

# ‘ALL LITERATURE AS VULGAR’: AMBEDKARITE POETICS OF THE PEOPLE\*<sup>1</sup>

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The reflection presented here stems from a concern in two intersecting questions. One is the recognised necessity to rethink the concept of ‘the people’. Freighted as it is, from its origination in European political philosophy, with the built-in contradictory fact of colonialism in the framing of the modern nation-state form, the concept is now made shaky in the transnational, possibly ‘post-national’ push of postcolonial globalisation. What is the outlook for democracy as the forms of the political recompose, on a global scale? The other question is the history of knowledge which has led to the situation of division and often conflict between conceptualisations of the people, of peoples, and of the political dynamics that run through cultural difference: a still active split between social sciences and the humanities. Their common genealogy in Europe’s colonial rationalism has been established, and the special function of the Indian sub-continent as laboratory for their articulation amply documented. The issue of caste, a cultural singularity and a theoretical problem for political philosophies based on liberal citizenship as well as on class-division, is notorious as motivation of European Indian sociology (and its genealogy in colonial demographic classification). It is also critical, *in absentia*, as blind spot in the brahminical bias of textual Indology from its inception. What does the question of caste problematise in the divisions of knowledge concerning human societies, and their implications for democracy?

In studying Ambedkar’s work and its continuities in contemporary dalit debates on literature, I explore what can be illuminated in these issues by a poetics of the people. The link between poetics and politics has a long tradition of preoccupying, as well as questioning, literary study. Concerning South Asia, it has mostly taken the form of a critique of the textualist culturalism of Indology, and the emergence of a political sociology of India has been decisive in fashioning the necessary tools to capture the positivities of India’s

political present and past. But the analytical power of poetics is not reducible to the theory of *mimesis*—supposedly Aristotelian despite much retouching since, and organised on the Platonic disjunction of form and reality—, which is indeed one of its traditional ideologies and which sustains the disciplinary separation of (social) experience and (humanist) discursivity. Rather, as the study of the historicity of meaning constitutive of the process of socialisation, it offers potentials for strong rehistoricisations of ‘the people’. It trains attention to the critical people-effects that are forming and transforming, rearticulating and irrupting, within, below, or outside of the categories of social science and liberal philosophy, constantly shaping ‘a missing people’ (Deleuze, 1985) from the texture of the presumed peoples—whether ethnic, cultural, communal, democratic, national... The condition for this rests on an equally strong historicisation of ‘literature’ as category.

#### Ambedkar

B.R. Ambedkar, as political leader, constitutional lawyer and social scientist himself, is typically discussed in the idiom of political scientists in the context of the history of Independence, and of social scientists for the discussion of caste politics. His denunciation of Brahminism makes him a natural ally for methodologies concerned with maximising the distance from the formalism of text. Yet for a poetics of the people, we can take a starting point in the radicality of his enunciative stance as he engages his critique of the casteist order in an unrelenting textual polemics with the *Dharmashastras*—here in *Who Were the Shudras* (1946): ‘It will be said that I have shown no respect for the sacred literature of the Hindus which every sacred literature deserves. [...] in my research I have been guided by the best tradition of the historian who treats all literature as vulgar—I am using the word in its original sense of belonging to the people’ (Rodrigues, 2002: 392). In this philological perspective, the history and the present of literature is placed within the history of an *ethnos*. The philological discussion of this literature also opens up the strategic field of the politics of enunciation, which makes possible an analysis of the *demos* in the linguistic products and practices that build up as culture.

This cultural, anthropological take on texts has a specific history in India, in the double-edged genealogy in the Orientalist project. ‘Culturalising’ India has also meant undifferentiating the diverse groups of enunciators, and providing arguments for those who saw

the advantages in the depoliticisation of the colonial relation. But it is also interesting to consider this anthropological perspective in its own formative moment within the genesis of Indology—for instance in the words of Eugène Burnouf inaugurating the discourse of Sanskrit Studies in Paris with a lecture ‘On Sanskrit Language and Literature’ (1833). In 1863 Burnouf would give his classic *Essay on the Veda* (1863) the subtitle ‘Studies in the religions, the literature and the social constitution of India... A work which might serve as an introduction to the study of Western literatures’, at a time when these had not yet formed as objects of scholarship. Equally significant is the historical simultaneity with an opposite movement shaping the Romantic notion of ‘literature’ which was rapidly superseding the earlier inclusive category of ‘letters’. We know how in this new cartography of text and society, the artistic autonomy of literature was nevertheless welded with the equally new national, if not nationalist, frame of reference. The ‘literarisation’ of Orientalist canons and textual practices would follow, amplifying the civilizational logic (for instance in widening the gap between Great and Little traditions) against the historical and (self)historicising perspective.

But the question of the people which Ambedkar recaptures by equalising the field of letters, well beyond the folklorist reclaiming of popular and vernacular forms, to engage in a textual sociology that has the power of a radical social critique, constitutes a direct interpellation of ‘literature’ and of what Europe-inspired literary thinking makes of the political, both in the course of its formative history and in its practices in the present.

Ambedkar, born in the Mahar community in the Bombay Presidency and educated into the Westernised intellectual elite, is a complex figure: ambivalent in the perspective of national history for his part in the shifting alliances and divisions of the decolonising process, and profoundly controversial. His posterity is marked with seesawing ups and down: centrality (as reference for emergent dalit politics with the 1972 formation of the Dalit Panthers, and again as instrument for the appeal to popular masses in the nationalist politics which has developed in recent decades, with the mainstreaming operation of his 1991 centenary celebration), and marginalisation (in the long intervening episodes of historical silencing). The multiple valences of Ambedkar, past and present, have to do with the penetrating character of his speech acts in democracy (Joubert, 2015), which dissected and disrupted the social contracts of Brahminical—but also reformist and nationalist—ideological agendas for India as independent polity. A poetics of the people

is at work in the political creativity in his war of discourses, and in the textual terrain of engagement he established for the democratic struggle.

Ambedkar's logomachy, conducted in the tight-knit, highly-charged discursive texture of public and political debates in the decades leading up to Independence, illuminates the discursive process through which democracy is produced. His action as maker of the untouchable political subject *and* key enunciator—in his role as chair of the Constitution Drafting Committee—of Indian constitutional democracy is materialised in this invention of successive rupture points in the hegemonic assemblages of enunciation, in the context of the acceleration of social transitions in de-colonial India. From his first intervention, in the 1916 ethnographic study on 'Caste in India', he opened up the terrain for engagement at the heart of the Indian discursive order, from which he would successively carve out a series of discursive positions for political critique, or discursive modes of political-democratic struggle, which are also political performatives. Each performs an alternative people, and constitutes a political emergence of the untouchable democratic subject: precarious, produced in the inchoative temporality of strategy, situational and shifting, but also decisive in the construction of the Union's socio-political scene as it is constituted today. We know how this dimension of counter-hegemonic interpellation in his work, the political imagination and analytic penetration of it, has been crucial to the constitution of the untouchables as political force, which would be expressed later in the new self-designation as 'Dalits'.

In a previous work, I have studied three of the most notable forms of Ambedkar's speech-acts in democracy as conducted in his essays and speeches (Joubert, 2015): annihilation (of caste)<sup>2</sup>, representation (of the people), and conversion (and the posterity of liberation). Indeed Ambedkar's scalpel-sharp analysis of the social articulations of domination, and the vigorous political imagination in his proposed re-assemblages of collective enunciation, which dis-articulate instituted language games and redistribute socio-political relations, are worth studying in themselves. My suggestion is that Ambedkar's textual intervention is also a theory of the fine historicity of the *demos* that courses through enunciation, working by radical re-historicisations of the discursive compacts that hold together a political order and the different political subject positions that it allows. Ambedkar's 'vulgar-isation' of literature for the work of democracy is first and foremost the act 'of the historian', and a trenchant political philosophy of history.

