explicitly Dalit individual's activities and ambitions in a form that is both Brahminical and bourgeois, and these novels receive global and critical attention. Yet it is crucial to examine how low-caste and Dalit lives are narrativized.[10] In the last ten years in particular, the number of Indian Anglophone novels with protagonists who belong to a lower caste has grown. Gajarawala attributes "this kind of space that is now literarily possible" to "the democratization of the literary sphere of which Dalit literature is one essential part" and to "post-Mandal Commission politics" (164).

This growth is particularly important because, as many critics rightly note, the main site for Dalit literary production in the English language is not the novel form but life writing: autobiography/memoir, poetry, and, more recently, graphic memoirs and internet writing. In fact, the caste privilege of the authors of the majority of Indian novels

accounts for what remains a limited portrayal of caste experience.[11] This fact leads to inductive conclusions about the nature of caste. In *Flesh and Fish Blood: Postcolonialism, Translation, and the Vernacular* (2012), Subramanian Shankar positions the caste system as something vernacular—particular and ethnographically specific. For Shankar, caste is fundamentally resistant to translation into the modern form and language of the Indian Anglophone novel. This position would be challenged by scholars like Rao who, in *The Caste Question*, argues that caste in India is neither a vestige of precolonial society nor an artifact of colonial governance. In fact, Rao's work, along with the negotiation of caste identity by the Dalit capitalists, confirms that, far from being untranslatable into modern forms like the novel, caste in India and the Anglophone Indian novel are very much mutually constituted.

In the Indian-Anglophone novels, the individual successes of low-caste characters are often held up as some sort of commentary on and deliverance from the oppression of the caste system. Such characters receive special authorial attention because of their exceptional moral and physical attributes. More often, however, low-caste and Dalit characters appear as part of the novels' large cast of characters, as in Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* (2009, 2012, 2016), in which they simply perform their caste rather than drive the plot in any meaningful way. With a few exceptions, most Indian Anglophone novels engage the question of caste via low-caste characters who are not protagonists. Examples include Velutha in Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Kalo in Bhabani Bhattacharya's *He Who Rides the Tiger* (1954), the Pariahs and the Dalit women in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1963), Chandri in U. R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* (1965), and Ishvar and Omprakash in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1997). Two out of these five works also portray their Dalit characters as dissembling. This trend has only intensified in recent times, especially when these characters are Dalit protagonists.

In the specific context of recent novels about low-caste characters set in post-liberalization and post-Mandal Commission India, Adiga's Man Booker Prize-winning novel *The White Tiger* has perhaps received the most attention for being formulaic and championing the politically wanting figure of the entrepreneur who sells India out. The novel has

been criticized for "disrespect[ing] the underclass Adiga is heralded for having represented" (Sadana 12). The low-caste narrator-protagonist in the novel, Balram Halwai, has been referred to as "vulgar" (Davis 169), an "illegitimate spokesman" for the "neoliberal values" he espouses (B. Joseph 72), and in possession of a "tone deaf voice" that befits his poorly educated persona (Davis 169). Among the many other similarly damning critiques of him, perhaps the most important for my purposes is the fact that he, like Mani, lacks caste consciousness (or class consciousness, for that matter). Balram's growth and development in the novel occurs despite, rather than because of, his caste identity. This translation between caste and class ostensibly valorized in the novel, Shingavi correctly points out, does not produce grounds for cohesion on either front (5). Balram is portrayed as very much a "white tiger"—exceptional in his ambition, recklessness, and isolation from his family and community.

This critical reception of *The White Tiger* is worth examining because it is representative of how similar novels such as *Serious Men* are read. For instance, according to Gajarawala, caste remains a blind spot in Indian Anglophone novels because such texts are grounded in an oversimplified ideology of "naked individualism" (165). By failing to portray low-caste and Dalit characters in the context of their sociality, these novels flatten the complexity of a caste-ordained life.[12] Gajarawala contends that, given the ahistoricity of a modernist aesthetic and the abstraction of capitalism, the novel form emerges as fundamentally unequipped to imagine a life marked and defined by caste. It thus translates caste into other terms like class and characterizes any engagement with a caste-marked life in a language of pathology (165).

