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Collective Action against Graded Inequality: Lessons from Ambedkar and Sartre[1]

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ABSTRACT: This essay juxtaposes the South Asian system of social hierarchies, conceptualized by Babasaheb Ambedkar as "graded inequality" with "serial relations" as conceptualized by Jean-Paul Sartre. Collective action against casteism faces internal problems. The complex psychological dynamics preserved over millennia through caste systems prevent solidarities across castes. The notion of "seriality" helps us to understand the material limitations placed by scripted functional roles on collective action. Internal divisions arising from prioritizing a caste or class perspective can be resolved with a better understanding of how "exigencies of sociality" create an ambiguous unity. A key lesson from Sartre is that it is only through praxis that consciousness remains open to the attractions of solidarity. Cultural otherness disconnected from the materiality of class (or gender) is a distortion. Conceiving of classes as historically determined while ignoring caste-being makes any analysis of revolutionary action incomplete. Reading Ambedkar and Sartre together opens the way for a genuinely historical materialist account of collective action against graded inequality.

KEYWORDS: Ambedkar, casteism, collective action, Sartre, seriality

For a long while I was undecided about what to speak on at today's event. There is a lot to think about, but the dialogical space to think with others is shrinking for some of us. Many academic philosophers in the UK are facing the risk of redundancy. We have not quite devised a form of collective action to protect ourselves from the assault on philosophy. However, our worries about saving jobs are by no means the worst of fates that people around the world are facing in our neoconservative, deeply troubling times. Yet the immediacy for us of this crisis as professional philosophers cannot be overlooked. The months since I

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received the notice of risk of redundancy from my university have been very hard but instead of reflecting on my personal situation, I want to reflect more generally today on the problems of collective action. I am trying to follow in the footsteps of European philosophers who attended to the exigencies of their times. The context of my reflection is the world of caste—a South Asian system of "graded inequality." I will begin by familiarizing you with the context, then pose the problem of collective action against the hierarchies of caste as it was faced in pre-independence India and has recurred ever since. I will draw on the explication by Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) of what it means to be part of a collective and use this understanding to reflect on the anti-caste struggles led by Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891–1956), an Untouchable by birth status, an original theorist of caste, a jurist, philosophical thinker, political leader, and architect of the Indian constitution. I would like you to tell me about what you make of my way of doing political philosophy across boundaries in this dialectical way.

"Graded inequality": Lessons from Ambedkar

Social classes are ubiquitous, but the social classification of people into bounded groups—referred to as "castes"—is another matter. These are social groups mapped to a hierarchical arrangement, so that some are secure in their unshakeable position at the top, while others are condemned to remain at the bottom, simply because this is the social station into which they were born. In contrast to economic class, which can also be very difficult to transcend, birth-acquired caste status cannot be voluntarily changed. Inter-caste marriage affects one's status, but individual economic advancement does not have the traction to shift one's position within the caste hierarchy. Sometimes, though, at historical turning points, entire groups may move upward or downward as a result of the patronage of ruling regimes. However, throughout various historical upheavals, the "Untouchable" castes remain the lowest in the hierarchy, even below the "laboring" castes.

There is no theoretical consensus about what caste is, but it is widely accepted as a birth-ascribed social classification, with roots in ancient texts. And while some caste groups are assigned specific roles in religious rituals, others are mainly identified as occupational groups with no ritual role. The different meanings of caste range from *jati* (literally, "species") and *Varna* (literally, "color" or "class") to *Kula* (literally, "extended family") (Dhanda 2021). Some, such as the political philosopher Bhikhu Parekh, consider caste a benign communal identity, but from a critical perspective I hold that caste necessarily involves hierarchy that stigmatizes those placed in the lowest rungs.

Caste grouping was exploited by colonialists and continues to aid the extraction of surplus value from laboring classes. It is also self-deployed by inhabitants of the caste-world in collective bargaining for resources. Historians, anthropologists, sociologists, religious and political reformers have differed on the salience of caste, its uniqueness to India and other countries of South Asia, its link to religion, and the implication of a casteized existence for ethical life.