In the space of this study I concentrate, concerning the poetics of Ambedkar’s own essays, on the specificity of his praxis of re-historicisation. As he works to establish an untouchable speech position, his major point of engagement is with the power of social articulation in Brahminical letters. It is in his re-readings of the *Vedas* and *Shastras*, *Brahmanas* and *Upanishads*, as well as the *Gita* and the echoes of the Smriti in Sanskrit drama, that he undertakes a systematic de-coupling of the yoking between ritual content and the social hierarchy of caste, in the speech act of consecration. His rigorous, acid and at times jubilant polemic energy too is well-known and has been feared across several generations. It has also given rise to a popular culture of celebration around an exultant metaphor that plays with the possibilities afforded by his name Bhimrao to mythologise associations with Pandava Bhim, and all the possible imaginings of a smashing, breaking, crushing, to counter the socio-religious treading-down of the dalits (Poitevin, 2009). The ‘annihilation of caste’ takes place in the denouncing, dis-enunciating of the violent pragmatics activated in Hinduism’s founding texts. It is in the most attentive philological ‘respect’ of the texts (Rodrigues, 2002: 392) that it is conducted, following the operations of symbolic degradation in direct confrontation with its enunciative authorities: ‘straight from the horse’s mouth’ (Rodrigues, 2002: 405), and down to the letter: ‘chapter and verse’ (Rodrigues, 2002: 391).

But the polemic is the form only of a speech act, which has its overall logic in the work of historicisation. Ambedkar reads ‘the sacred literature of the Hindus’ to retrace the positive operations of domination that have shaped Indian history, and reconstruct a history of the *formation of* Chaturvarnya—and of a fifth varna as outcaste. Reversing the argument of antiquity of the Hindu order, celebrated by Orientalist research and appropriated by a section of Indian society to bolster the nationalist project, it makes audible what Jotirao Phule had already called the ‘fabrication’ of caste (Deshpande, 2002). And yet, developing Phule’s mode of refutation into an altogether new dimension of shudra and ati-shudra critique and giving shape to what would become the age of the dalit political voice, it pointedly diverges from Phule’s rhetorical strategy and avoids ‘treat[ing] the whole literature as a collection of fables and fictions to be thrown on the dung heap not worthy of serious study’ (Rodrigues, 2002: 394). Reading less for content than for force, he recaptures the historical struggles generative of domination, and identifies the logomachic strokes of Brahminism: in the anti-Buddhist ‘counter-revolution’ propounded in the *Gita* (Rodrigues,

2002: 193-205) for example, or in the insults and threats in the letters that he was receiving from ‘the mad dogs of orthodoxy’ (391). In this he redirects the antiquitising perspective to bring to view a historical process of social ‘*degradation*’ (Rodrigues, 2002: 393) that resulted from political defeat. The titles of his published studies are explicit: it is a matter of retrieving the formative history of *Who Were the Shudras? How They Came to be the Fourth Varna in Indo-Aryan Society* (1946), the history of *The Untouchables: Who They Were and Why They Became Untouchable?* (1948), and even the contemporary history of caste in the making, in *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables* (1945).

In his luminous study *Dr Ambedkar and Untouchability*, Christophe Jaffrelot proposes to read as an ‘ethnicisation of caste’<sup>3</sup> the critical revolution which Ambedkar effects in the analysis of Indian society (Jaffrelot, 2005). It is certainly true that his readings reconstruct the shudras, for example, as a ‘population’ of the Indo-Aryan past: ‘as a distinct, separate, identifiable community’ (Rodrigues, 2002: 386), of identifiable kshatriya status in an original three-fold division of Aryan society, engaged in a persistent war opposing king and brahmins, and ultimately broken by the brahmins’ victory<sup>4</sup>. In this reconstructed history, the brahmins’ refusal of ritual service generated the creation of the fourth varna, excluded from twice-born status, and gradually the significance of political defeat was transmuted into social degradation, while the community itself was diluted and ‘absorbed’: ‘The word Shudra lost its original meaning of being the name of a particular community and became a general name for a low-class people without civilization, without culture, without respect and without position’ (Rodrigues, 2002: 397). Out of the ideology of the people imprinted in the casteist order, and consecrated by the organic myth of *Purusha Sukta* (Rodrigues, 2002: 390), Ambedkar’s reversed archeology indeed carves out a space for an *ethnos*: a history of peoples and of conflict, which contradicts the temporality of Sanatanism (Rodrigues, 2002: 170) and karma. Jaffrelot describes the strategies of ‘militant autochtony’ which can be—have indeed been—formed from the notion of an original anthropological identity, and the empowerment that results from this ‘inventing of a golden age’ (Jaffrelot, 2005: 38) for the lower castes.

The political myth for the untouchables which Ambedkar builds from his remobilising of history constitutes a less ambiguous attempt to bring out the generative acts of exclusion—in this case the persecution suffered for the communities’ Buddhist secession from

the Hindu order—, both in terms of historical method and political vision. Ambedkar here does more than claim anthropological dignity and historical pride. Opening a past ‘when Untouchables were not Untouchable but were only Broken Men’ (Rodrigues, 2002: 400), he offers a double hypothesis: the notion of a Buddhist origin of untouchables, and an interpretation of untouchability as brahminical construction of the Buddhist meat diet into a taboo, at the time of the ‘counter-revolution’<sup>5</sup> unleashed at the ending of the Buddhist polity, when this group ‘did not care to return to Brahminism when it became triumphant over Buddhism as easily as others did’ (Rodrigues, 2002: 402). Reintroducing the historical knowledge of a *reciprocity* of impurity between brahmins and untouchables, and of untouchable communities’ active refusal of brahmin ritual ministry, Ambedkar anticipates the ‘great surprise’ (Rodrigues, 2002: 399) which is as—or more—likely as the hypothesis concerning the shudras ‘bound to act as atomic bombs on the dogmas of the Arya Samajists’ (Rodrigues, 2002: 390).

This reactivating of history has had a remarkable power of political fabulation in the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, reworking the ethnic argument already developed by Phule and Iyotee Thassar in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Ambedkar’s injection of vast and multidimensional scholarship, both encyclopaedically historical and historically cutting-edge, into this broad project is a key part of his contribution. But the characteristic break—and what I understand as a major conceptual-political *essay*, or *poem*, of the people—consists in reshaping the already circulating concept of ‘Broken Men’, or ‘dalit’ in the original Marathi<sup>6</sup>, into the pioneering political concept which the last forty years of Indian history have materialised and vindicated. In Ambedkar’s enunciation, the phrase ‘Broken Men’ is made to operate as political identification: it is taken from the already strategic discursive terrain of *ethnos* to the plane of the *demos*, and calls into emergence the untouchable people as political subject. In so doing it also identifies the historical and present actors of the ‘breaking’ up of a community, and the ideological speech acts archived in the Hindu *Shastras* and *Veda Vyas Smriti*, as the performatives of degradation. The remarkable political invention encapsulated in Ambedkar’s concept constructs social humiliation (the experience of the broken *man*, as effect of oppression) into a collective becoming, and a political history, of a dislocated *people*<sup>7</sup>. It displaces the affective, inter-individual plane—as well as Mahar particularism in this instance—to shape an interpellation addressed to, hence constitutive of, a political subject which is potentially trans-

communitarian and trans-regional. Where ‘dalit’ can come to signify what it does in the 1973 Dalit Panthers’ manifesto.<sup>8</sup> A similar insight into the fragmented people will be developed in Partha Chatterjee’s *The Nation and its Fragments* (Chatterjee, 1993), although this key Subalternist study has been criticised for proposing no specific treatment of Dalit exclusion. But certainly, Ambedkar’s ‘Broken People’ and Gramsci’s thought on the fragment—theorising the subaltern as resulting from the dislocation of previously established communities, surviving within a hegemonic order as dis-organic fragments of classes and peoples, ‘falsified and mutilated’ and deprived of historical initiative—are mutually illuminating concepts<sup>9</sup>. Both are attempts to rethink, beyond Marxist economism and beyond the liberal ‘political school’ (Rodrigues, 2002: 121), the interconnections of class with culture, and *ethnos* with *demos*.

This is also why a reference in Ambedkar’s thinking can help retain the critical edge in the Gramscian concept of the subaltern, against its partial erosion in Subaltern Studies work over the decades since their launch in 1982, when it has inclined towards a culturalist, possibly essentialising celebration. In recovering a political past for the shudra and untouchable peoples, Ambedkar’s historicisation generates a political future, for struggle and social change through democracy. Similarly, his apprehension of the caste system through the concept of ‘graded inequality’ (Rodrigues, 2002: 385) constitutes a political anatomy of domination, beyond the social analysis already articulated by anti-brahmin voices and the various religious and social reformist movements and active from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century on. ‘Graded inequality’ explains how the ‘division of labour’ is compounded in caste with ‘*a division of labourers*’ (Rodrigues, 2002: 263, italics in the original) in a relayed, hierarchic system of oppression which generates a deep ‘anti-social’ logic, making ‘public opinion impossible’ and constituting a structural invalidation of the principle of ‘Fraternity’. In this obstacle to the *demos*, and its mobile configurations of political solidarities or class alliances, Ambedkar also identifies the point of hegemonic articulation which needs to be broken for any possible political evolution towards democracy. The ‘annihilation of caste’ will be a demolishing, a fracturing ‘back’: a breaking of the solidarities which hold the brahmin order in place, even when it also means breaking the solidarity of the Independence movement, in the demand for separate electorates in 1932 to take one landmark example, or in the dissidence from the Quit India movement of 1942.