While it is tempting to read the same language of pathology, casteless-ness, exceptionalism, and naked individualism in *Serious Men*, Mani's performance of these qualities actually mocks them. Mani's idiosyncratic character shines a light on the inexorability of his caste-ordained life and the paucity of cultural imagination that stymies any attempts to represent a life unmarked by caste. The fact that Mani does not identify his exact caste in the novel does not necessarily mean that he has a diminished caste consciousness. Mani wants nothing more than to flatten the complexity of caste so that its hold can be loosened. However, his

dishonest efforts to that end bear no fruit. The novel's focus on deception and trickery certainly presents an implicit moral critique of the ascent of low-caste characters like Mani. However, the departure of Mani and other characters like him from the usual expectations for such characters also constitutes a challenge as the bourgeois novel emerges as the site of the ultimate fungibility of this problematic hyper-individualist figure. Mani is problematic in order to reveal a problematic: as a Lukácsian problematic individual, he demonstrates a way of coming to terms with his situation that is ultimately ineffectual. Mani's productively problematic and performative nature (and the nature of characters in other novels who are like him) becomes more salient when he is contextualized within a broader Dalit history and politics, especially Dalit capitalism. It is critical to interrogate these seemingly poorly characterized Dalit figures to discern the ideologies that motivate them and riddle the author's construction them.

IV. Ambedkar's Afterlives

As an idea and a political phenomenon, Dalit capitalism places faith in the free market and a progressive vision of history to make caste maneuverable and imagine a level playing field. Dalit capitalism is by no means a mainstream movement. In its opposition to anti-capitalist and anti-caste activism and protests against the liberal Brahminical state and its practices, it mobilizes the growing Dalit middle class, celebrates consumerism, and lauds and funds Dalit entrepreneurial hustlers. In the caste system, one's poverty is one's divinely decreed and socially enforced lot. In a capitalist system, it is a personal failing. Of paramount concern to Dalit capitalism is the humiliation—centuries of exploitation at the hands of the upper castes—and the unshakeable grasp that caste has on one's life in India. Thus, the encounter with capital promised by Dalit capitalism is not simply about the success of the Dalit subject or the weakening of class solidarities; it is also about the transformation of a low-caste life, marked by humiliation and poverty, into a life rich with purchasing power.

In his own words, Prasad is invested in "de-Indianizing" capitalism (qtd. in Menon and Nigam 96) or decoupling it from India's caste

system. According to him, it would be better to be exploited at the hands of the Dalit bourgeoisie than at the hands of the *savarna* (caste Hindus as opposed to the Dalits, who are considered outcastes) bourgeoisie:[13] "A few Dalits as billionaires, a few hundred as multi-millionaires and a few thousands as millionaires would democratize and de-Indianize capitalism. A few dozen Dalits as market speculators, a few Dalit-owned corporations traded on stock exchanges, a few Dalits with private jets, and a few of them with golf caps would make democratic capitalism lovable" (Prasad qtd. in Menon and Nigam 96). Prasad's repetition of "a few" suggests that a small shift in the mode of production will create a big shift in, if not entirely topple, the caste system. This optimistic view of capitalism ignores the violence and inequalities inherent in capitalist relations. Instead, Prasad focuses on private jets, golf caps, and high-earning market speculators and stock traders.

But just as importantly, we also have a vision of a capitalism that does not accommodate or reproduce India's age-old caste system. Indeed, the golf caps, smart outfits, and private jets are not ends in themselves here; rather, they represent a vision of mobility that is not clad in caste-sanctioned sartorial guidelines. Endless poverty seems better than a poverty that is caste-ordained before one's birth. As such, Dalit capitalism opens up the possibility of an opportunity to ascend in class, which remains impossible in the caste system. In his characteristically provocative style, Prasad sums up the advantages of capitalism: "In the caste order, you cannot buy Brahmin status. In capitalism, you can buy a Mercedes and hire a Brahmin driver. That's the difference capitalism is making" (qtd. in Jerath 1). By appropriating signifiers of upper-class identity, Dalit capitalism imagines a fluid class structure and the possibility of a life that is not determined by one's caste.