An explanation of the genesis of castes and how they developed into "enclosed" classes is provided by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar:

> Castes exist only in the plural number. There is no such thing as a caste: There are always castes . . . while making themselves into a caste, the Brahmins, by virtue of this, created non-Brahmin caste; . . . while closing themselves in they closed others out. (Ambedkar 2014 [1916], 20)

Endogamy is the chief characteristic that turned "classes" (*varna*) of the *Rg Veda* into many castes. Ambedkar argues that patriarchal customs, like *Sati*, girl marriage, and enforced widowhood, were used to preserve strict endogamy by the highest classes and imitated to varying degrees by others for achieving "higher" status.[2]

The juxtaposition, arrangement, and competition of caste-groupings is key to understanding the resilience of the caste-matrix. Glimpses of restrictions on who can perform what ritual, who can prepare the materials used in the performance of the ritual, who can touch, ingest, expunge, or offer these materials as sacrifice, are evident in Vedic Hinduism (1500–500 BCE). The much-cited Puruśa hymn (*Rg Veda*, 10.90) on the emergence of constituting segments of the human universe from a primordial being, arguably suggests that Vedic Hinduism associated the *brahmana* with superior intellectual capacities compared to the lowly *śūdra*. Ambedkar challenges the idealization of this *de facto* division of society into classes otherwise commonly found in many societies: "The scheme of the *Purusha Sukta* is the only instance in which the real is elevated to the dignity of an ideal" (Ambedkar 2014, Vol. 7, 26).

There is, clearly, an epistemic deficit in our knowledge of the ancient past: "we have little access to information about either heterodox or popular religious practices" because only the orthodox schools preserved verbal material internal to the ritual, including exegesis and accompanying mythologies. The gap in our knowledge of the past remains unplugged because everything we know about social and political matters of the times is "filtered through a priestly lens" (Jamieson and Witzel 1992, 3). This lacuna deserves as much recognition as the correct observation that the "Indian tradition of rational de-

bate" between "many opposed groups" requires far greater attention than it has received to overcome the "parochialism" of philosophy (Watson 2015). That there was internal criticism is attested to by the philosopher Bimal Krishna Matilal, who highlights the "paradoxicality of caste and *karma*," affirming that "hierarchical society was heredity-bound from time immemorial" but there existed "an internal critique of this within the tradition itself" (Matilal 2017, 143).

The term "graded inequality" was coined by Ambedkar:

> In the system of graded inequality there are the highest (the Brahmins). Below the highest are the higher (the Kshatriyas). Below the higher are those who are high (Vaishya). Below the high are the low (Shudra) and below the low are those who are lower (the Untouchables). All have a grievance against the highest and would like to bring about their downfall. But they will not combine. The higher is anxious to get rid of the highest but does not wish to combine with the high, the low and the lower lest they should reach his level and be his equal. . . . In the system of graded inequality there is no such class as completely unprivileged class except the one which is at the base of the social pyramid. The privileges of the rest are graded. Even the low is a privileged class as compared with the lower. Each class being privileged, every class is interested in maintaining the social system. (Ambedkar 1979, vol. 5, 101–2)

Graded inequality is a "principle of the Hindu social order" (Ambedkar 2019, 104). Caste, he wrote, is not "division of labour" but a "division of labourers."

The complex psychological dynamics preserved over millennia through caste systems prevent the "lower" castes from building solidarity or joining forces with those placed at the lowest level. Nonetheless, Ambedkar's mission and message to the world was unambiguous: *the "annihilation" of caste*. He promulgated the removal of Untouchability in the Indian Constitution, which came into force on January 26, 1950. However, in practice, untouchability continues widely in many guises, including, within South Asian communities in countries such as the UK and the United States.

The most recent example to hit the headlines in social media on the eve of India celebrating its seventy-fifth Independence Day on August 15, 2022, is of the death of a nine-year-old school child in Rajasthan, from a brutal thrashing by his teacher for daring to touch a pot of water in his school. Untouchability continues.

To engage meaningfully in the lives of people inhabiting such a caste world, it becomes imperative to understand what it means to face caste prejudice or "casteism." Casteism can be defined as a form of inferiorization. Building global solidarity against it therefore requires an understanding of an entrenched collective hypocrisy, to use Aimé Césaire's term, regularly renewed with dissimulation (Dhanda 2020). Continuing caste prejudice is masked, while pride in caste identity is presented as having aspirational value. Cultural practices that are attuned to existing hierarchies continually reinforce privileges and prejudices.