Ambedkar’s poetics of the people develops in the intense political



creativity with which, many times over in the four decades of his political leadership, he re-fashioned the possibilities of the *demos* as strategic conditions, hegemonic coalitions and critical opportunities shifted and realigned in the turbulent evolution of decolonisation. In each of these counter-calls to the iterative interpellation of caste, he imagined the *password* of a people in the making, as he diagnosed and activated the possible fissures in casteism's *order-words* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980). A comprehensive review of the organisational forms he successively gave to his work in calling into political being a possible democratic subject and political constituency would show the power of this sustained re-invention, consolidating successive common causes and discursive footholds, and aggregating constituencies across caste stratifications and across systems of social divisions: from the separate electorate demanded for 'Depressed Classes'/Untouchables at the Round Table Conference for colonial legislative reform of 1931, to the common condition of workers with the creation of the Independent Labour Party (1936), the solidarity of caste inferiority (with the Scheduled Caste Federation in 1942), and again with the mass conversion to Buddhism as project of social egalitarianism (1956).

This praxis of the *demos* was always tentative, necessarily a gamble within the prevalent equilibriums of power, more or less successful and always precarious; and certainly always vigorously contested by the various dominant groups whose 'order-words' it attempted to de-totalise and disjoint. The sequence of Ambedkar's career as statesman—as Minister of Law and Justice in the first national government and chief enunciator of constitutional law for the Constitution of independent India—ended his hopes of inscribing the *demos* in the political terms of the innovating Indian *polis*, as his draft for a Hindu Code Bill was blocked in the Legislative Assembly and he made the decision to resign. After this failure in 1951, the new 'password' to break through the 'order-words' of caste that Ambedkar experimented with bifurcated away from the political idiom, to form a new collective assemblage across historical lines and across discursive spheres, trans-connecting with a long and multiform tradition in India of social movement and dissent in religious expression. This retreat from the constituted plane of politics is no retreat from the political work of giving shape to the constituting *demos*: it is still actively inventing modes of disaggregating the casteist hold in national politics.

In reorienting his movement towards neo-Buddhist conversion, Ambedkar was placing the enunciation of the untouchable *demos* in

confluence with the vast historical stream of an alternative discursive and literary history which ranges from Buddhism to bhakti. The speech-act of Ambedkarite conversion picks up historical echoes with hagiographic tradition and devotional forms; from the radical bhakti poet-Sants of medieval vernaculars; from the Buddhist disputations (including their language choice of popular Pali over brahmanical Sanskrit). It resonates with the historical figure of the gurus and bodhisattvas who founded sect congregations, creating communities that cut locally egalitarian, emancipatory perspectives through the dominant ideologies. The figure of Kabir, and his following in the Kabir Panth, opening a zone of passage in the cultural order at the jointly mobile point of poetry and conversion between Hindu Brahmanism and Islam in the Mughal 15<sup>th</sup> century, is an emblematic guru figure in all of Ambedkar's political thinking<sup>10</sup>. The 1956 conversion reconnects with a radical history which it helps in turn to reinterpret from a political angle, beyond religion and beyond poetry, in its full spectrum from local popular heterodoxies to civilizational revolution, for which the Buddhisisation of the State in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century constitutes the historical model. It is important to note Ambedkar's denunciation of the social quietism generated by bhakti culture in the lower castes. His criticism of pilgrimage practices, his acid remarks on the Chokhamela cult's 'very unhealthy effect on the Depressed Classes' (Jaffrelot, 2005: 49), signal the exact point in his reactivation of the conflicting and protesting histories in the canons of Indian discourse: the appeal to traditions of discourses from below is made not in the name of the *popular*, which can always potentially be re-absorbed into the national project as folkloric Little Traditions; not in the name of *poetry* either, whose critical energy can be dispersed in aesthetics; but as radical and dissenting: a history of political resistance and revolutionary pressure, which can be reconstituted as critical capital for the political creations to come.

Ambedkar's poetics, 'treating all literature as vulgar', brings together an original assemblage of three issues: literature, people and, crucially, the critical activation of historicity. It is the specificity of this proposition which distinguishes his contribution from earlier historicist attempts, where history was indeed already reactivated to generate a usable past for 'the shudratishudras'—Phule's designation for the groups identified by caste oppression but now engaged in a process of mobilising, including under his own leadership, and building social pressure to claim popular agency and social inclusion (Deshpande, 2002: 191). The 'adi' [original natives] theme which operated as rallying term for the enunciation of an uprising social

identity in a number of social movements starting from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century—from Iyotee Thassar’s Adi-Dravida interpellation in 1892 (Bergunder, 2004) to its political amplification by Periyar in the Tamil Nadu of the 1920s and 1930s, or in the Punjabi Chamars’ defiant claim to Adi-Dharmi status in the early 1920s—had been a militant use of pre-Aryan history. It founded new militant untouchable identities on the historical reimagining of outcaste and lower caste communities as dignified by an antiquity superior to that of the Aryas; as primordial, indigenous claimants of the land. This strong, and historically effective political re-articulation of the structural oppression of caste must be read as a major political invention, applying anti-traditionalism to ‘the fraudulent rigmarole of the caste system’ (Phule, in Deshpande, 2002: 45). The vision of Phule’s Satyashodhak Samaj (Society of seekers of truth, founded in 1873) directs the social demand towards a restoration of historic truth, and his *Gulamgiri* ([Slavery], 1873) opens out an ample rhetorical stage on which he conducts a relentless debunking of the ‘deep cunning’ of the ‘Bhats’ who, characteristically, ‘wrote books’ to enshrine their ‘cruel and inhuman Laws’: ‘Their main object in fabricating these falsehoods was to dupe the minds of the ignorant and to rivet on them the chains of perpetual bondage and slavery which their selfishness and cunning had forged.’ (Deshpande, 2002: 30) The rationalist demystification of the ‘mass of specious fiction’, working through the illogical and the contradictory in the speech-acts of caste, works on a truth/falsehood binary focused on a polemic correction of the past.

Ambedkar’s first scholarly statement on *Castes in India* (1916), bears a subtitle which is an index of how much he inherits from Phule’s historicist protest: it is indeed in the study of the ‘Mechanism, Genesis and Development’ of caste hierarchies that their oppression will be exposed. But Ambedkar’s political imagination breaks further ground in the strategies of ‘apply[ing] the dynamite’ to the ‘finality and fixity’, the ‘cramp[ing]’ and ‘cripp[ing]’, of social immobility. Ambedkar presses historicity to a more radical capacity, by vigorously reframing origin, but also locating the political resource of historicity in the mobility, the creativity, of the *demos*: a constantly originating of the people, constantly ‘missing’ (Deleuze, 1985) from *instituted* forms—social order, ethnic identities, or majoritarian polities—because continuously *instituting* in the negotiation of irrupting, de-totalising minorities. His conception of the *demos* as *historicity* of the people reframes caste, beyond its redefinition as race or ethnicity, as political history: a history of wars, and of ‘Revolution

and Counter-Revolution'. It reorients the fight for annihilating caste as the work of inventing political spaces for the *demos* in the past-heavy present, including making use of all possible eddies in the precipitation of history approaching Independence to 'stamp the dalit imprint on time', in Kalekuri Prasad's words<sup>11</sup> (Satyanarayana & Tharu, 2013: 621). Indeed this 'process by which congealed power is made to flow, and flow all the way down to the lowest levels, remains to be discovered', Prasad continues in a 1998 essay: however powerful the Ambedkarite proposition for the dalit democratic force, its development in a number of post-Ambedkar movements has passed through destructive crises of leadership and new internal congealings of power. It has always been a matter of the continuous reinvention of the *demos* in the evolving situation of the enunciation of power: originating a people in the immediate process of history, as 'sharp, fresh and alive' as the dalit poetry to which Prasad pays tribute (Satyanarayana & Tharu, 2013: 617).