While Dalits have had government jobs and spots in government-run educational institutions reserved for them since 1991, they do not have the same guaranteed space in the corporate sector. This absence for Dalits in the private sector creates conditions for the Dalit millionaire to thrive without the stigma of having benefited from job reservation (Chishti 1). In addition, Prasad suggests that Dalit millionaires serve as role models for other Dalits and fund them (Sengupta 1). Although it

seems as if the focus of Dalit capitalism is on the individual, communitarian goals remain important to Dalit capitalism. Such a network of Dalit millionaires will obviate the sense of being beholden to non-Dalit patrons and further affirm Dalit pride in one's own people and history.

However, despite its critique of the state and its desire to eschew state patronage, Dalit capitalism betrays a reliance on the neoliberal Indian state of the post-1990s. Gopal Guru writes that, initially, the Dalit millionaire's mobility was made possible by state and political patronage rather than a free and competitive market. He notes that "[c]apitalist patronage came into the picture only at a later stage, which had already been set up by state patronage. In fact, the capitalist in the Indian context remains the beneficiary of the Indian state" (Guru 43-44). Dalit capitalism may certainly be enabled by state patronage but it resents that patronage, which gives nothing to the Dalits save their humiliating "right to begging" (Jadhav 7). Prasad claims that the competition in the corporate sector redresses the oppression of the Dalits by not reproducing caste-based structures of dependency.

Even as he champions capitalism, Prasad is aware of its limitations as a redemptive system. He maintains, however, that the problems of capitalism "are radically different from caste-based problems. A caste-based system is a system of humiliation. In capitalism, there is poverty, of course, but that is *universal* to everyone regardless of his birth. Anyone who is lazy, who doesn't want to compete, will face the problem of poverty but minus the humiliation" (qtd. in Gatade 1; emphasis added). While the rhetoric of laziness is dangerous, the hereditary nature of caste and its long history in India—when transmuted into categories of class—become maneuverable. Dalit capitalism is resigned to the prospect of exploitation and poverty but wishes to arrive at it on terms that are not caste-mandated.

Even though Ambedkar never advocated for capitalism, Kamble and Prasad argue Dalit capitalism to be the realization of Ambedkar's economic vision. Ambedkar registered Dalit aspiration in economic as well as rhetorical terms that were conscious both of class and caste (Gupta). Important in this context is Ambedkar's 1956 speech "Buddha or Karl Marx?" in which he objects to Marxism in favor of Buddhism.

His objection, however, does not translate into an endorsement of capitalism.[14] In fact, throughout his career, Ambedkar maintained that Brahminism and capitalism are the two enemies of the working class in India and criticized the Indian Left for failing to criticize casteism (Omvedt 82). He argued that citizenship rights and economic opportunities were always marked by caste: "Millions were denied the use of public wells, conveyances, roads and restaurants, though all of these were maintained out of public funds" (Ambedkar qtd. in Omvedt 82). Ambedkar recalibrated the relationship between base and superstructure to locate caste not in the superstructure as the Left tended to but in the formative forces of the base. During the Indian nationalist movement, which was itself deeply influenced by socialist and communist ideals, Ambedkar contended that eradicating caste was the precondition of a united working-class struggle.[15]

While Dalit capitalism remains largely in contradiction to Ambedkar's philosophy, it certainly picks up on the longstanding distrust between the broad Left and the Ambedkarite strand of the Dalit movement in India. As in Amedkar's thought, Dalit capitalism draws on a frustration with class-based analysis that ignores questions of caste. And yet, as conceptualized by Kamble and Prasad, Dalit capitalism is not exactly radical or progressive. As a form of capitalism from below, Dalit capitalism does not embrace political or economic resistance. It emerges as neither an alternative to nor a variation of capitalism. As resistance or an economic mode, capitalism at the peripheries is just capitalism, rather than a different kind of capitalism. In presenting itself as capitalism from below, as though it has a different relationship to it, Dalit capitalism appears both insufficient and specious.