Collective Action

The concurrence of anti-racism and anti-casteism lies among the South Asian diaspora in the realm of *praxis* (Dhanda 2022). South Asian populations experience the relative intensity of racism and casteism in different ways. Their personal and community responses are calibrated to suit larger battles over the "image" of caste and how its "unethical" elements are perceived at a global level. Personal rivalries, historical scars, and the sedimentation of the past in memory affect how these oppositional stances are prioritized and made coherent. I have learned through closely following and supporting local and global campaigns (in the UK, USA, and Australia) that anti-casteism as a form of anti-racism can be partially actualized through the practice of litigation using available legal apparatuses. Caste is malleably open to interpretation, thus allowing a pragmatic capturing of the experience of casteism as a form of racism.

I say "partially actualized" because the driver of change is ultimately collective action and here there are problems. Collective action by anti-caste activists faces internal divisions that are not easily overcome. I will discuss the recurrence of fissures between those who identify with the communist left and those who position themselves as following Ambedkar when it comes to prioritizing the caste question. I will cite the public intellectual, Anand Teltumbde, author of several books on caste, class, and Ambedkar, who has been incarcerated in Taloja jail, Mumbai since April 14, 2020, and is awaiting trial for bogus charges under the UAPA Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Amendment Act 2019—a piece of anti-terrorism legislation in India.[3] In his "introduction" to *India and Communism*, Teltumbde describes the "pitiful plight of Dalit comrades":

> they become outcaste for both their own community, which they ideologically forsook, as well as to the comrades whom they embraced. The former castigates them as communist and the latter

> condemn them as Ambedkarite, a euphemism for Dalit. (Ambedkar 2019, 46)

A documentary film by Anand Patwardan—*Jai Bhim Comrade* (2011)—captures this predicament poignantly.

The earliest examples of collective action by Ambedkar include the march in Mahad when he led Dalits to drink water from the public water tank—the Chowdar Tank—to which the Mahad municipality had granted them access in 1924. Yet the exercise of Dalits' right to drink water was perceived as a provocation by local upper caste Hindus who attacked the demonstrators. That led the municipality to revoke their decision of granting access. In a renewed protest Ambedkar held a second Mahad conference in 1927, this time calling for the abolition of the caste system. He said:

> At the outset let me tell those who oppose us that we did not perish because we would not drink water from this Chowder tank. We now want to go to the tank only to prove that, like others, we are also human beings. . . . This conference has been called to inaugurate an era of equality in this land. Removal of untouchability and inter-caste dinners alone will not put an end to our ills. All departments of services such as courts, military, police and commerce should be thrown open to us. Hindu society should be organised on two main principles: equality and absence of casteism. (Ambedkar cited by Jaffrelot 2000, 47)

Resolutions asserting human rights were passed and a copy of the *Laws of Manu* was symbolically burnt by a Dalit ascetic on this occasion. A word about this text: problematically valorized by the colonialists as definitive of Indian customs, *The Laws of Manu* (*Manavadharmaśastra* or *Manusmriti*), acutely studied and decried by anti-caste intellectuals, is a compendium of customary practices—prescribed, permitted, or prohibited—with detailed prescriptions of penalties for those who commit "crimes," including crimes committed "with" the *avarna,* the Untouchables. Notably, for the "same" crime, for example, theft of a cow, or a murder, or adultery, the punishment varies according to the class (*varna*) of the perpetrators, the victims, and the relation between them. For example, "If a priest kills a ruler unintentionally, he should give a thousand cows and a bull . . . . (but) if a priest has killed a commoner who knows his place . . . he may give a hundred cows and a bull" (Doniger and Smith 1991, 263–4).

There were other actions for "religious equality," such as agitations for temple entry supported by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, that Ambedkar

reluctantly joined. But largely, Ambedkar was not very enthusiastic about matters of religious access; in fact, he proposed temple entry not as an end, but as means of energizing the Untouchables, and to test claims of inclusivity that Hindus made. Ambedkar wanted his followers—the Untouchables—to realize that Hindus merely paid lip service to equality but were in fact unwilling to share a common socio-religious space with the Untouchables. Thus, in 1930, at one significant temple entry event he said:

> Your problems will not be solved by temple entry. Politics, economics, education, religion—all are part of the problem. Today's satyagraha is a challenge to the Hindu mind. Are the Hindus ready to consider us men or not; we will discover this today. . . . We know that the God in the temple is of stone. Darsan and puja will not solve our problems. But we will start out and try to make a change in the minds of the Hindus.