It is interesting that Ambedkar refers to Bhavabhuti for a poetics of democratic becoming, declaring trust in the 'future generation' of Hindus who will, if the present generation will not, 'take notice of what I have to say', he writes: 'For I take consolation in the words of the poet Bhavabhuti who said, 'Time is infinite and earth is vast, some day there will be born a man who will appreciate what I have said'' (Rodrigues, 2002: 392). Poetry is evoked here as operation of futurity, opening a trans-enunciative process for a people in the making across the generations, and explicitly not as aesthetic concern. Ambedkar's dalit critique is scrupulously a 'historian's' treatment of all literature as vulgar, unapologetically carried out with no pretention of style, as he remarks regularly<sup>12</sup>. The concern here is to essay a *demos*, and transform the terms for the enunciation of the people in the idioms and the geographies of social imagination. A poetics of the vulgar, as belonging to the people, is a de-poeticisation, or de-literarisation, practiced in his own writing as well as effected in the re-politicised reading of Kabir's or Ramanuja's bhakti poetry.

I will not suggest that the radical democracy which Ambedkar projects has the quality of granular historicity which the anarchist conceptualisation of Deleuze and Guattari explores. His theorising of minority, and his involvement of literature 'as belonging to the people'—as space for the de-totalisation of political order by the people in the making—differs from the notions of literature as 'the affair of the people', of 'minor literature', and of literature as 'minoritising' force (Deleuze & Guattari, 1975). It is important to sense the distinctness of his praxis of history and the strategic

cutting-edge, in his situation of enunciation in the colonial and caste-structured Indian hegemony of the interwar years, of his statist, constitutionalist option, based on the liberal principle of the rule of law. Critical historicisations are themselves historical forms of the work of emancipation, determined by their conditions of enunciation in the diversity of hegemonic conjunctures. It is in fact in the comparative study of their historical singularities that the critical modes for the here and now can be imagined and forged. Ambedkar's choices in his strategic moment are made sufficiently clear in his contributions to the legislative debate on the shaping of the Union: *States and Minorities* (1947), and *Pakistan or the Partition of India* (1946). His radical *demos* is not based either on the 'sly civility' that Homi Bhabha has dissected in the subaltern social history of the Raj (Bhabha, 2004: 132). The irruption of caste in the political sphere of civility translates into precisely the explicit modernism which has made him suspicious for Gandhian nationalism, and into the militant deployment of the cause of progress (and education particularly). A long development in *Annihilation of Caste* is organised in the successive examination of potential or actual modes of reform (religious reform, social reform, revolution, in various combinations...), to settle in conclusion on the choice of the temporality of democracy, as inspired by Dewey (and recognised by even such a counter-revolutionary as Burke, quoted for stating that 'A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation'): democracy lies in 'the present act of living and growing', in opposition to the anti-historical, sanatan look 'upon the present as empty and upon the future as remote' (Rodrigues, 2002: 304). As much as '[a]n individual can live only in the present' (quoting Dewey here), an 'ideal society' for Ambedkar 'should be mobile, should be full of channels for conveying a change taking place in one part to other parts.' 'In an ideal society,' he continues, 'there should be many interests consciously communicated and shared. There should be varied and free points of contact with other modes of association. In other words there must be social endosmosis. This is fraternity, which is only another name for democracy. Democracy is not merely a form of government. It is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience' (Rodrigues, 2002: 276). And fundamentally, 'the idea of law is associated with the idea of change.' Such a view of democracy as social movement can have revolutionary consequences: 'I have decided to change', Ambedkar declares as he bids farewell to the 1936 Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal for social reforms, where he had been

invited to speak but where the thrust of his address, which he would publish as *Annihilation of Caste*, alarmed the audience. 'I am gone out of your fold' (Rodrigues, 2002: 304), he repeats, after his earlier statement that he 'would not die a Hindu', and after the resolution adopted at the Yeola conference of 1935 that the untouchables should leave the fold of Hinduism.

### Ambedkar-talk

To explore further the constitutive identity between the *demos* so conceived as movement of historicity in the people and the creativity of enunciation which mobilises communities in and through language, I want to follow Ambedkar's praxis of history in his posterity in contemporary Ambedkarism. The futurity which Ambedkar opened for the dalit subject has been spectacularly 'imprinted' on the *de facto* course of Indian history. However unevenly successful his projections of untouchable politics were in the decades of his leadership, and however marginalised his own voice has been in his lifetime and beyond, it is as inventor of the untouchable voice that he has marked and reshaped Indian history. 'Ambedkar-talk' (Bama, 2005: 103) has developed into a trans-enunciative space of political subjectivation where dalit empowerment has taken and is taking place, relaying the movement of emancipation across generations, locations, and languages: 'You gave us the tongue', Namdeo Dhasal was writing in the 1970s (Zelliot, 1992: 313). It is Ambedkar's role as 'logothete', or '*créateur de langue*' (Barthes, 1971) for the Indian *demos* and 'vulgariser' of literature as question of the people, as his discourse is continued in dalit enunciation now, which will help delineate further the poetics of the people necessary for the reinvention of politics that globalisation requires of contemporary peoples, ever more critically.

The canonisations of Ambedkar, 'the Doctor and the Saint'<sup>13</sup>, do belong to a socio-political expression of popular politics which has an identified history in India, but the poetic strand of this history also finds a decisive new instantiation in dalit expression. From the neo-Buddhist turn of Ambedkarism in 1956, dalit literature has been in close and constant association with dalit activism, starting with the immediate formation of an organised programme of Dalit Sahitya<sup>14</sup>. And the expression of devoted homage to Ambedkar as 'father of Dalit literature' (Dangle, 2009: xxii) has been so characteristic that it has formed into a subgenre or identificatory trope in dalit literature, across poetry, autobiography, short-story and novel forms, and across languages. Anna Bhau Sathe's poem 'Take a Hammer to Change

the World' ('so saying went Bhimrao! [...] To break the chains of class and caste/ Hold to the name of Bhim!', Dangle, 2009: 5), Baby Kamble's eulogy in her 1986 autobiography *The Prison We Broke*<sup>15</sup>, or the popular *ovis* entreating 'Mothers and women, stop singing the songs of the old times/ Compose ballads on *Bhim*' (Poitevin, 2009: 242), may give a sufficient sense of the common expression of inheritance and militant re-enunciation across genres, generations and locations. How then is it that this close interlinking of politics and poetics has been so persistently and so bitterly debated, in successive generations of struggles and movements? How can we understand the literary praxis of dalit activists, in the variety of local and historical situations? 'If you were to live the life we live/ (then out of you would poems arise),' Arjun Kamble writes in 1973 (Zelliot, 1992: 286). What does this characteristic yoking illuminate of the discursive historicity of the *demos* and, symmetrically, of the political processes in the poetic?

Looking at the ways the poetics-politics nexus is constructed, contested and problematised in a number of interventions in recent dalit debates, it soon becomes evident how much depends on *which* literature or which conception of literature is discussed; ultimately, on *which* imagination of the people it makes possible. As it disarticulates 'literature', the practice of dalit discourse re-historicises the category of literature in its identifiable, localised cultural sequences, and doing so it re-politicises the poetic, as making-'vulgar': as people in emergence, re-mobilised from the peoples 'congealed' in the dominant poetics. It is possible to conceive of the infinitely diverse cultural practices of enunciation in categories that are not those of 'aesthetics', as articulated in 18<sup>th</sup> century Kantian terms for the purposes of finding a shared experiential space for the otherwise autonomous subject of pure reason. It is equally possible to account for the poetic outside the mimetic opposition of representational form and content or style and experiential emotion—or again outside the European Romantic notion of the autonomy of art, tied up with the strategies of social distinction which it makes possible and welded as it is historically with the political horizon of the nation-state, along with its colonial undertow. It is, also, possible to think of it outside of the Sanskriti values that generate untouchability. The dalit critique of 'literature', 'aesthetics', 'poetics', whether conducted in English or Bhasha, will still be a poetics, precisely if one is ready to allow 'poetics' to name the collective creativity of a people, in and through a transformative politics of literary value. There is a concern shared by dalit critics over the capture of dalit productions by the mainstream literary scene and academic discourse. Against

this literarisation of the dalit voice, a poetics of society can be developed, able to envisage the radical historicity of ‘the people’, in enunciations that are not ‘literature’ but the quality of the people in the movement of political invention. In his ‘Suggestions to Dalit Writers’, Kalekuri Prasad calls for authors who will ‘function like the permanent opposition to seats of authority’ and be ‘the dissenter who offers constructive criticism of the dalit movements’s political leadership’ (Prasad, 2013: 621). For a poetics of democracy, ‘self-respect’, the political trope developed by Periyar, must also be a ‘self-criticism’ consistent enough to continually regenerate leadership: ‘encourage everyone who can hold a pen’; and ‘prepare to be led by’ that everyone.