The critiques of Dalit capitalism are obvious and plenty. Moreover, as one would expect, capitalism in India is not unmarked by caste. The liberalization of economic policies and caste-based reservation has not diminished the hold of caste in Indian governance. Take, for example, the case of sanitation jobs, which reinforces caste hierarchies. Despite the widespread impression among anti-Dalit critics that Dalits are getting "too many benefits from the government" (Jadhav qtd. in Vincent 1), a number of studies show that Dalits do not actually receive the full benefits

they are entitled to by state policies. Many reserved positions remain vacant. Officials at government institutions like the Indian Railways go to extreme lengths to hire Dalits only for lower-level jobs or to avoid hiring them at all (Yadav 2012; Deshpande and Weisskopf 2014; Deshpande 2011; Thorat and Attewell 2007). Violence against Dalits is a daily occurrence in contemporary India and has risen steadily since the early 2000s. In the past few years, India has seen horrific incidents of Dalit flogging, killing, and lynching in the town of Una and the city of Saharanpur, among others.[16] The country has been shaken by the institutional murders of Rohith Vemula (2016) and Muthukrishnan Jeevanandham (2017) and the Bhima Koregaon violence of 2018, along with many other instances that did not and do not make news headlines.[17] In this context, any notion that the future of an anti-Brahminical and anti-caste revolution is capitalist seems myopic and dangerous. It erases the long history of Dalit thought and struggle that is anti-capitalist and continues—even justifies—the exploitation of all the non-millionaire Dalits.

What does it mean for the Dalit capitalist to claim a political space that is so shaky and tenuous? Dalit capitalism takes shape in the face of the knowledge of anti-Dalit state violence and anti-capitalist caste struggle—not in ignorance or denial of it. Perhaps, like Mani's child prodigy, Dalit capitalism is always more of an affective response, a strategic performative affront, than a viable alternative. Its draw toward capital is motivated by a sense of belatedness to and exclusion from capitalist modernity; its hope is that caste will no longer be a marker of one's identity or a determinant of one's potential. If the *savarna* bourgeoisie have been thwarting such a casteless modernity then the Dalit must simply storm the bastion, perform the abstracted fiction of modernity for themselves, and partake in its advantages. The abstraction—individuation—of modernity resonates with the abstraction of labor in capitalism and offers a path to maneuver the caste identity that one is born to. In Prasad's words, "[a]n ideal Dalit for [the upper castes] is one who is dark-skinned, bare-chested, carrying a farm tool, sweating profusely under a hot sun. It [is] a *shock* for them to see a Dalit walking into a boardroom" (qtd. in Jerath 1; emphasis added). Dalit capitalism's vision is marked by a performative refutation of stereotypes; the *savarna*-spectator is meant to be

awed and antagonized by the appearance of a Dalit figure who upends expectations. Its focus on visible details also enables a critique of the caste order as performative and socially constructed. Despite the fiction of abstraction, these figures can never just be capitalists but must always be *Dalit* capitalists. This failure to simply be "capitalists" establishes the very impossibility of a capitalism that serves the anti-caste agenda. Dalit capitalism, then, is not so much a misreading of or an argument for capitalism as it is a literal performance of the capitalist logic that must, eventually, expose its own seams.

The utopia of Dalit capitalism is a utopia of nothing—the annihilation of caste itself—a utopia tantalizingly unburdened by centuries of oppression on one level and vacuous of any viable political alternative on another. As it seeks, first and foremost, a bid for survival and equality, Dalit capitalism is eager to develop and articulate a relationship with capital that is not mediated by or dependent on the state. Dalit capitalism relies on a logic and performance of exceptionalism and entrepreneurial spirit not because they are productive but because they call attention to their own limits.

V. Conclusion

There remain important differences and tensions between characters like Mani and the Dalit capitalists. Most significantly, while the Dalit capitalists base their resistance to the Indian caste-system in their newly gained purchasing power, Mani wishes to steal power that does not belong to him yet. In each case, however, power is exposed as unlinked to caste-relations and acquired rather than inherited by individuals. Adherents of the caste system argue that caste is not as unchangeable as detractors allege—that because a person's deeds may trigger rebirth in a higher or lower caste in a future life, one who is Brahmin in this life ostensibly could be Dalit in the next, and vice versa. Mani and the Dalit capitalists reject the redemptive possibility of rebirth and insist on opportunities for socioeconomic mobility in *this* life, revealing the unseemly ties of caste and class in the process.

