

# The Aporia of Touch: The Gift of Community in Untouchability

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## ABSTRACT

Inspired by stories about and by the Untouchables, this paper aims to read the Untouchables for a certain sense of community, which challenges our usual understanding of being in common. In Indian culture, history, and society, the Untouchables, as the outside or other side of the caste system, prove to be a crucial point to question any social hierarchy whatsoever, in its explicit as well as implicit forms. This paper is therefore an attempt to reconsider, with the help of various anthropological insights (such as those by R. S. Khare and others) as well as contemporary discursive analyses (like Viswanathan's investigations), the structure and culture of hierarchy in Indian society in particular and in human society in general. I see some connection between the issue of the Untouchables and the interests in "touch" (Derrida) or "inoperative community" (Nancy) in sophisticated Western theory. The paper will try to make sense of what is really remarkable in "Dalit representation," in two senses: Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar's Dalit Movement, which evolved within and alongside the Indian Independence Movement, and which critically exposed the limit of Indian Nationalist discourse and politics, *as well as* a cluster of stories linked by the common experience of dalits through the metaphor of "poisoned bread." The Untouchables, who always give without "proper" returns, point to the direction of the (im)possibility of the gift.

**KEY WORDS:** Dalit, the Untouchables, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, caste, gift, community

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# 觸的難局： 不可接觸性之中作為禮物的共同體

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## 摘 要

本論文受印度賤民自己所寫關於自己的故事啟發，試圖從所謂「不可接觸」的種姓制度賤民的特殊位置，找到「共同體」的另類意義，而且挑戰一般所認為人們「在一起」的意義內容。歷史上，印度社會文化之中，不可接觸的賤民位於社會階層和種姓制度的底層，或「另一邊」、「外面」。事實上，賤民的問題彰顯了所有隱然或明顯的社會階層的問題。本論文因此希望藉賤民之力（或賤民之「位」），加上人類學研究的貢獻（如 Khare 的研究）以及論述分析的發現（如 Viswanathan 的書），重新考慮印度社會的階層文化與結構，進而檢討人類社會的階級性難局。另一方面，本文作者也發現繁複的當代西方理論中有些主題可以幫助我們看待賤民問題，如德希達對「觸」的解讀，以及南希（Nancy，或譯儂曦）對「無為共同體」的理論。更重要的，本論文最後要討論「賤民再現／代表」（Dalit representation）的兩種意義：第一，安貝卡（Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar）組織的賤民運動，試圖在印度階級精英領導的獨立運動之中謀得種姓制度的革命，同時暴露出印度民族獨立運動與論述的極限；第二，賤民如何透過以「沾毒麵包」的隱喻為核心的多元故事，自己再現自己？賤民「給」，總是得到不足的回報，使不可接觸之賤民成為積極意義下「禮物」的可能形式。

**關鍵詞：**賤民、印度不可接觸者、安貝卡、種姓制度、共同體、禮物

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## The Untouchables as a Topic

The image of the Untouchable writer writing for himself or herself involves the important question of how the Untouchable can become himself or herself. It is a question of whether the Untouchables, who were assigned to the place of the “outside” in the Indian caste system, could represent themselves by writing about themselves. In his anthropological investigation of Lucknow Chamars’ struggle for a positive ideology and an assertive identity, R. S. Khare pays special attention to the Untouchables’ structural complicity with caste Hindu’s cultural and social dominance. The re-invention of an identity cannot be achieved by dialectical opposition; rather, the possibility of a positive identity comes only by confronting and opening its *impossibility*. In other words, the attempt is inevitably caught within the “dilemma of being the *incomplete non-Hindu*, the bind of trying to become a non-Hindu by employing cultural principles and products *shared* by the Hindu” (Khare, *The Untouchable as Himself* 16).<sup>1</sup> The Untouchable thinkers, “interpret and modify the Indic [‘Indic’ here means pre-Hindu or non-Hindu] principles to derive a congenial moral and philosophical ethics. But as they raise *their* cultural model and reconstruct its ‘history’ . . . , they demonstrate their deep-seated intellectual *différance*, a strain that allows conditional overlap but no agreement with Hindu thought” (144). The differential relation is thus marked not by opposition but by sharing, *sharing in difference* (Spivak, “Bonding in Difference”; Nancy, “Sharing Voices”): to quote Khare again, “the Untouchable’s categories and conceptions rarely exhibit an unconditional and unequivocal opposition to the caste Hindu’s” (7); rather “The Indian Untouchable, though increasingly estranged from the caste Hindu, continues to *share* this civilizational framework” (x; emphasis mine). But one has to add that it is precisely because they share that they are different; sharing presupposes difference, and at the same time sharing means that there is something in common, without being reduced to the same. The French word *partage*,<sup>2</sup> meaning both sharing and dividing, sharing in dividing and dividing

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<sup>1</sup> The title of Khare’s book is actually a misnomer, betraying the gender politics upon which Khare bases his research and writing. He tries to accommodate women’s viewpoints in his more updated book. See Khare, “The Body, Sensoria, and Self of the Powerless.”

<sup>2</sup> *Partage* in French means both “dividing” and “sharing” at the same time; the word is thus loaded with the implication that to be together (“sharing”) presupposes a condition of being different (“dividing”).

in sharing, captures the subtlety of the structural complicity.

The question of sharing and the logic of touch will be my main concerns in this paper. I intend to read the figures of the Untouchables<sup>3</sup> (as the forbidden in the caste system in the Indian subcontinent) as a vantage point to question the question of social hierarchy in Indian society in particular and in human social systems in general. More importantly, it is to see how the Untouchables can be represented both in analytical and narrative discourses. Also, the Untouchables pose questions for the possibility of “touch,” in the sense of a way or a surface of proximity, connection, communication, and community, that is, as a way of being-together among different individuals, entities, or groups. I will try to employ the help of not only Khare’s anthropological investigations and Gauri Viswanathan’s discursive analyses (especially her analysis of Ambedkar’s Dalit Movement), but also the theoretically relevant findings of Jacques Derrida on the question of “touch” and Jean-luc Nancy on “community,” to see what the powerful significance of the untouchability of the Untouchables can “lift” to bring in philosophically more radical senses of touch and untouchability, in a critical process of going from local or social untouchability to general or philosophical untouchability.