This did not mean that he undervalued religious change. On the contrary, he eschewed piecemeal accommodations in favor of an overhaul. Unlike Gandhi, he gave up on Hinduism and, two months before his death in December 1956, he embraced Buddhism alongside 400,000 Dalits. His difference with the communists of his time lay precisely in their conception of classes seen in purely economic terms. By contrast, for Ambedkar, confronting socio-religious oppression head-on was an integral part of the class struggle. He wrote in *Annihilation of Caste*:

> Generally speaking, History bears out the proposition that political revolutions have always being preceded by social and religious revolutions. The religious reformation started by Luther was the precursor of the political emancipation of the European people. . . . The political revolution of the Sikhs was preceded by the religious and social revolution led by Guru Nanak. . . . The emancipation of the mind and the soul is a necessary preliminary for the political expansion of the people. (Ambedkar 1979, Vol. 1, 43–4)

An example of an ideal collective for Ambedkar is the idea of the *Sangha*. The Buddhist idea of the *Sangha* is non-hierarchical, and Ambedkar considers it superior to the Marxist idea of dictatorship of the proletariat as a response to the problem of exploitation of laborers. He develops this idea in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, a text devoted to elaborating his version of Navayana Buddhism or New Buddhism.

In the political realm, Ambedkar aspired to be a workers' leader. He formed the Independent Labour Party (ILP) on August 15, 1936, seeking to build broad alliances between Dalit and non-Dalit workers and peasants, but his influence was largely restricted to his own caste group—the Mahars—as Christophe Jaffrelot surmises from the lists of ILP electoral candidates. The manifesto of the party demanded state ownership of key sectors, including compulsory education, tax reform, collectivization of agriculture, and assistance for the landless and the unemployed (Omvedt 1994).

Note that meetings mainly organized by the ILP gathered 80,000 to 100,000 workers. The ILP was a key partner with the Marxists of the All-India Trade Union Congress in September 1938, in a massive strike against the draconian Industrial Disputes Bill put forward by the Congress ministry in the Bombay provincial assembly to curb strikes by imposing a conciliation procedure between employers and workers in dispute. Teltumbde tells us that Ambedkar took the lead in condemning the bill in the assembly and argued that the right to strike was "simply another name for the right to freedom" (Ambedkar 2019, 26).

The Problem of Collective Action

The problem of collective action can be stated like this: Why are workers similarly placed within an exploitative system of capitalist extractivism unable to consolidate collective action against graded inequality? Or to use Ambedkar's terms: Can the division of labourers be overcome in and through collective action?

In *Republic of Caste*, Anand Teltumbde, explains:

> In the context of the Indian system, where caste and capitalism amalgamate, the biggest obstruction to the growth of the politics of change has been the growing divergence between the dalit and left movements. The cause of this rift lies in the dichotomy of caste and class, reflecting a misunderstanding of both categories. Caste is a concrete reality—the life-world of the people of the subcontinent. Caste often encompasses classes within it. Class, on the other hand, is a conceptual category; an abstraction based on one's relation to the means of production. It follows that a class analysis of Indian society cannot be done without taking cognizance of the overriding reality of castes. (2018, 20)

Teltumbde reminds us that Ambedkar had no reference point in pitching his battle against the caste system (Ambedkar 2019, 75), but instead of lending him support, the communists chose to ridicule him and label him as "pro-imperialist" and "an opportunist leader" (Ambedkar 2019, 53). Decades after Ambedkar's death some communist leaders began to acknowledge the need to combine the struggle for radical democracy with the struggle against caste society. Ambedkar himself was of the view that the principle "From each according to his ability; to each according to his need" was distorted in the Hindu social order to the principle, "From each according to his need. To each according to his nobility" (Ambedkar 2019, 104). As he wrote:

> The Hindu social order does not recognise equal need, equal work or equal ability as the basis of reward for labour. Its motto is that in regard to the distribution of the good things of life those who are reckoned as the highest must get the most and the best and those who are classed as the lowest must accept the least and the worst. (Ibid.)

To address the problem of collective action and to think through the class/caste binary, let us now turn to Sartre.

Lessons from Sartre

Sartre writes in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*:

> people are separated by alterity, by antagonisms, by their place in the system; but these separations, such as hatred, flight, etc., are also modes of connection. However, since matter unites men insofar as it binds them together and forces them to enter a material system, it unifies them insofar as they are inertia. (1982 [1976], 221)

But we just noticed that in the case of a caste-divided labor force the material system that binds them together, placing them next to each other, so to speak, nonetheless, divides them along lines of caste (*jati*). Even insofar as they are inertia, they are not unified.