Recently, Dalit political activists have been demanding that the Left acknowledge the lived experience of caste more explicitly. With slogans

such as "You keep the cow's tail, give us our land" ("Dalit Leader") becoming the clarion call for Dalit self-assertion, Dalit political leader and social activist Jignesh Mevani, for instance, connects the emancipation of Dalits directly to demands for land distribution. Echoing a similar but more flagrant distrust, the Birsa Ambedkar Phule Students Association (BAPSA) was set up in 2014 as an autonomous alliance to break with the bastion of the progressive parties of the Left. This movement gained momentum after the murder of Vemula, who parted ways with a Leftist students' political association to join the Ambedkar Students Association. Based on this frustration with the Left for being dominated by upper castes and negligent of the caste question, in 2016 BAPSA candidate Rahul Sonpimple and others contested the Jawaharlal Nehru University Students' Union elections with a vigorous anti-Left agenda that got a lot of public attention. This rallying cry reiterated Ambedkar's point that the Dalit struggle is not simply political or economic but also social and cultural.

In citing the above instances from the rising groundswell of the Ambedkarite movement, this essay does not equate the movement with Dalit capitalism or the actions of literary characters like Mani. Instead, this contextualization helps plot the degrees of Dalit discomfort with a political ideology that privileges the economic. In their counterintuitive and controversial ways, Mani and the Dalit capitalists also seem to be making the argument that, just as anti-caste movements cannot lean into neoliberal governance, anti-capitalist movements also need to acknowledge caste. They belong to the same political landscape as the contemporary Ambedkarite movement in India that demands a reckoning with the Dalits' economic rights through careful conversations about caste and class oppressions. As they force us to consider what kind of Dalit characters and stories are permitted by writers and readers, Mani and the Dalit capitalists demand a reassessment of caste experience under modern capitalism.

Notes

1 A. Rao writes that "Dalit is a word for a community and an identity that are in the making. To call oneself Dalit, meaning 'ground down,' 'broken to pieces,'

'crushed,' is to become a particular sort of political subject for whom the terms of exclusion on which discrimination is premised are at once refused and reproduced in the demands for exclusion" (1). The term was first used by Ambedkar in 1928 in his newspaper *Bahishkrut Bharat*. Ambedkar characterized being Dalit as an experience that consisted of deprivation, marginalization, and stigmatization, and positioned it as an alternative to Gandhi's appellation for Untouchables, "*harijan*" ('children of God'), a term Ambedkar found "patronizing" (A. Rao 15).

2 The Dalit Buddhist movement refers to the Ambedkarite movement, which rejects Hinduism because of its caste system. Dalits convert to other religions such as Buddhism, Islam, and some non-Brahminical sects of Hinduism to challenge Brahminical supremacy in Hinduism. The anti-caste movement has a long tradition of questioning Hinduism.

3 Formed in 2005, the DICCI is an association of entrepreneurs from the scheduled castes and tribes. It has eighteen state chapters and seven international chapters. In order to achieve a homophonic rhyme with FICCI (the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce), the acronym notionally invokes the Indian state even as it aspires to and is emboldened by visions of globalism.

4 This is Gajarawala's argument, but essentially, the character's hyper-individualism is explained by the lack of supportive familial and social structures. So when the character acts selfishly and on his own, he has ethical authority to do so, which allows for a resolution for the caste-marked problems faced by the character.

5 For instance, in his essay "Rise of the 'Dalit Millionaire': A Low Intensity Spectacle," Guru reads the idea of Dalit capitalism as Guy Debord's spectacle as ideology. Guru writes that "Dalit" is not an adjective that can modify capitalism but a noun that draws on a history of struggle against oppression. As such, yoking it to capitalism or the coercive state is both absurd and egregious. Dalit capitalism, in Guru's estimation, blunts the critical and historical sharpness of Dalit thought and activism without evincing any class consciousness. For discussions of Dalit characters in Indian Anglophone novels, see Shankar and Gajarawala.