But before going into details, there is something I must deal with. For the issues of sharing and touch in fact also concern my subjective condition of writing this paper. Indeed, my intellectual interest in the dilemmas and the political stakes of the Untouchable writers and the Untouchable Movement is inevitably and crucially intertwined with my position vis-a-vis South Asia Studies. (Indeed, I knew nothing about Indian history and society before attending a course on nationalism and modernity in Indian Literature. I believe the experience of reading the chapter “Bifurcating Linear Histories in China and India” in Prasenjit Duara’s book *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* helps me imagine the link between the Chinese history I am familiar with and the Indian history I am reaching out to grasp.) Of course, I have no knowledge of, let alone formal institutional or disciplinary relations with, South Asia Studies in general, but when I took the course in order to know more about colonial and postcolonial India in the light of nationalism and modernity, I felt quite isolated, even though I was surrounded by my friends. In consequence, when I was required to pick a

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<sup>3</sup> The first letter in the name “Untouchable” is irregularly capitalized because some writers capitalize it and some do not. I will capitalize it in my writing but will follow the practices of individual writers when I quote from their writings.

topic, as if taking my cue from some strange order of things, I was *determined*, in both senses of the word, to work on the question of the Untouchables and Dalit literature, about which I knew practically nothing and still know very little. I was attracted to the question of the Untouchables for my interests in the productive relationship between postcolonial studies and deconstruction. From postcolonial criticism and theory, I would like to know how the question of the Untouchables can cast light on the failure of independence and national liberation, as well as on the question of “internal colonialism,” “a form of colonialism in which the dominant and subordinate populations are intermingled, so that there is no geographically distinct ‘metropolis’ separate from the ‘colony’” (Barrera 194; Acuna)<sup>4</sup> in the former colony itself. And the Untouchables provide an excellent point of entry. Therefore, as I mentioned above, I would like to inquire into the question of touch and touchability, about the possibility *and* impossibility of touch, about the aporia (as an impasse that cannot be resolved, dialectically or otherwise) of the touch that cannot be, cannot be recognized as touch, drawing my inspirations from Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy’s theorization of this very question developed from readings very different from the Dalit literature.

In short, the two focuses would be closely related ones, from the empirical to the theoretical: the Untouchables as a social group *and* the question of untouchability as a philosophical question. Which means that on the one hand the Untouchables will be dealt with as (out)caste, as “the lowest of the lowest,” or as a political movement—Dalit movement, as a group of writing, while on the other hand I am going to tackle the more abstract issue of untouchability, the aporetic of the possibility (one cannot avoid touching) and the impossibility (one cannot really touch or get in touch with) in the act of touching or the taboo of touching. The latter question thus points beyond the realm of the boundaries between the caste Hindu and the Untouchables; indeed, it is relevant to *any* contacts between social groups in general. It becomes something like a “universal” concern. There cannot be a social contact without

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<sup>4</sup> The object of study of the above books is the American situation, but of course the question of internal colonization must be asked in the newly independent states, especially the multi-cultural and multi-racial ones. This citation is in fact very “symptomatic” of my approach to the question of the Untouchables in this paper, because I *cannot not* rely on material on other cultures which I am more familiar with to get closer to the issues in the subcontinent. This is questionable but also interesting in that the dilemma of the deconstructive “cannot-not” would force productively (rather than imperial intervention or penetration) an opening of the other experience in the “contact zone,” as it were, in the scene of reading. On the other hand, from a completely reversed direction, the comparative viewpoint in Prasenjit Duara’s “Bifurcating Linear Histories in China and India” provides me with a window to Indian nationalism; see Duara 51-82; Chakrabarty 91-110.

a consideration of touchability and untouchability, or of touchability *in* untouchability. In other words, it is a question of *community* in the narrow sense and *communication*, or between the idea of *community* and the chance of *communicability*. And I will approach the former with the help of many interesting works in the field of anthropological and historical investigations, and I will analyze the latter from the perspective of deconstruction.

I intend to join the two, to fuse my theoretical interests to a postcolonial condition in which the Untouchables and the Dalit writings are the *lever* to turn and to open the question of community. In so doing, I run the risk of stepping into a territory with which I am not familiar. Is the risk worth taking? This inevitably involves the risk of “transnational literacy” and the effortful attempt to “unlearn” in the “learning to learn” (Spivak, “Teaching for the Times” 191-6; Spivak, “Diaspora old and new” 247, 253). This is therefore a risk that I *cannot not* take.

## **Ambedkar, Religious Conversion, and the Dalit Political Movement**

For the Untouchables’ efforts for social change, we must turn to Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar’s innovative use of conversion to Buddhism as an active political and social strategy. (What is more interesting is the incessant *proclamations* for conversion, the speech act *performative* that is tactically uttered to serve political functions, which I will return to later.) Ever since I first knew of the crucial link between the question of the sacred (or the religious) and the social hierarchy in the subcontinent, I have been very interested in Ambedkar’s critical deployment of Buddhism in the struggle of the Untouchables against the caste Hindus within the cultural parameters of Indian history and mythology, for Buddhism is the only thing that is familiar enough for me to serve as an entry into the complex social/religious knots in the subcontinent. As someone who was born and raised in Taiwan, Buddhism has been part of my cultural life; I have been living in Buddhist traditions and its various ramifications in Taiwanese and Chinese cultures. Therefore, I would like to see what Ambedkar could do to make Buddhism a strategic weapon to pry open the enclosure of the sacred in Brahmanical history. For me, it seems that Ambedkar’s employment of Buddhism can be read as an attempt, to use Homi K. Bhabha’s phrase, to “articulate the archaic.” Actually, it’s more a “re-articulation” than a simple articulation (An articulation is

already always a *re-articulation*!) because if it is the aim of the nationalists in decolonization to articulate the resistant “colonial nonsense” in relation to the Enlightenment rationality and language of the West, the Dalit attempts to *re-write the sacred* can be seen as a *re-articulation of that articulation*, to get to the bottom of the complicated folds within the politics of the sacred. The issue is precisely how to struggle for the interpretive rights of determining “culture’s archaic undecidability” (Bhabha 135). For the Dalits, “to be genuine, they must reclaim their glorious, pre-Aryan past, weeding out the very principles which sowed the seeds of their social degradation and misrepresentation (in Hindustani *galat bayani*)” (Khare, “The Body, Sensoria, and Self of the Powerless” 160).