The dalit poetics of vulgarity and obscenity, which has so shocked and aimed to shock the Indian public, is a constitutive feature that has fuelled several decades of literary and social clashes. In the first generations, Daya Pawar poetically imagined himself, ‘Gathering all strength’ against the hands that ‘raised the whip’ and dismembering the body of ‘the cultured world’, wearing its pointed fingers like the legendary Angulimal ‘in the garland around [his] neck’ (Zelliot, 1992: 294-296). In ‘Sanskriti’, he would also picture the indecorous dalit voicing of pain:

Generation after generation  
has arranged the plastic pastime  
of that Great Divine Culture.  
Now then they  
stuff balls of cotton in their ears.  
In huts after huts, whimpering,  
the weeping of a broken heart,  
*disturbs* their peaceful life. (Zelliot, 1992: 282, italics in the original)

Keshav Meshram was also writing at the time:

One Day I Cursed That Mother-Fucker God:  
He just laughed shamelessly.  
My neighbour—a born-to-the-pen Brahman—was shocked.  
He looked at me with his castor-oil face and said,  
‘How can you say such things to the  
Source of the Indescribable,  
Quality-less, Formless Juggernaut?  
Shame on you for trying to catch his dharma-hood  
In a noose of words’.  
I cursed another good hot curse.  
The university buildings shuddered and sank waist-deep.  
All at once, scholars began doing research  
Into what makes people angry. (Zelliot, 1992: 300)



But the poetic overturn of *samskritika adhipatyam* [cultural hegemony] (Prasad, 2013: 611) is larger here than the shock value in a simple reversal of diction in anti-diction. Beyond the introduction in literary thematics of the brutality of slum life and the violence of degradation, beyond even the militant inscription of the uncouth, the rustic, and the obscene made taboo in brahmin poetics, it is not a representation of vulgarity which is at stake but an effectuation of the vulgar—'as belonging to the people'; as the transformative generation of the dalit political subject. 'My everything amber/sky alcohols in the glass', writes Namdeo Dhasal in 1975 (Zelliot, 1992: 307): the poetic process performed here doesn't only give offense to the politics of purification, but projects an 'alcoholing' of values as poetic-political programme. The poetic act here is a call, in the poem's own terms, to 'family-plan your vulgarity': which implies also the concerted call to vulgarise/democratise, pointedly against the State's demographic policy in the years of the Emergency. The poetic performative is a drama of the people, molding a futurity: 'From what generation to what generation/ is this journey?' asks Arun Kamble in 'Primal Bond' (Zelliot, 1992: 304). 'Turn your dust smeared face this way/ and salvage these lives,' he continues, calling to the Ahilya-like statue-girl to transfigure, in a renewed 'connection' with the 'primal bond of the universe'. The process of the poem concludes when the 'phenomenon of procreation' has circled back to its point of generation in the present: the primal bond 'is forming in you.'

Dalit writing is teeming with such processes which, in myriads of poetic ways, perform the unceasing invention of emancipation. The semantic reversals, especially those that turn 'death' and 'life' into one another, or 'burning' from evocation of dalit atrocities into the qualification of the rage and power of struggle and back again to caste terror, are omnipresent. The politics of naming is a structural feature of the socio-symbolic degradation of untouchables through the enunciation of slurs, and its reversal typically deployed in dalit pride or in dalit strategies of social upward mobility. Phule's etymological efforts are a recognisable precursor to these vigorous symmetries of 'corrupting' caste-inscribed names (Deshpande, 2002: 57-64). Naming, identifying, as subject of enunciation, is a protest in itself. In dalit poetry the work on pronouns—circulating identities across I, you, we, they, it—takes this exploration of the enunciation of subject and collectivity further again, to striking and powerful re-imaginings of the dalit people. Recounting the peak moment of the dalit literary movement in Andhra in 1993-1994, Prasad singles out the poetic and political power of such compilations of the

Nalgonda poets as *Bahuvachanam* [The Plural/Plurality] and *Meme* ['It's Us'] (Satyanarayana & Tharu, 2013: 616-617): poetic activations of a political 'us'. His own poem 'For a Fistful of Self-respect' (602-603) violently disowns the strategies of purification, and exhibits the forging of 'a beautiful future' in the 'raging flame' of dalit atrocities turned, by the 'upside-down' power of poetic 'pronoun-ing', into 'the people':

Chundururu [locality of the dalit massacre of 1991] is not a noun any longer; it's a pronoun.  
 Each heart is now a Chundururu, a fiery tumour.  
 I'm the wound of the people, a communion of wounds. [...]  
 My very existence in this nation, drunk on caste and wealth,  
 is a protest.  
 I am someone who dies, time and again, to remain alive.  
 Don't call me a victim.  
 I'm a martyr, I'm a martyr, I'm immortal. [...]  
 I am the upside-down sunrise. [...]  
 I'm the one forging slogans in the fire of my heart. [...]  
 I will glow as a beautiful future in the pages of history.  
 I will be a raging flame  
 That glows in this very country, again and again. (Satyanarayana & Tharu, 2013:602-603)

Writing as protesting is 'again and again', in dalit poetry of successive generations, the staging of identifications in a process of empowerment reminiscent of Pawar's projection of a poetic 'I' as the bloodthirsty robber who was converted by the Buddha:

Angulimal.  
 I am Angulimal...  
 I am Angulimal... (Zelliot, 1992: 296)

Again in 'I Have Become the Tide', by J.V. Pawar, an identification is forged out of a poetic reversal of identity, which is also an allegoric trans-figuration of the individual experience of social violence into a movement of the people—a tide, rising with the power of the multitude:

As the sand soaks up the water at the shore,  
 so my great sorrow.  
 How long will it be like the sand?  
 How long will it cry out because of it's [*sic*] obstinate wish to exist?  
 As a matter of fact, it should have been in tide like the sea. [...]  
 The wind that blows every day  
 that day yelled in my ear

'women stripped'  
 'boycott in the village'  
 'man killed'

As it spoke, it told me a mantra: 'Make another Mahad'<sup>16</sup>  
 My hands now move toward the weapon on the wall.  
 I am now the sea, I soar, I surge. [...]  
 The winds, storms, sky, earth  
 Now are all mine.  
 In every inch of the rising struggle  
 I stand erect. (Zelliot, 1992: 306-307)

Prasad opens his poem 'The Road' with a similar allegorical process of conversion of identity: 'Like me, the road too is dalit./ Feeling the footprint in the heart,/ is winds into the past' (Satyanarayana & Tharu, 2013: 603). As the text proceeds, the first assimilation of road and 'dalit' in the common image of being trodden underfoot ('Under/ the macabre dance of rough feet'), which weaves in also the association of the road as traditionally forbidden space for untouchables, morphs into a different identification, from protest march to protest poem and back again to the space of violence perpetrated on dalits, as the reader is called upon and called onto the road. The road opens out as space of protest, witness, and direction, towards the possibilities of solidarity—a powerful poetic instantiation of the 'password':

Tell me,  
 have you ever heard the song  
 of the road lined with crucifixes?  
 Have you ever seen an assembly of  
 entangled roads marching in procession?  
 Have you ever joined in the protest song  
 when the corpse of a road, lynched,  
 fell right across, bringing  
 all traffic to halt?  
 Walk this road.  
 Once.  
 To my village. (Satyanarayana & Tharu, 2013: 603-604)