6 A similar conflict appears in Swarup's *Q & A* through the trope of the game show that offers a chance to escape poverty but cannot be won and in *The White Tiger* through a letter written in a language the narrator does not know addressed to a world leader who will never receive it.

7 Hindi writers such as Navaria and Bharati also portray discrimination based on affirmative action. See Bharti's short story "The Case of the Quota Candidate" and Navaria's short story "Yes, Sir."

8 This metaphor is reminiscent of Adiga's *The White Tiger*, in which the protagonist, Balram Halwai, fetishizes the urban space as a site for class mobility. Balram famously divides society into two classes: those who travel in egg-shaped cars and those who do not. Balram draws his boldness largely from feeling invincible in a car where the rest of the world cannot touch him.

9 Ganguly, in the context of Dalit life stories, also advocates for a way of reading Dalit personhood that "accords India's ex-Untouchables a stature beyond that of victims at the mercy of the capricious sentimentality of upper-caste solidarity with their suffering" (159).

10 The same phenomenon can be observed in Indian cinema as well. Recent examples of films with Dalit or low-caste subjects include *Masaan* (2015), *Mukkabaz* (2017), *Kaala* (2018), and *Newton* (2017). See Patel.

11 Shankar and Gupta astutely observe that

> caste is not the lived reality of Dalits and Dalitbahujans alone and, accordingly, . . . the critical study of caste cannot be their burden alone. An 'upper caste' Bania (such as M. K. Gandhi . . .) has as much a 'caste life' as a Dalit. While not all 'upper caste' life narratives acknowledge caste as directly as Dalit life narratives do, they nevertheless remain marked, even in their silence, by caste. Indeed, it has been argued that such silence is itself a mark of caste privilege—after all, is not the ability to ignore caste in itself a mark of privilege? (2)

12 Gajarawala points out a similar erasure in Navaria's writing but argues that this erasure does not have the same political implications. Gajarawala writes that "[i]f [Navaria's] fiction seems 'casteless' in its embrace of the modern, technological, and urban, then it is deliberately, strenuously, and anxiously so, rather than unconsciously—a feature that distinguishes it from the non-Dalit literary field that surrounds it" (156).

13 Caste as terminology is inadequate to the complex categorizations that have historically constituted the Hindu caste system. Speaking broadly, there are four castes, or *varnas*, based on the labor performed in a religious and social hierarchy. Those who later identify as Dalits would fall outside this four-fold division. All of the castes and outcastes are further subdivided into *jatis*.

14 Ambedkar notes that both Buddhism and Marxism focus on the materialist structure of exploitation and suffering and seek to abolish private property. The difference, according to Ambedkar, lies in the means to achieving this end. The basic tenets of Marxism involve violence, as the dictatorship of the proletariat could not be established without it.

15 Omvedt writes that Ambedkar grew increasingly suspicious of the socialist tendencies of the Indian National Congress and of communist politics in the country more generally. The Communists imagined that the issue of caste would be "automatically resolved in the fight for socialism and characterized Ambedkar as a 'petty bourgeois misleader'" (Omvedt 83). At the same time, socialists like Jawaharlal Nehru (India's first prime minister and a central figure in the Indian independence movement) believed that Dalits were really landless proletariat and that their primary concern had always been an economic one.

16 Una, a town in the state of Gujarat, became an epicenter of Dalit protests after four Dalit men were publicly flogged by alleged cow-protection vigilantes for skinning a dead cow in July 2016. In August of the same year, members of the Dalit community started a ten-day march from Ahmedabad to Una to protest the growing atrocities against the community in the state and the ruling right-wing Hindu government's apathy.

17 On 17 January 2016, Rohith Vemula committed suicide in the hostel of Hyderabad Central University. Vemula was a Ph.D. student in Life Sciences, an active member of the Ambedkar Students Association, and a Dalit. In July 2015, he and a group of other students clashed with the student wing of the right-leaning Hindu party on campus. As a result, university administrators barred Vemula and his associates from public spaces on campus and withheld their fellowships, citing administrative delays. It was in these circumstances of social alienation, political defeat, and financial strain that Vemula committed suicide.

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