Gauri Viswanathan has analyzed rather thoroughly the issue of religious conversion in England and the subcontinent, but before I go into her detailed analysis of Ambedkar’s famously peculiar use of conversion within the struggles of nationalism and decolonization, I would like to approach the latter’s “re-articulation of the archaic” from the stance of deconstruction to gain a certain critical perspective. Steven Parish, who comes to the questions of the Untouchables in particular and caste in general in a proclaimed “deconstructive” position and who, in my opinion, comes up with a rather weak deconstructive reading of the Untouchables in the caste system, nevertheless offers something relevant to our present discussion of the strategic use of Buddhism in “re-articulating the archaic”:

“My stance is deconstructive, at least in part . . . In a certain sense, the Untouchables I seek to understand have a deconstructive stance towards ‘Hindu’ culture. Untouchables often subvert normative and dominant interpretations of culture. They question the ethical, ontological, and existential status of key cultural constructs; they endeavor to examine the way these are produced and understood, taken up in life and put to practice. They take pieces of culture apart and reassemble them, amending and supplementing culture in the process, giving a ‘spin’ to symbols and meanings that they lack in the dominant community.” (Parish 174)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Notice that Khare also wants to read the Untouchables’ struggles against Hindu-ness in terms of Derridean *differance* and deconstructive complicity. See *The Untouchable as Himself* 144-8.

His argument is that “The caste Hindu and the Untouchable may ‘have’ the same culture, but ‘read’ it in different ways, and animate it as a vehicle for thought and life in radically different ways” (173) and that “low caste people often appropriate the language of hierarchy, give it a different ‘spin’ in their own minds, define how it is to be interpreted with tacit or explicit metacommunications . . .” (177). His examples of the ‘spins’ include how the Untouchables, while “speaking” the language of purity and impurity (of exclusion, hierarchy, distinction, and oppression) following the demands of cultural hegemony, may be in fact “speaking” the language of necessity as part of their strategy, as well as how they counter the values of Untouchable ascetic against caste-oriented ascetic and renouncers (181-190).

The “spins” employed by the Untouchables in the attempts at reinterpretation can be understood as *catachrestic* maneuvers, with catachresis meaning a trope that goes astray, that is diverted from its proper sense, but also a trope that is under such circumstances capable of being connected or grafted to the *other* possibilities and thus capable of producing new *senses* (both meanings and directions):

“Marking the moment of the turn or of the detour [*du tour ou du detour*] during which meaning might seem to venture forth alone, unloosed from the very thing it aims at however, from the truth which attunes it to its referent, metaphor also opens the wandering of the semantic. The sense of a noun, instead of designating the thing which the noun habitually must designate, carries itself elsewhere.” (Derrida, “White Mythology 241, also 253; Parker 60-73)

In my opinion, Ambedkar, in his attempts to “trace the malady [of social inequality induced by the caste system] to its source” (Ambedkar 226), is precisely employing the strategic use of catachreses in the interpretation of the sacred and Indian ancient history. In his historic speech on 25 December 1927, at Mahad, Ambedkar uses an analogy to illustrate his point that the Dalits need to be more radical in getting rid of the caste system as a whole, rather than being satisfied with the removal of the prohibitions of interlinking and social intercourse. But his analogy at this juncture appears to be loaded with implications. He says that in the struggles between the patricians and the plebians in the “ancient European nation of Rome,” it’s not enough for the



plebians to have the patricians change the laws, or to get control of one of the tribunes in the matter of administrations and enforcement of the laws, because “The Roman people had a tradition that nothing was to be done without the favourable verdict of the oracle at Delphi” (229). So while the Roman patricians retained hegemony over the interpretation of the sacred via the institution of the Delphi oracle, the plebians would be in an inferior position.

Under such circumstances, as Ambedkar’s analogy clearly shows, it’s no wonder that the key to “eradicate” untouchability at its “root” is to *spin the sacred*. And it is precisely for this reason that conversion means so much in the Dalit movement under the leadership of Ambedkar. But it is of course a genealogical re-writing of history. For example, in Ambedkar’s “Revolution and Counter-Revolution,” he divides the pre-Muslim period into three stages: “(a) ‘Brahmanism’ (the Vedic period); (b) ‘Buddhism,’ representing a revolutionary denial of caste inequalities; and (c) ‘Hinduism,’ or the counter-revolution which consolidates Brahman dominance and the caste hierarchy” (Omvedt 38). The point is to *invoke* a revolutionary past under Buddhism that was well before the consolidation of the caste system. Ambedkar thus tries to open a space through the entanglement of Hindu hermeneutic dominance of social hierarchy, by reaching for a segment of history that lies *between* “Brahmanism” and “Hinduism.” The brief historical space in between, between the beginning and its consolidation of the oppressive social system becomes, through a performative of invocation with the agency of the Dalits, the political space for *survival*.

At this juncture, it is useful to turn to Viswanathan’s reading of Ambedkar’s conversion. The role of religion in the theory of nations and nationalism has not been sufficiently addressed until very recently. Witness the absence of discussion of this topic in Ernest Gellner (whose central point of concern is nationalism as a reaction to manage the “uneven development” of industrialism across the globe, a Weberian stance purged surprisingly of the concern for religion) and in Benedict Anderson (who synchronizes the development of the ideas of nation with secularization, that is, the end of the dominance of the sacred scripts in its various religious expressions), two of the most popular attempts at theorization (See Gellner, Anderson). With the earlier *Genealogies of Religion* by Talal Asad and the more recent anthology *Nation and Religion*,<sup>6</sup> Viswanathan’s *Outside the Fold* is among the new