The idea of the "series" is a central explanatory tool for Sartre. As illustration, he describes a group of people waiting for a bus, none paying any attention to the others:

> In this state of semi-isolation it is obvious that they are united by the street, the square, the paving-stones and the asphalt, the pedestrian crossings, and the bus, that is to say, by the material underside of a

> passivised praxis. But this unity is itself that of a material system, and in this sense it is highly ambiguous. (Ibid.)

We might devise other examples of "series" from the Indian context, such as of thousands queuing to exchange bank notes during demonetization in 2016 and, in a more acute case, thousands waiting for transport to return to their villages following the sudden announcement of lockdown after the spike in COVID deaths (DHRDN 2021). The Indian government had not considered the impact of the hastily assembled plans on the most marginalized because, from their vantage point, the most marginalized did not and do not matter. The notion of dispensability of those in queues is perfectly illustrated in these cases.

There are "serial behaviours, serial feelings, and serial thoughts," writes Sartre, "in other words, a series is a mode of being for individuals both in relation to one another and in relation to their common being." *The* Jew, *the* colonialist, *the* manual worker are neither ideas, nor concepts, but serial unities, held together by exigencies of sociality.

> In fact, the being-Jewish of every Jew in a hostile society which prosecutes and insults them, and opens itself to them only to reject them again, cannot be the only relation between the individual Jew and the anti-semitic, racist society which surrounds him; it is *this* relation insofar as it is *lived* by every Jew in his direct or indirect relation with all other Jews, and insofar as it constitutes him, through them all, as Other and threatens him in and through the others . . . *the* Jew far from being *the type* common to each separate instance, represents *on the contrary* the perpetual being-outside-themselves-in-the other of the members of this practico-inert grouping. (1982 [1976], 267-8)

In discussing another example of a series, of listeners of the radio broadcast, Sartre discusses the frustration felt by someone worried about how Others may be convinced by the broadcaster's nonsense that she finds unbearable. In that moment, she experiences the impotence of being a part of this series. In a further example of hoarding behavior of buyers during a rapid price rise, Sartre explains:

> The phenomenon occurs as *flight*: because I cannot prevent some unknown person from changing *his* money as quickly as possible into goods which he will stockpile, I hasten to exchange *mine* for other goods. But it is *my* own action, insofar as it is already inscribed in economic behaviour as a whole, and my future action, which deter-

> mine the action of this unknown person. I return to myself as Other and my subjective fear of the Other (whom I cannot reach) appears to me as an alien force, the accelerated depreciation of money. (1982 [1976], 289)

We can see this way of becoming Other against one's own interest, by one's own actions, and blaming it on circumstances, in many other serial relations. When applied to caste identity, it is evident in the collective hypocrisy of denying belief in caste while continuing to *live* it through everyday choices. Those of privileged caste groups often are the ones who deny belief in caste. We might ask, even if I cannot answer here: How can the non-members of the caste world, the third parties deal with this not-I-but-they-are-responsible for the perpetuation of caste?

The task of Sartre's *Critique* is to shed light on "collective otherness." We need a language, as Paige Arthur helpfully puts it, "to describe the concrete relations between any two individuals who are members of different groups" (Arthur 2010, 14). Sartre followed Simone de Beauvoir's lead in *The Second Sex* by shifting attention from individual being to collectivities. Beauvoir wrote: "no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself" (Beauvoir 1953 [1949], 16). In *Black Orpheus*, Sartre describes "black consciousness" as a kind of practical activity, described by Arthur as "an anti-racist racism," "a strategic move" to counter an "imposed universality" championed by colonizing Europeans. When conditions necessitating the assertion of Négritude disappear, so will Négritude. But collective identities are not so easily transcendable. While non-essential, these identities nonetheless adhere. Why is that so?