### Movement and Literature

When B.M. Puttaiah asks 'Does Dalit Literature Need Poetics?' (Puttaiah, 2013) therefore, what is at stake is a question of poetics—how one conceives of the politics of poetics, and of the formation of new political subjects—which has no formalist superficiality or middle-class high culture complacency. The context of Puttaiah's essay is

his critical disaffiliation with the basis for discussion while attending a conference on ‘Kannada Literary Poetics’ (n.d.). Reacting to the co-optation of ‘Dalit [and Women’s] Literature’ within the frame of ‘Kannada literature’ in this setting, he identifies a dissenting and ‘urgent academic requirement’: ‘if there’s a ‘Dalit Literary Poetics’, it will not be a natural part of the category ‘*Indian Poetics*’; it can never be that. It is more accurately a dissension in ‘Kannada Literary Poetics’.’ His argument is that the reception of dalit literature, when it has not been a simple rejection in forms ranging from literary ‘disdain [to] violence and brickbats’<sup>17</sup>, has in fact given a spectacle of the assumptions characteristic of mainstream literary criticism and of what I would call, after Kuhn, the ‘normal science’ of literary studies. For those who have sung its praises—‘Aha! Oho!’, Puttaiah ironises—in appreciation of ‘themes’ and ‘ideas of craftsmanship’, it has been a classic matter of aestheticising commiseration (‘For the rulers, the tears of the poor are after all, just rose water’) and the ‘normal science’ of critical protocols, ‘treat[ing] the words as ‘a beautiful peacock that no hands can seize’<sup>18</sup>: police raids might indeed not be able to detach the painting on the walls of the dalit hut, but the romanticised view of literary creativity, held by ‘the class that now delights in literature’, and folklorism, will do nothing to question ‘the traditional sense that the word ‘literature’ carries’. It is not only that, as ‘expression of the collective pain of society’, ‘dalit literature carries with it the powerful, unbearable odour of burning chilli’, but that dalit irruption on the literary scene questions ‘existing notions of ‘criticism’ and ‘research’’: ‘What is called ‘dalit literature’ is not simply literature that has an ideology.’ ‘[C]lose reading’, ‘language and structure’, ‘the focus on canonical texts or accepted forms and definitions of literature is not adequate’ (Puttaiah, 2013: 351-354).

‘Poetics is a distant dream’, in these terms. Or at least it raises the issue of knowing ‘[t]o whom [...] the question of dalit poetics [is] addressed’. ‘Some traditional studies have made dalit literature their prey, others have made it a source [to affirm their theories’, Puttaiah continues, and a dalit canon has already formed, ‘a readymade list of dalit authors and works’, which even within dalit communities has come to have validity in ‘the eyes of dalit leaders, writers and politicians’. Literarised, dalit expression can become an attribute of the educated dalit middle-class: Puttaiah reluctantly gives the case of Devanoora himself as example (Puttaiah, 2013: 362). Here it forms indeed as ‘dalit literature’, characterised by its fetishising in language. Congealing in ‘letters of the alphabet, it splits dalits’

experience from their existences'. This evolution has led to the division of 'two ways of looking' at dalit groups and dalit expression, for Puttaiah: 'the bottom-up model and the top-down', reflected in the opposition of two views of dalit productions. One line of this opposition for Puttaiah distinguishes between reading and speech: silent reading is the 'method ideologically projected by the State, while speech stems from the body of people', when Dalit literature 'begs to be read aloud in a full-throated voice'. This determines another opposition, between 'the way non-dalits [as well as the educated dalits] and non-academic dalits respond to dalit literature': 'for Study, for Discussion'. Literature 'popularly defined as writings of famous dalit writers' can easily be included in syllabi, and 'studied under different rubrics, like proliferating brands in a market'. If the current flavour is dalit poetics, 'the irony is that whatever the name of the brand, the content of these studies remains the same', and as 'exclusionary'. In contrast, literature conceived as voice conceives of response as co-enunciation. It is not only that such literature 'resist[s] silent reading and require[s] to be read aloud', as it keeps the close connection with 'the body of people' and the rawness of social experience: the voicing is a 'dialectic', and speech 'aims at and anticipates a listener, and demands an immediate response' (Puttaiah, 2013: 362-363).

Puttaiah's position is not exactly K.V. Narayana's caution, which he quotes: 'Either become burning coal yourself, or stand outside and watch it' (Puttaiah, 2013: 351). In Puttaiah's outlook, a process of becoming is indeed involved but precisely through the dialectic of response, where the *demos* is generated, in trans-subjection, in opposition to the individualist modes of social mobility or the (Romantic) notion of self-expression. 'In reality, dalit literature is not meant for such [literarising] studies. It requires overwhelmed responses that pour out like the predictions of a fellow in a trance, like Kurimayya [in the story]' (364). In *this* literature, what is alive and 'burning' is the collective futurity, which passes from voice to voice, to flame 'bottom-up' for dalit movements and democratic pressure. Literary criticism might declare Siddalingaiah's famous protest song '*Ikkrala Vadirla*' to be 'not poetry at all', on the ground that "Bash them! Kick them!" is not legitimate in poetic diction' and constitutes a 'violat[ion] of the sanctity of Goddess Saraswati'. But the test is elsewhere: 'Despite this, that same poem inspired hundreds to write poetry'. The 'raving reviewers have expelled them from frames of poetry or literature and rendered them untouchable' in the critical order, but the democratic inspiration has multiplied.

‘Is it possible to have a poetics for dalit literature?’ Puttaiah’s conclusion asks (Puttaiah, 2013: 367): only if ‘poetics’ is critiqued as strictly as Puttaiah has critiqued ‘literature’. The question is to understand what it takes for poetics to attain the ‘serious theoretical interest or real theoretical maturity in studies’ of dalit poems and to ‘work towards revealing the actual vested social interests of those accolades’ that turn the enunciation of the *demos* into ‘literature’. One direction is signalled in Puttaiah’s critique: extending the category of literature maximally, to include the demotic forms of social mobilisation, from ‘pamphlets, wall graffiti, banners, magazine articles’, slogans and protest-songs sung in chorus to the sound of the dappu, to plays, research and study camps, ‘heartfelt talk between dalit activists’, and even stretching to ‘the words that were cooked up in the hot belly of the oppressor as reaction to the dalit talk’—the outer reach of trans-enunciation. ‘Political demands, slogans and songs too constitute literature and there is vision even in a statement’. The vulgarising of literature here is not exactly contained in the undoing of the exclusionary process of cultural distinction and its fearful symmetries; not a static of popular against cultured forms, but vectors of socialisation precisely located in the historicity of a people in the making.

B. Krishnappa, a founding member and president of the Dalit Sangharsha Samiti in Karnataka which Puttaiah would also work with up to 1990, had a blunter view of the politics of the people in dalit poetics: ‘The purpose of dalit literature is to prepare people for revolution’ (Krishnappa, 2013: 109). Criticising both the confusion of progressive ‘literary texts about dalits’ with dalit literature and the assumption that ‘if a writer is a dalit by birth [...] his work [is] necessarily dalit literature, his essay ‘Dalit Literature’ made clear: ‘Dalit literature has a different stand on creativity and literary excellence. It is inappropriate to look for refinement in a movement’s revolutionary literature’. ‘[O]ld aesthetic pleasures or artistic creativity or, indeed, abstruse similes and metaphors’ are the luxury of ‘the satiated and the flabby’, and their value as literature ‘can only be regarded as boosa [cattle feed]’. The interest of his analysis lies, again, in the poetics that Krishnappa does delineate for ‘a literature that is part of a revolution’: a quality of address, tied to a fresh sense of history. ‘As dalit literature is addressed more to the labourer, the farm hand toiling in the fields, the unfortunate living in hell [...] it has to be unadorned and fresh,’ he writes. And despite the logomachic dismissal of all ‘aesthetic luxury, *written to kill me*’ (Krishnappa, 2013: 110, my emphasis), it is interesting to note that

the wholesale opposition of ‘simply imaginative’ (and ‘irresponsible’) and ‘realistic’, if strategically necessary, does leave room also for a more penetrating distinction: between ‘the subjective mode’ with its ‘cynical quality’ and an envisioned alternative, however disappointed so far, of ‘commitment to’ the dalit ‘identity’. Even if he concludes: ‘To my knowledge, no Kannada writer has dwelt on the real problems of this country’.

### Social Science and Poetics

This invalidation of literature, reminiscent in the history of discourse about literature of the deep interdiction of poetry which Adorno identified ‘after Auschwitz’, poses again the exact question of the poetics of social ‘barbarism’, to use Adorno’s term: the question of how one thinks through the relation between the political ‘reality’ of violent hierocratic experience (and the task of revolution/annihilation), and the power of enunciation in this reality.