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<sup>6</sup> Peter van der Veer and Hartmut Lehmann: “The general point we want to make here is that it is

efforts to look at the issue of religion, or the sacred, in the formation of nations and nationalism. Addressing the “centrality of conversion as a form of political and cultural criticism,” she aims to “consider the significance of Ambedkar’s conversion and examine its implications for the possibilities of nationhood, at the time of decolonization, for a social class denied access to political power through self-representation, yet seeking a course of action that preserved rather than eradicated difference” (Viswanathan 213). She regards Ambedkar’s conversion less as a negative reaction than as “a rewriting of religious and cultural change into a form of political intervention” (212), thus highlighting his “creating a new mythology around which the political identity of dalits could be mobilized” (212), a mythology that would lead to a political path different from that derived from brahmanical and colonialist ideologies. In this way, conversion in the Dalits’ struggles is a strategy for the other possibilities, for “exploring the possibilities offered by conversion (especially to ‘minority’ religions) in developing an *alternative* epistemological and ethical foundation for a *national community*” (213; emphases mine). Later I will try to stretch the possibility of this notion of “alternative community,” but at this moment we can see the link between the “spins” I mentioned earlier *and* Ambedkar’s desire, through the appropriation of Buddhism, to “reclaim cultural identities located *at an originary point*” (214; emphases mine).

Though I cannot follow Viswanathan’s close analysis of Ambedkar’s various strategic moves vis-à-vis Ghandi and the National Congress, for my present interest at least I would like to deal with the what she says about the “double nature” of Ambedkar’s use of conversion to transform the fate of dalits. To be true, Dalits protest against “a double colonialism at work” (237) or “the double deracination that non-elite Indians suffered as victims of both caste and colonialism” (231), so Ambedkar’s aim is to fight against British colonialism with the Hindus while at the same time trying to get socio-political rights as well as cultural space for survival by distinguishing the Dalits from the Hindus and Hinduism. Of course, “the recovery of dalit agency through conversion to Buddhism suggests alternative conceptions of nation and community that resist being encompassed by pre-existing, received forms of the state and its apparatuses” (216). But though Buddhism was

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essential to follow the transformation of religious notions when they are transferred from a purely religious context to the sphere of national politics. Nationalism feeds on a symbolic repertoire that is already available but also transforms it in significant ways” (7). See a similar position in Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity*, and *Nationalism and Modernism*.

chosen because of its obvious universalism and egalitarianism, which for Dalits mean something altogether more desirable and liberating than the hierarchy of the caste system in Hinduism, it was chosen over Christianity and Islam by Ambedkar over a twenty-year period of advertising and deferral because Buddhism is still largely “Indian,” a product from the history of the subcontinent. A dialectical other of Hinduism it may be, a critique of Hindu hierarchical society it may be, a revolutionary attempt to bring in social change it may be, but Buddhism has been rooted in the Indian cultural soil for such a long time and has never been an “alien” intrusion. Dialectically speaking, Buddhism is thus a difference within the same, a recognizable other over a familiar horizon. Under such circumstances, it is clear that the Dalit struggle for agency and for self-representation in various aspects remain within “national” terms. In Viswanathan’s words, “Ambedkar’s conversion to Buddhism, which shows all signs of having roots in a separatist impulse, is nonetheless the base from which he sought to reconstruct a national community” (238).

But she adds immediately that Ambedkar’s move “redefines rights not in terms of political franchise but primarily moral claims” (238). So it is a search for a “construction of a moral community” (239). Ambedkar, the key architect of the Indian constitution, tried to come up with a community for Dalits through a more than political, even more than religious, means, for Buddhism was for him a more moral than religious matter. It was therefore a “reinvented Buddhism” (229) that he wanted to set up. And it is here that my concern for the “catachrestic spins” can be relevant. By going to the “originary point” the Dalit movement aims to re-activate a “mythological description” and to retell “the story of untouchability as a product of religious conflict”; in this description “Buddhism’s attraction . . . lay in the link it enables [Ambedkar] to draw between the advent of untouchability and the spread of Buddhism” (231). Indeed, by thus re-inventing a Buddhism by drawing on the intricate Indian past, Ambedkar came up with a very different Buddhism, a Buddhism less in terms of religious dogma than in terms of *dhamma*, “as right relation between people in social and political life” (234, 233-4). In this way, in Ambedkar’s alternative interpretation and innovative re-writing, Buddhism becomes a radical signifier, equipped with new semantic contents, that would help Dalits restore their repressed agency and the right to speak for themselves. A new version of Buddhism makes possible

both the connection to the Indian past, the original and originary revolutionary Buddhism against hierarchy, and the way to the future, the coming egalitarian democracy and a new moral community. In sum, “the crowning achievement of Ambedkar’s writing was the identification of Buddhism with enlightened nationhood—a historical possibility that clearly existed in ancient India but was thwarted by Hindu casteism” (232).<sup>7</sup> Now, by a “deconstructive” rewriting of the past and by reinventing Buddhism, the Dalits made the lost historical possibility re-emerge to the surface of cultural and political life, and the possibility has created a powerful space for social criticism. But what might be the implications of this revival for people in India in general?

As I have mentioned, the notion of a new moral community in Ambedkar’s theory may have a certain possibility. And I have said that it might be possible to stretch this notion of community to test its radical potential. Now, it is easy to see the Dalits’ efforts as something concerning more than ethnic, class, racial, caste or gender issues; theirs was a struggle that started from a specific site and spread to become a general matter. Again, in Viswanathan’s words, “Ambedkar turned to an originating moment in Indian history—the spread of Buddhism—to reclaim a redemptive cultural identity not only for dalits but for all Indians” (232). I have followed Viswanathan’s reading of Dalit conversion and its various tangled implications, in order to understand the “catachrestic spins” in more concrete detail *and* then *to give it yet another spin* to look into the (im)possibility of community in general. As I have explained earlier, my interest is *double*, both post-colonial and deconstructive; in this reading, I would like to see how a post-colonial analysis of the Dalit conversion can give light to a deconstructive intervention into the discussion of the question of *being-in-common* in any community whatsoever.