Sartre states in the *Critique*:

> I used to say that one never *is* a coward or a thief. Accordingly, should I not now say that one *makes oneself* a bourgeois or a proletarian? . . . There can be no doubt that one *makes oneself* a bourgeois. In this case *every* moment of activity is embourgeoisement. But in order to make oneself bourgeois, one must be bourgeois. There is no comparison between cowardice, courage and other such useful summaries of complex activity and membership of a class. At the origin of this membership there are passive syntheses of materiality. And these syntheses represent both in the general conditions of social activity and our most immediate crudest objective reality. They already exist; they are simply the *crystallised practice* of previous generations:

> individuals find an existence already sketched out for them at birth. (1982 [1976], 231–2)

Citing Karl Marx from *The German Ideology*, that people "have the position in life and their personal development assigned to them by their class," Sartre explains, that "What is 'assigned' to them is a type of work, and a material condition and a standard of living tied to this activity; it is a fundamental *attitude*, as well as a determinant provision of material and intellectual tools; it is a strictly limited field of possibilities" (1982 [1976], 232).

Sartre discusses the working woman in the Dop shampoo factory:

> when the woman in the Dop shampoo factory has an abortion in order to avoid having a child she will be unable to feed, she makes a free decision in order to escape a destiny that is made for her; but this decision is itself completely manipulated by the objective situation: she *realises* through herself what she *is already*; she carries out the sentence, which has already been passed on her which deprives her of free motherhood. (1982 [1976], 235)

Even more severe sentences are carried out by Dalit women. In the wake of the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in the U.S., privileged caste women were full of praise for the progressive abortion rights granted to Indian women. The reality is that these rights are difficult to exercise. Abortions are unaffordable even in government hospitals for the majority of Dalit women who earn about £1 a week (Rao 2022). Babita Valmiki, a Dalit woman, gathers human excrement by hand from dry latrines in the state of Uttar Pradesh, in north India, earning about £3 a month. Manual scavenging was outlawed ten years ago following a vigorous campaign by a dedicated organization Safai Karamchari Andolan (SKA), but the practice continues and, of the 1.2 million (Kumar 2020) manual scavengers in India, 95% to 98% are Dalit women. Babita was unpaid throughout her three pregnancies and was repeatedly denied reproductive care by government hospitals for eleven years due to her caste.

Our class-being "constitutes itself through us as a future-fatality, that is to say as a future which will necessarily realise itself through us, through the otherwise arbitrary actions which we choose" (Sarte 1982 [1976], 239). We can easily transpose this way of constituting oneself to caste-being.

Inter-changeability of units in the series—and, as we have seen, caste identity is one such serial relation—is contingently determined by exteriorities of the practical field. This would explain why caste identity appears less salient

in some classes and more so in others. The possibilities of choice that caste restricts vary from one location to another.

Relationships between people belonging to different groups are mediated by third parties and there is a multiplicity of such third parties. Further, social relationships are mediated by what Sartre calls “the practico-inert.” This is “worked matter”—the inhuman mediation structuring external relations among people. Sartre takes the example of the machine which divides skilled and unskilled workers and organizes relations with their employers.

And when the machine stops, and the potential of the series to become a “group” recedes, there is the return to the serial relation, but not necessarily in the same way. Recent studies on the effect of liberalization, globalization, and corporatization of India’s productive resources show the changing contours of enmeshed material and cultural-symbolic caste effects. For example, sections of Marathas, urban ex-mill workers of Mumbai, face a “crisis of dominance” (Mhaskar 2021). Liberalization has led to dwindling of jobs in the public sector. Children of retrenched workers from relatively dominant castes are unable to recreate their marginally higher status on return to the villages their parents left to seek urban employment, while their educated Dalit co-villagers have benefitted by joining public sector employment using state provided affirmative-action provisions. Dalits are “refusing to undertake humiliating work linked to their caste status” (Mhaskar 2021, 78), thus threatening caste norms and facing “major resentment.”

Conclusion

Conceiving of classes as historically determined within specific locations, while ignoring caste-being makes any analysis of revolutionary action incomplete. If the Indian Communists had paid attention to this complexity, Teltumbde complains, there would have been no need for Dalits to articulate their separate movement. The “duality of caste and class that was uncritically used by everyone and which has been the chief bane of radical politics in India,” he writes, “is born of this folly of the earlier communist and arguably cost us the Indian revolution for now” (Ambedkar 2019, 36).