This articulation of enunciation and socialisation touches at the heart of the politics of knowledge which plays out in the division of disciplines. With characteristic incisiveness, Gopal Guru has explored one of its contemporary theatres in his 2002 article ‘How Egalitarian Are the Social Sciences in India?’ The text denounced a pathological casteist division of academic labour between on the one hand ‘empirical shudras’ (Guru, 2002: 5003)—restricted to their perimeter as informants and censored beyond that as ‘emotional, descriptive-empirical and polemic at best’—and ‘theoretical Brahmins’ or ‘the high priests of theory’ on the other, continuously taking over ‘newer epistemological territories that belong to the dalit/adivasi intellectual universe’. The publication stimulated a heated, long-drawn, and seminal polemic, generating in particular a long conversation with philosopher Sundar Sarukkai which was eventually published in 2013 under the title *The Cracked Mirror*. In the context of the web of high-stake interlinked issues raised in this vast and highly informed discussion, I restrict my entry point in the debate to the symptomatic function given to poetry in Guru’s original argument, as illustration in the diagnosis of an exclusionary hierarchy of ‘experience and theory’—in the author’s chosen terms.

This mention of poetry is an unusual presence in political or social science debates. It appears when, regretting the ‘soft options’ too many dalits are taking as they veer away from ‘tough courses like philosophy and theory’ and respond instead to ‘the attraction of temporal power’ and forms of ‘practical reason’ that will connect

to 'more glamorous and easy spheres of mobility' (careers in 'formal politics and networking with institutions that demand that intellectuals always be ready with data'), Guru identifies an individualistic trend which he also extends to poetry. 'Dalits try to compensate for theoretical deficiency by doing brilliant poetry,' he writes. This

has led to the creation of brilliant poetry in Maharashtra from this class. [...] But poetry cannot be a substitute for theory. Most poetry, including dalit poetry, is based on aesthetics and metaphors and this no doubt makes things interesting. It is true that dalits have developed a good sense of aesthetics but it by definition belongs to the particular, though it is based on rich experience and therefore has the potential to become the guiding standard for the universal. Besides, it also generates inwardness and tends to keep some things hidden from the public imagination. But poetry has no conceptual capacity to universalise the particular and particularise the universal. It does not have that dialectic power. By contrast, theory demands clarity of concept and principles and the open examination of one's action to see whether it is justified. Poetry helps the dalit in making connections through metaphor, but not through concepts. It is theory that is supposed to do that. [...] However, Gadamer would ask the question 'is it right to reserve the concept of truth for conceptual knowledge? Must we not also admit that the work of art possesses truth?' This is a serious question. (Guru, 2002: 5007)

The argument is based clearly on a preconception of poetry, 'supposed to' rely on form and limited by its individualism. It is 'interesting' to recognise in it the Kantian framework for the rationalism of the autonomous subject ('one's action'), indeed tied philosophically to the reduction of art to aesthetics. Guru's argument for theory, and for the 'social necessity for the dalits' of embracing theory and thereby 'restore to themselves the agency to reflect organically on their own experience', is crucial. In its call for the 'double commitment both to scholarship and also to the social cause', it is also in line with the early perspectives of Phule's 'Satyashodhak' educational activism, and with Ambedkar's explicit insistence on the highest education possible for the untouchables, against any notion of limiting it to vocational training. Guru's dissociation from the dalit argument against doing theory (that 'it makes a person intellectually arrogant, egoistic and socially alienated if not irrelevant') is explicit, as is his rejection of the 'ontological blindness' in the claim of dalits' 'lived experience' as 'privileged access to reality' which they can capture 'with a full view without any theoretical representation'. But the call to 'bring together



reason and emotion' and to articulate 'ownership' of experience with 'authorship' of theory—in Sakkurai's encapsulation of Guru's challenge to 'the practice of social science in India' (Sakkurai, 2007)—requires a considerable shift in the understanding of 'theory'. It cannot hold with an ahistorical understanding theory, as identified by Horkheimer for instance under the designation of 'traditional theory'. Horkheimer's 'critical theory' in contrast requires a hold on the historicity which defuses the categorical binaries of individual-collective, particular-universal, and subject-object—experiential reality and theoretical concept—, and picks up on the dialectic processes of subjectivation, socialisation, public-*ation*, and the trans-*enunciative* production of truth.

The discussion of poetry—that carried out in European languages at least—has generically been placed on this disciplinary faultline ever since the contemporaneous developments of 'literature' (and 'aesthetics') and the scientification of knowledge about Man. When Guru illustrates his argument on the limits of poetry for theoretical praxis by quoting as 'a particular ditty' P.I. Sonkamble's lines 'When we were tearing you were tearing us/ Now we tear you while you tear' (Guru, 2002: 5007), he is leaving ignored the cumulative, resonant discursive history of dalit poetry. The implication is that the play on polysemy is a local, individual, textual trick of no 'particular' perlocutionary consequence on the common cause. But the trope also connects eloquently with the poetics of semantic reversal so powerful in dalit literary and so tied in, across the decades of production, with the 'pronoun-ing' of collective subjects trans-enunciated as more than 'public imagination': the re-imagining of the people. Much of literature anywhere is indeed the simple reiterative *énoncé* of the stratified status quo in its particular cultural and social context of production, and the orthodox repetition of 'congealed' identities—and it is the case within 'dalit literature'. Prasad's critique is one lucid analysis of this. But there are also poems of the people, subjectively-socially transformative even when they offer no recognisably 'literary' form.

Guru allows for a moment of uncertainty when he brings in Gadamer to reflect on the relation of art to truth, which opens a possibility for the work of truth a little other than the traditional 'transcending emotions to rationality' (Guru, 2002: 5007). The horizon of his argument is delineated in conclusion, as he calls for a theory that will be practiced with the organic impeccability of a Gramscian theory of theory, in the public space, 'from the Red fort in Delhi': 'That would, by the way, resignify the fort by dispelling

the deceitful rhetoric of interested parties ritually on every 15<sup>th</sup> of August'. Resignifying national identity, with the 're-' here indicating the exact space for the work of egalitarianism, is indeed a process of semantic-political *transformation*, which contradicts the disciplinary separation of social realities and semiotic forms, or experience and concept, because it contradicts the equally 'traditional' account of their relation as one of *representation*: mirror, whether cracked or intact. The question of poetry, raised by Guru as one amongst the inorganic choices of dalit-bahujan scholars turning away from the task of theory, here also helps to locate a theoretical blockage in the conception of the *demos*, and helps to devise a way through the traditional theory of language as *mimesis*, which has for centuries generated variations on the anxious aporia of an unbreachable conceptual divide between language and world. Western philosophy has been the major beneficiary of this ancient move, establishing truth rather than social signification as the ultimate goal of knowledge, and its own tropes as the royal road there.<sup>19</sup> Like Gramsci's philological critique of Marxism, Ambedkarite poetics has practiced *and has theorised* enunciation as resignification: it has effected the conversion of 'tearing' hides, an allegory of untouchable hereditary occupation, not into the expression of individual pain but into 'tearing' ('ripp[ing] to shreds the caste system's obscurantism', writes Prasad) as political power of collective voice: in Guru's own words, 'dalits deploying knowledge to tear the TTB [Top of the Twice-Born] through social auditing and intellectual intervention at various levels'.

'It is no coincidence,' Kalekuri Prasad insists in his 1998 essay on 'The Dalit Movement and the Dalit Literary Movement', that every one of [the leaders of the struggles in Andhra] was a poet' (Prasad, 2013: 608). Tracing their predecessors in 1930s dalit journalism and amongst the leaders who were there to receive Ambedkar on his 1944 tour, he argues: 'ever since those early days, dalit leaders and writers have been indistinguishable from each other.' There has been 'movement-inspired poetry', but more specifically the generation of literature out of the historical episodes of atrocities tells us something about the organic link of politics and poetics involved here: focusing analysis on the transformative process of 'victim' into 'martyr', Prasad's poetics theorises the poetic through the concept of 'inspiration'. From the key event in 1968 when Kanchilacherla Kotesu was burnt alive, Prasad shows the generative collective posterity in poetry and in political empowerment—'the movement-generation sprint[ing] ahead': 'To this day, Kotesu is the subject of dalit poets' lines', Prasad writes. 'Kotesu, symbol of dalit

aspirations', was first enunciated as such in the dedication to him of the Digambara poets's third volume of poetry that same year; thirty years later, '[w]here Kotesu collapsed now stands an Ambedkar statue'. Dalit experience is theorised here as the flaming of 'social ferment', across everyone's literature: 'The incident inspired a great deal of literature. Every poet, writer and journalist who ever wielded a pen in support of the oppressed has written Kanchikacherla Kotesu's name. To this day, Kotesu inspires dalit poets and writers'. And even after the Dalit Mahasabha splintered and 'the synergy between writers and the movement had been lost', Prasad makes the point that the 'literary movement kept the dalit question alive at a time when the dalit movement itself was in retreat' (Prasad, 2013: 612-617).