The question of caste is one about community, as we have read about Ambedkar’s attempts to imagine an alternative community, while the question of untouchability is about taboo and how people get into relation (or not to get into relation, to be more precise) with people, that is, about communicability. In the rest of my paper, I will be moving *from* the issue of Dalit conversion through “catachrestic spins” of Buddhism *to* a more theoretical one of (un)touchability and hence communicability. Is untouchability possible, in the

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Also: “[Ambedkar’s] disclaimer that his philosophy has roots in religion (specifically, the teachings of Buddha) and not in political science seeks to revive Buddhism from a vanquished condition in Indian history,” in Viswanathan 233.

social realm or others? Or is it part of the question of the impossible? In this connection, I think it will be fruitful to learn from Derridean deconstruction in order to point to the *aporia* of untouchability, because in Indian society, as will be shown later, untouchability has in fact never been maintained. The taboo on untouchability is always already, has always already been, crossed or broken; in one way or another, the Untouchables were or have already been touched, by other ways, through other means. From the very beginning, there has never been any instance of untouchability. Untouchability is the impossible. Indeed, it is an *aporia*, which means, in Derrida's words, "something that does not allow passage," a "non-road" (Derrida, "Force of Law" 16), or in a more detailed way, "the difficult or the impracticable, here the impossible, passage, the refused, denied, or prohibited passage, indeed the nonpassage, which can in fact be something else, the event of a coming or of a future advent . . ." (Derrida, *Aporia* 8). The experience of the *aporia* in untouchability may be able to provide us with a chance to have a glimpse of a community that is "something else," or that is "coming" in the future advent, the "other" community (other than the community which centers around a core, or an identity for solidity and presence) that may be related to the ordinary or present communities of whatever kind.

Casteism presupposes a notion of body. It is a notion about the (im)purity, the division, the classification, of the body. And it prescribes the rules of contact—that is, about touchability and untouchability. About this I have to cite from Partha Chatterjee: "Caste attaches to the body, not to the soul. It is the biological reproduction of the human species through procreation within endogamous caste groups that ensures the permanence of ascribed marks of caste purity or pollution. It is also the physical contact of the body with defiling substances or defiled bodies that mark it with temporary conditions of pollution, which can be removed by observing the prescribed procedures of physical cleansing . . . The essence of caste . . . requires that the laboring bodies of the impure castes be reproduced in order that they can be subordinated to the need to maintain the bodies of the pure castes in their state of purity" (194). Thus, the attempts by the Dalits to fight for an agency and an identity within/along with the nationalist decolonization should be understood more properly as attempts to regain control over the body. Perhaps more than any other social movements (perhaps with the exceptions of the Women's and Queer Movements), the struggle for identity

cannot be separated from the concern over the body, the body as a site for battle and negotiations. As Khare puts it, the questions are: “[H]ow do Untouchables, men and women, *reconstitute* their own body and self in the face of unresolved fears, challenges, pain, and suffering within everyday life? . . . How do they *reposition and use* their body, senses (particularly speech, hearing, and sight), and memory for forging appropriate social response, including those of scorn, protest, and even bluff and bluster?” (Khare, “The Body, Sensoria, and Self of the Powerless” 151). In other words, I can translate Khare’s “reposition and use” into what I have previously mentioned, something like a “catachrestic spin.” It is not only that the Untouchables need to retrieve past history to make a genealogical rewriting, to productively appropriate the signifier “Buddhism” for radical use. At the most intimate level, the Untouchables must *re-write their own body*. The efforts have usually been understood as “reclaiming the body”: For instance, in Chatterjee’s chapter on the Untouchables as outcasts, “the attempts to define a claim of proprietorship over one’s own body, to negate the daily submission of one’s body and its labor to the demands made by the dominant dharma and to assert a domain of bodily activity where it can, with the full force of ethical conviction, disregard those demands” (195). But I think it involves far more than a reclaiming of proprietary rights; it is even more than a rewriting, as I have just proposed. When the issues of gender and sexuality enter the question of *the Untouchable body*, the latter becomes entangled in something that may incur danger, threat, and anxiety.

## **An Anthropology of the Untouchables**

We remember Ambedkar’s aim was for removal of untouchability as a curse, but how to read the doubleness of untouchability as both curse *and* power, when the Untouchables “reposition and use” the body marked by untouchability? In his fieldwork, Khare discovers the tempting power coming from the Untouchable women; it means that the curse of untouchability (especially “feminine untouchability,” if there is such a thing) can reverse, or at least change the power relations prescribed by the caste system. Also, Khare discovers that though the Untouchable women were said to be cast outside of womankind by the uppercaste women, there are some hidden reasons for doing so: “Untouchable women are found particularly dangerous for their threatening sexuality and dangerous magical powers. But the culture

remains equivocal on the issue. If these women are known to carry curses, the evil eye, inauspiciousness, and black magical spells, then they are also known to cure, heal, and avert misfortune. Of all these, uppercaste women remain most anxious about the Untouchable woman's uncontrollable sexuality . . ." (Khare, "the Body, Sensoria, and Self of the Powerless" 155). Of course, the last reaction can be just stereotypical, but the double nature of untouchability as both curse and power make the Untouchable body, the defiled body a powerful weapon in not only the ideological struggles (as in the mass Dalit Movement) but more tangibly in everyday encounters. (And the Untouchable women as doubly questionable, as shown in Khare's observation above, thus occupy a pivotal position in any reconsideration of the position of the Untouchables and social hierarchy, for they highlight, in a twice double structure, the matter of positionality even more than the Untouchable men.) And this very double-ness reminds us of the Derridean (Platonic) *pharmakon*, both poison and medicine, both harmful and beneficial, at the same time (Derrida, *Dissemination* 99-100). (Things become even more complicated if we take into consideration the *doubleness* brought in by the new state and law. There has been a "reconfiguration" in terms of the relationship between the body and the law. After the "major historical break" introduced by the Independence, the "Untouchable's body acquired a new political and legal basis," because his [sic; gender bias] bodily presence, actions, and gestures spoke in the language of political rights and contests" and because the body was "now not only ritually ranked (and karmic) but . . . was, more importantly, the locus of new economic protection, political representation, and legal claims and rights" (Khare, "The Body, Sensoria, and Self of the Powerless" 160).