Arguably, Teltumbde seems hasty in dismissing the identity politics of Dalits. He says that “there is no way to arrest the identitarian obsession that is growing amongst the Dalits” (78). But it’s important to note the origin of this “obsession,” which lies in the blindness to the question of caste, clearly expressed in the presidential address of the First Communist Conference, uncritically stating that “from the standpoint of communism this question of untouchability is purely an economic problem. . . . With the advent of Swaraj

these social and religious disabilities will fall off themselves. Communists have neither caste, nor creed nor religion" (cited in Ambedkar 2019, 38). Wedded to this "automatism," the Communists expected Dalits to wait for the revolution to occur before their problems—relegated to the "superstructure"—could be addressed.

The failure of the Communists to support struggles against caste was due partly to their "doctrinaire attitude towards Marxism," but also "to their inability to efface their caste consciousness of being upper-caste" (Ambedkar 2019, 45). In the context of the UK, in a long interview with me published in the *South Asia Multidisciplinary Journal* (Jaoul and Dhanda 2021), I discussed the experience of casteism within Indian Workers Association related to me by a Dalit left-wing political activist. A kind of reproachment between the left and Ambedkarites was made possible through stakeholder engagement in the *Caste in Britain* project that I led for the UK Equality and Human Rights Commission in 2013–2014.

Teltumbde suggests that the question is not of one or the other but a question of "struggle against caste as a class. It is only through struggle that caste consciousness would be displaced and class-consciousness germinated" (Ibid.). This way of enmeshing caste with class avoids cultural essentialism in understanding caste.

Cultural otherness disconnected from the materiality of class (or gender) is a distortion. A key lesson from Sartre is that it is only through the medium of action that consciousness remains open to the attractions of solidarity. In 2021, I wrote about the participation of landless Dalits in the historic protests challenging farm laws imposed by the Indian government. In 2020, 300,000 farmers camped for several months on the outskirts of New Delhi. Dalit laborers too participated in this protest. Since around 2014, access to common lands has become a crucial focus of struggle and resistance from organized Dalit groups in the Malwa region of Punjab, particularly Dalit women, with support from local left-wing farmers' and laborers' unions. These are struggles to access land for homesteads and for cooperative farming, as Dalits claim entitlement to tilling for subsistence crops and/or for livestock fodder. Enclosures of commons have severely affected landless women. Whether collecting fodder or, due to lack of access to space for defaecation, travelling far from home to go to the toilet, Dalit women are often at the mercy of landowners' "benevolence" and thus at greater risk of sexual harassment and rape. Met by brutal violence from local landowners, and often entailing physical battles, their struggles for land have nonetheless been successful in almost 120 villages. At each site, committees have been set up to share workloads, with machinery taken on rent. Crops

are shared and any surplus sold with income from sales also shared. During the coronavirus lockdowns, this hard-won land was a crucial lifeline for otherwise landless Dalits in these villages. The Zameen Prapti Sangharsh Committee (Land Acquisition Struggle Committee) is adamant that these battles are the first stage in a longer struggle for land justice (personal communication with ZPSC, January 28, 2021).

Harinder Bindu, state leader of one of the unions' women's wing reflecting on the transformative potential of the farmers' movement says:

> All sections of society have been part of this whether [they are] students, women, farmers, *mazdoors* [workers]. But will this protest solve the problems of caste? No. Will it restore the rights of women? No. Will it make farm-labourers the owners of the land they work on? No. But there is one thing. *Is andolan vich kuch rishte badalne shuru hue* [Over the course of this movement, some relationships have started to change]. (Quoted in Singh, Singh, and Dhanda 2021)

There is an ever-present risk of falling back into seriality, the comfortable habituation of caste or class privilege, if one is not vigilant in checking oneself. This is a caution to Savarnas who want to be allies of Dalits in the anti-caste struggle—for example, white people who want to be anti-racists, or cis men who want to be feminists.

To give Ambedkar the last word: the kind of freedom he imagined for the individual could only be achieved in a social order "where exploitation has been annihilated, where no suppression of one class by another exists, where there is no unemployment, no poverty and where a person is free from the fear of losing his job, his home and his food as a consequence of his action" (Ambedkar 2019, 86).

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ENDNOTES

1. *Editors' Note*: This essay is a revised version of the keynote lecture given by the author at the Society for European Philosophy conference held at Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK, in August 2022.
2. *Editors' Note*: while *Sati* describes self-immolation on the funeral pyre of the husband, enforced widowhood refers to the prohibition of widows remarrying.
3. *Editors' Note*: Since the delivery of this keynote lecture, Anand Teltumbde was released on bail on November 26, 2022. He is still awaiting trial.

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