Indeed, the Dalit condition, the condition of living with the curse of untouchability and the possible subversive weapon of that very same untouchability, makes me think of Gloria Goodwin Raheja's anthropological study of the relationship between the question of the caste system and the institution of the gift, *The Poison in the Gift*. Raheja's interesting study does *not* particularly address the Untouchable condition; rather it deals with the dominant Gujar caste in Pahansu, in Saharanpur District, particularly the practice of the giving of *dan* (See Raheja)<sup>8</sup> the ritual performative in which

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<sup>8</sup> Raheja wants to contest Louis Dumont's thesis about the caste system as formulated in his *Homo Hierarchicus*, in which Dumont holds that the caste system derives singly from the ideological principle of purity and impurity. See Louis Dumont 46-9. For her, it is the acts of prestation, the giving of the gifts, rather than the "hierarchy" in terms of purity and impurity, that are essential to caste relations in Pahansu. See also Steven M. Parish's discussion of Raheja's book in *Hierarchy and Its*

the donor transfers “inauspiciousness” to the recipient of the gift of dan, thus on the one hand instituting a relationship of power and humiliation, while on the other hand establishing the figure of the “other” in the recipient in the act of prestation. Though it is not my concern here to get to the bottom of the caste system, I think it would be fruitful to take inspirations from Raheja, to look at caste from another direction, that is, to look at it from the viewpoint of the primacy of relation over entity. In other words, the relation of the gift-giving is constitutive of the social relations in the community, and gift-giving provides *the possibility of being-in-common, the being-community of communities*. Indeed, it is interesting to note the way this perspective opens to look at caste as gift, though as poisoned gift, as poison in the gift, as Raheja’s title indicates. It is not only that the gift of dan gives shape to caste, to caste relations; it is much more significant that, inversely, caste, or *the label and status of outcaste can be seen as a gift given* to position social groups. At this juncture, for the Untouchable, it would be interesting to consider the *positionality*, rather than the “essence,” of the status as something given, that is, to interpret *the ontological situation of being outcaste as a gift*, as a *poisoned gift*, to borrow Raheja’s expression, albeit as a gift urgently in need of re-negotiation.<sup>9</sup>

For me, as a person who is interested to understand deconstructively the situation of the Untouchables, the approach to seeing untouchability from the perspective of the gift is a fruitful one. It is so because basically I have been thinking of using the question of untouchability as a *lever* to rip open the edifice of social formation structured around caste hierarchy. And as I have shown earlier in the part dealing with Ambedkar, the issue of untouchability poses questions to nation-building and decolonization, teasing the justice claimed by political struggles that in fact homogenize society around an archaic or residual anterior tradition. Now, the fact that the Untouchables are determined by the tradition of caste system to perform certain jobs and work

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*Discontents* 88-93.

<sup>9</sup> The idea of the gift used in this essay is based on a long tradition of critical studies from Marcel Mauss’s pioneering work on the gift in the primitive exchange system as an alternative to capitalist commodity exchange, to Derrida’s seminal deconstructive intervention which famously questions the possibility of the return in the so-called “exchange” of the gifts and which lifts the idea of the gift to the realm of the impossible. The present essay borrows the idea of the gift from Derrida to push for a reading of Dalits (as the Untouchables), to see them as people being given a poisoned position in the caste system by the very system itself but also as people who, precisely because of this poisoned position which gives them the vantage point to probe, are able to change the meaning of that problematic gift which they do not return into something affirmative.



in society, that is, getting *in touch with* people, without being permitted to *touch* others shows that the Untouchables are actually the ones that provide the communicability in the *conduit* of people in society. So it may not be an exaggeration to say that it is the Untouchables that glue together the different social sections by their various menial and “low” services to the society. It would only *seem* paradoxical to say that the social itself is *maintained by the strange institution of untouchability*, which is never itself. Because people get in touch with people in the very untouchability that is instituted to separate them according to a certain principle (for example, the principle of purity and impurity in the traditional interpretation, or the institution of prestation in Raheja), because untouchability can never be kept as it is (so it is never simply itself), untouchability is necessarily and critically *aporetic*. In this context, in my efforts to put the Dalit condition into a contemporary theoretical frame, Ambedkar’s re-negotiation of untouchability can be seen as probing more radically into the very possibility of the constitution of the social itself in the subcontinent.

I am not trying to deny the political thrust in Ambedkar’s pronouncements; rather, I am paying attention to not only “politics” (*la politique*) but “the political” (*le politique*)<sup>10</sup> in the possibility offered by his opinions: it is not just about the struggles in the formation of power in the political realm; it is more about how the political realm itself is constituted, how community comes to itself. So Ambedkar can be seen as *also* addressing the constitution of the social itself. In the realm of “politics,” he deals with the contradiction in the nationalist decolonization when the latter could not take its logic of emancipation to its logical conclusion. In the realm of “the political,” however, he questions the foundation upon which all communities are based, by linking untouchability to the egalitarian Buddhism.

## Theories of Community and Touchability

We have seen that in the Dalit movement the goal is to give voice to the Untouchables, to form a community composed of the Untouchables themselves, as can be seen in the case of attempts to get separate (if not “separatist,” as some “misrepresented” it) electoral representation. But the more intriguing issue today that concerns us would be how to detect a different possibility of

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<sup>10</sup> For the distinction of “politics” and “the political,” see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Retreating the Political*.

community implied here in his attempts, perhaps beyond his expectations. For me, the Dalit situation reminds me of a fundamental reconsideration of the thinking of community in a “community for those without community.” Is not this precise for the Untouchables? I am thinking of linking untouchability to the hymenal together-ness in separation, or being-in-common in difference, in terms of both language and community, in terms of, perhaps, “unavowable community” or “inoperative community” (See Blanchot; Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*; Nancy, “Of Being-in-Common”). To think through the in-between-ness opened up by untouchability moves us towards the edges of communities, towards a community that can not be understood in the ordinary sense of the word, a community, whether “unavowable” (because avowal would mean substantial consolidation) or “inoperative” (*desoeuvre*; because work or production would mean immanent presence, which in turn points to the disappearance of “sharing” of the “being-in-common”), which is the interruption of all communities.

By turning to Nancy’s ideas of touch and the inoperative community, we may be able to consider the relation of the Untouchables to “the community without community,” in order to open a possibility of considering all communities in their foundation. When Jacques Derrida talks about Nancy’s idea of touch, he tries to question the transitivity of the act of touch, and he is pointing to the inevitable reflexive double movement of the act of touch: touching is always already involved in self-touching. But can one really reach out to touch others and to touch one’s own self or subjectivity? For Derrida, the aporia of touch consists precisely in the fact that both outward and inward movements cannot, strictly speaking, reach the destinations: “[I]t brings into contact (contamination and contagion) contact *and* non-contact. Contamination thus becomes the interruption of the relation. The law in fact demands to touch *without* touching it. . . . It touches itself at the moment it touches the Untouchable” (Jacques Derrida, “*Le toucher*” 124-5). And for Nancy the question of touch is one about the access to the other (Nancy, “Touching” 59-63; Nancy, “Corpus” 189-207). Of course, Derrida and Nancy are not thinking about the specific historical existence of the Untouchable outcasts in the subcontinent, but I aim to forge a catachrestic connection at this juncture to show that in fact the Dalit situation can be considered from a philosophical perspective in which the issue of touch or communicability in human society in general can be read as operating in the peculiar figure of the Untouchable in

India. Given this, we may be in a position to see the Dalit condition as figuring the difficulty of human communicability in general, *without* in the process abstracting the Untouchables' historical suffering into *proof* or *evidence* or *data* gathered from the natives for the European Philosophical Subject. I try my best not to do that. But, as I have said, I am interested in both looking into how Ambedkar used the reinterpretation of the sacred to facilitate practical political struggles, *and*, on the other hand, how a deconstruction of the situation can throw light on *other* conditions.

Given these, we may be in a better position to read the Dalit narratives, to draw out both political implications and philosophical potentials. And I will end my paper with a reading of some texts written by the Untouchables themselves: this way, we would try to see how the Untouchables can give voice to themselves, in the touching/self-touching of their voices—always in the plural. (In a similar way, when Chatterjee talks about the relation between nationalism and women he offers an interpretive essay, but when he, in another chapter, talks about “Women and the Nation,” he offers stories written by women themselves to give voice.<sup>11</sup>) When we are reading Dalit narratives and “literature,” we inevitably encounter the relationship between the *writing* and the *movement*, the two kinds of representation becoming one and the same thing. We have to ask: How can the Untouchable touch oneself/touch on oneself, in writing, in referentiality and transitivity? How do they touch themselves and others in their writing? (It's interesting to note that by such a strange coincidence and through such long torture I, as a cultural other, am now being *touched* by the Dalit writings of the Untouchables. Even today I would still consider this a most unbelievable encounter, an inconceivable *touch*, even when chance had brought me to this course.) How to touch and self-touch? In reading the narratives, one has also to bear in mind the task of the articulation of the positionality of the subaltern in the question of (un)touchability.

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<sup>11</sup> I have not forgotten the important issue of the *impossibility of non-representation* and who-speaks-for-whom in Spivak's “Can the Subaltern Speak?” but Spivak is of course not denying the importance of giving voice to the other by the other. Compare the original version of her essay collected in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg's *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, and Spivak's slightly different re-formulation in her *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 247-311. Cf. The essays in Judith Roof and Robyn Wiegman.

## Literary (Self-)representations of the Untouchables

It is significant that the narratives and poems in the Dalit literary movement are collected in an anthology called *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*, edited by Arjun Dangle.<sup>12</sup> While Khare, Chatterjee and Viswanathan deal with the epistemological efforts on the part of the Untouchable thinkers (Ambedkar and others) to construct a cultural ideology, the writings collected in *Poisoned Bread* are also part of the attempt to negotiate an identity through literary representation, to articulate and to construct an identity effect to let the affects of the Untouchables to emerge beyond the epistemological. It is interesting to note that, speaking in another context, Jane Gallop points out that “critical anthologies . . . may be the best place to hear [the] collective subject. Since anthologies not only have many voices but are organized choruses, they are good places to witness the dynamics of collectivity” (Gallop 1992). Similarly, *Poisoned Bread*, an anthology or collection of literary, critical and autobiographical writings, may be a good place to hear the collective “voice.” But even though the Untouchable writers are now writing for and about *themselves*, the identical subject-object would still have to confront the questions of writing and representation, which have already always disturbed any complacent belief in identification and identity. In fact, some of the pieces in *Poisoned Bread* can be read both as touching descriptions about individual characters and as parables or allegories about the structural difficulty of being “incomplete non-Hindu” in writing. In “Some Issues Before Dalit Literature,” Raosaheb Kasbe has made clear that Dalit literature has to struggle between cultural conflict and assimilation (*Poisoned Bread* 292; page numbers will follow quotations from this book). There is thus no simple articulation or giving voice to oneself; instead, there are always co-implications or complicity in the relation to the others. At the end of “The Bastard,” an autobiographical piece written by Sharankumar Limbale, a genealogical dispersion of hybridization is displayed to question any claim to simple identity. After a long list of his blood line, the narrator highlights the motif of hybridity:

My father too was a Lingayat, and his grandfather and great grandfather that makes me a Lingayat. My mother was a Mahar.

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<sup>12</sup> Page numbers will appear in subsequent quotations from this anthology.

Her parents, her forefathers, were Mahars. So I am a Mahar. But have been brought up by a Muslim—Mahmud Dastageer Jamadar—my grandfather. Shouldn't that make me a Muslim? Do claims of the heart have no religious sanction? (123)

The narrator's identity-crisis and the author's cultural anxiety converge in the last paragraph, "Am I a caste-Hindu? But my mother is an Untouchable. Am I an Untouchable? But my father is a caste-Hindu. I have been tossed apart like Jarasandha—*half within society and half outside*. Who am I? To whom does my umbilical cord join me" (123)? It is upon the umbilical chord of genealogical past and cultural tradition that the writers put their focus. If the institution of caste has its legitimacy in the religious and sacred texts, it is necessary to negotiate with both the Hindu tradition and the pre-Vedic past in order to "turn the table." It would be necessary to re-interpret the umbilical chord, the link to the past and the tradition, as in Prakash Jadhav's "Under Dadar Bridge": "The umbilical chord I myself/had hung up to dry/there in the crevices of stone walls" (56). And it is perhaps for this reason that the ambivalent relationship with mothers surfaces in several stories, for example, in Baburao Bagul's "Mother" and Avinash Dolas' "Refugee," and others, because it is precisely the "birth" (that holds blood relations and passes on the caste system) and "re-birth" (the attempts by the Dalit political to give birth to new identity) that are at stake in the Dalit struggles. The continuity and discontinuity embodied in the figure of the umbilical chord must be rethought and re-negotiated. Indeed, the very first literary work in the anthology, L. S. Rokade's poem, asks the Hamlet-like question in the title, "To be or Not to be Born," asking the lyrical speaker's mother: "I, still in your womb, was wondering/Do I want to be born – /Do I want to be born at all/in this land?" (1).

The very doubleness in the relation between the Untouchable and the caste Hindu becomes the central trope of *poisoned bread* in the central piece of the collection, of the same title, by Bandhumahav. The poisoned bread is not something poisoned; rather *the bread itself is the poison*: "[T]he crumbs had turned to poison? It was in fact poison? Poisoned bread?" (153). It is bread and poison at the same time, the "age-old bread associated with our caste" (153): "I can only say: never depend on the age-old bread associated with our caste. Get as much education as you can. Take away this *accursed bread* from the mouths of the Mahars. The poisoned bread will finally kill the humanness of man . . ." (italics mine). But the "accursed share" (Georges

Bataille's term) of the Untouchable, the doubleness of the poisoned bread, is precisely where an intervention or a "turn" is urgently needed. As in my earlier mention of *pharmakon*, the point is to turn the poisoned bread, the gift, that is, the ambivalent relationship with both the Hindu and non-Hindu past, to turn it into positive and critical use, as in the operation of Ambedkar's strategy of re-interpretation of Buddhism. As Khare points out, "The Untouchable thinker often presents his case this way: He considers his group to be simply neither Hindu nor outside Indian civilization; neither merely consensual nor entirely alienated" (*The Untouchable as Himself* 6). What is more, the Untouchable "engenders competition as well as cooperation, sharing as well as exclusion, conflict as well as consensus, and change as well as nonchange. He is not only excluded, but for different reasons he excludes those who exclude him" (145).

It is in fact the accursed share, that something extra, that makes possible the economic circulation and the human relations, even though it is considered something to be excluded. But this accursed part mobilizes the social itself by being submerged and suppressed (See Bataille, *The Accursed Share; Theory of Religion*; "The Notion of Expenditure"). So in a similar way, the Untouchables work in and through social hierarchy, thus bringing the social in togetherness with, paradoxically, *untouchability*. *The glue lies in untouchability*: touching without being touched, touching/touched, at the same time. Under such circumstances, the Untouchables have an ambiguously *ghostly* presence in society; they have never been really considered for themselves, their own being. They exist without being there, as it were. And it is this *spectral identity* that Anna Bhau Sathe addresses in her story, "Gold from the Grave": "Bheema thus lived by sifting the ashes of dead bodies. He could not understand this paradox of life and death. The distinction between the two was lost on him . . . He solemnly declared to his friend that those leading a life of humiliation have no call to live or die . . . Like a ghoul he lived on corpses and so his life was inextricably woven with corpses" (211). The comparison of the life of the Untouchables to the (non)life of the living dead appears to be more than an angry accusation or crude analogy, for we may be able to read in the *Dalit spectrality* something that is true to all claims to identity, of whatever kinds, and that may be true to human life, in general, if we take into consideration the Heideggerian and Derridean understanding of human existence as necessarily ghostly and spectral because there has never

been presence enough in human existence to make it fully human in temporality.<sup>13</sup> And we can read more theoretical implications (besides the angry accusation) for a *general spectrality* in the following statement from Bheema: “Who’s told you that ghosts only haunt graveyards? . . . This city of Bombay itself is a colony of ghosts. The real spectres live in houses and the dead ones not in the graves” (212). In this way, the Dalit existence not only teases out the shaky ground upon which national decolonization and nation-building problematically played out by trying to include yet contain Dalit power. The Untouchables, never fully recognized, live in the in-between of existence and non-existence, an in-between-ness that reveals the “truth” of communitarian connectedness. The Untouchables speak the ghostly “truth.”

## Conclusion

The trajectory in the structure of this paper, from Ambedkar’s religious-political endeavors, an alternative anthropology, theories of the touchability and community, to the chance of Dalit representation in writing, is practically a journey for critical knowledge concerning the Untouchables, from the religious-political, via the social scientific as well as the theoretical, to the literary. The trajectory of this paper thus involves four different ways to tackle the (almost) discursively mute and invisible Untouchables in the Hindu caste system in particular and, by extension, the system of Indian social differentiation in general. But more importantly, for me, the journey opens an opportunity to consider the questions of social differentiation and stratification in other locations. Three lessons may therefore be gained in a trans-cultural attempt to read the figure of the Untouchable in relation to the religious-political, the social scientific, the theoretical (or the philosophical), and the literary discourses. First, while it is true that cultural investigations today must take historic-social “specificity” into consideration, Dalit experience may nevertheless inspire us to understand more the “subaltern” situations elsewhere, probably owing to the pervasiveness and deep-rootedness of the repression of the Untouchables. The reading of the Untouchables in one cultural/social realm may be lifted, or “grafted,” to another consideration of touchability and

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<sup>13</sup> My reading strategy is indebted to Derrida’s reading of Heidegger’s endorsement of “Spirit” into something else, which is a complicated matter I cannot possibly discuss within the scope of the present essay. To know more, please see Derrida, *Aporias; Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*.

untouchability in other circumstances. Second, the aporia of Dalit literary self-representation highlights the general impasse in the question of Dalit identity, which can only be understood in a spectral sense. An attempt to read the *ghostly life* of Dalits in terms of the *deconstructive spectrality* may draw out some radical political possibility, e.g., spectrality of social existence. Third, the journey offered in this paper provides a strategic point to engage *the Untouchable* in order to “touch” *the Tribal*, another diverse “group of groups” in the subcontinent which would further complicate, expand, and radicalize the question of social differentiation. While the path from the Untouchable to the Tribal cannot be done here, the present project has definitely paved the way to think in that direction. The Untouchable triggers a thought about the Tribal.



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