When both receded altogether it was, in Prasad's analysis, through a common weakening of collective cohesion, and the parallel formation of 'disagreements between individuals' in 'political differences' and, in the dimension of poetics, the 'debilitating individualism' of authors who disconnected from 'oral forms' that thrive 'beyond the dalit movement's immediate sphere of influence', making way for the process of literarisation. 'Literary criticism was reduced to lavishing praise and passing prejudiced judgements', Prasad writes, and "'dalit' had become a static, abstract term, emptied of its usefulness and political charge' (Prasad, 2013: 617-618). With this clear negative of literature when it is the 'sharp, fresh and alive' projection of a political subject in becoming, Prasad redefines the location of poetic value and, as a consequence, the object of literary study: not so much the popular, 'from-below' or vulgar forms in a static hierarchy of cultural values as, more exactly, the forms 'forg[ed] in the fire' of the historicity of the people. Poetry alive is not the poetry of a caste—not in 'the marvellous literary expression of the dalit folk'; not even in the dalit 'reconstruction of their history and literary history' if it is to reiterate the 'focus on individuals' achievements'—, but of a movement. This also means the structural proximity of the roles of poet and leader: Prasad writes of the role of Katti Padma Rao's 'as the movement's legendary orator', who 'crafted public speaking into a fine art' and 'went from village to village, making speeches that touched the hearts of dalits'. The literary value here is in the collective quality of the speech circulating through individualities and inventing a people. It is inseparable from a political theory of leadership as collective emergence, and a diagnosis of the failures of dalit movements in the fragmentation of the collective by individualistic aspirations to power<sup>20</sup>.

K. Satyanarayana, co-editor with Susie Tharu of the landmark anthologies of 'New Dalit Writing from South India' (Satyanarayana & Tharu, 2011 and 2013), has also contributed an extremely illuminating take on the debate raised by Gopal Guru. Its subtlety comes, I will argue, from its perspective in a careful poetics of society, and the methodology of fine historicisation that this entails. In his 2013 essay responding to *The Cracked Mirror*, 'Experience and Dalit Theory', Sataynarayana quickly identifies the experience/theory opposition as 'inherited from the natural sciences' and the 'product of a particular intellectual history in which theory bifurcated from experience' (Satyanarayana, 2013: 398). The strain of wresting an organicity in a situation of epistemic divisions (experience *vs* theory, but equally social sciences *vs* humanities) and to produce emancipatory theory appears much less of an impossible task once experience is de-naturalised, and repositioned as fully as possible in the flux of the 'broader historical and social context'. Sataynarayana starts with a reminder of the pioneering role, in the 'Mandal moment' of the 1990s, of dalit theorists and critics who reopened the Ambedkarite argument on institutions of higher education and the politics of knowledge production. He in fact replaces Guru's own critique within this movement, which identified the intellectual domain as a key area of power, and faulted the country's social sciences for failing to engage with the reality of caste and with dalit politics.

As he explores the historicity which Guru's argument blocks by keeping the self-identical category of experience intact, Sataynarayana retrieves the historical sequence of the 1990s during which dalit movements made a strategic use of identity and the claim to authenticity, and powerfully challenged the national politics of representation by 'bringing caste identity and Dalit experience into the public discussion'. In particular he evokes the famous 1996 episode in which the dalit-bahujan critic Kancha Ilaiah made the 'shocking' suggestion that the (all upper caste) revolutionary writers, who had dominated the Telugu literary scene since the 1970s—strong in their claim to represent 'the people', in the congealed language of Marxist-Leninism—should take up scavenging while the dalits, with their quite concrete life experience as 'the people', should write literature. When in this context the dalit writers raised questions of authenticity, Satyanarayana suggests, 'the claim to identity and experience [was] not to discover authentic Dalit literature, but to construct a canon of Dalit literature. Experience as a political category offer[ed] a ground on which to

posit a new canon' (Satyanarayana, 2013: 401). His call on Sanal Mohan's historical study of dalit slaves in colonial India provides a telling illustration of the poignant poeticity of experience: showing the construction of 'suffering' in the public performances of slavery narratives, shared and collectively healed in a process of cathartic community building, Mohan's own analytic gesture makes possible the construction of this historical 'narrativising' (Mohan, 2006) of community as dalit literature—with considerable repercussions in a critique of the category of 'literature'.

This poetic-political invention which forms as 'experience' in the present of political struggle is that of a dalit *critique* and a dalit *movement*; the dynamic reinvention of dalitness rather than the politicisation of a pre-existing dalit identity or a positive reality of experience, however brutal. Forged in the historical transition between a political alliance with the Left and the rise of an autonomous dalit movement, 'experience' was produced in the theoretical praxis of mobilising and organising. The fragility of the dalit hold on power, and the failure to hegemonise decisively, has not only been a result of splits in solidarities and divisions of leadership, or of the continued logic of casteist 'graded inequality', in Ambedkar's terms, within the social pressure exercised by the lower castes and classes. It is also a necessary consequence of the critical nature of the irrupting *demos*, coming from no pre-formed identity, and never insuring a final stabilisation of political identity that would put a stop to the regrouping of domination or the strategic inventions of new critical peoples. It is the common historicity of resignifying which movement and literature (and even literary history) share: 'Significantly, Dalit literature was not discovered but constructed in the wake of Dalit struggles,' Satyanarayana points out. 'The canon of modern Telugu literature, which appeared natural and fully complete, began to seem as exclusive, limited, and biased. Dalits' claim to authentic experience to write about their life was possible only after the shaping of experience as a category in the collective Dalit mobilization and struggle' (Satyanarayana, 2013: 401).

As they draw elements together of context in the introduction to their first volume *No Alphabet in Sight*, from the genealogy of the land question to dalit pasts and contemporary movements, Satyanarayana and Tharu elucidate their position on the linkage of poetics and politics, necessarily re-problematised by the history of dalit voices. Their 'Notes for an Aesthetics', which ultimately resolve in the eponymous allegory-slogan 'No Alphabet in Sight', put forward a

strong claim for a proposed canon of ‘new dalit writing’, as they make a deliberate choice to include creative literature as well as ‘what we can broadly term ‘critique’’. It is interesting to note that their characterisation of the corpus they ‘construct’ coincides—as it must in a study in poetics<sup>21</sup>—with the overall thrust of the theoretical poetics which they come to formulate: both are ‘a deliberate effort to pull away from’ a poetics of realism (Satyanarayana & Tharu, 2011: 59). Insisting on the contrast not only with pre-1970s periods when ‘atrocity reporting, polemical statements and policy proposals, largely done by non-dalits, and addressed primarily to non-dalits, occupied the forefront of writing related to the untouchable/Scheduled Caste question’, but equally with ‘the clamorous staging of atrocity and the sociological idiom of caste that marks much pre-1990s writing about dalits’, they propose to identify a new age of dalit literature in a distinct poetics of critique, and creativity. As much as poetic texts, the essays, investigative reporting and histories included in the ‘dalit literature’ which the anthologies compose are read as innovations in the forms of social and political thinking, and valued specifically for the critical effect they have for ‘not follow[ing] the protocols of social science writing but tak[ing] their cue from literature’s more direct and promiscuous involvement with life’.

The authors are careful to avoid any ambiguity: these writings do not achieve literary status because of the ‘familiar valorization of literature as presenting a more concrete and sensitive picture than what non-literary writing is able to offer’. This indeed would be an *aesthetics* of writing. Nor is their singular status due to their particular access to ‘realities that elude academic writing such as the social sciences’. Their common dynamics, neither in ‘literary’ form nor in ‘social’ truth-content, is in their cumulative politics of address: forming ‘the idea of a dalit reader is a major artistic and political achievement. Even more significant is the new community that is being gathered through such an address’ (Satyanarayana & Tharu, 2011: 56). In redistributing the positions of enunciation, these dalit poems of the people ‘ope[n] up a deeper story—that of the rise of dalits as a modern community’. Their achievement in ‘unsettling the boundaries, frames, figures and ideologies’ constitutes, beyond the dalit imprint on time, a praxis of ‘reformulating democracy’ (65).

As such, the dalit critique inaugurated by Ambedkar has implications for an understanding of the *demos* that far exceed the context of the Indian democracy, the cultural specificity of the sub-continent’s history of caste, and even the current aggressiveness of Hindu nationalism. It constitutes a world-historical contribution to

the critique of democracy, much needed in the new uncertainties of the mutating nation-state form, whether expressed in the neoliberal disarticulations of the States' perimeters or the flaring up of nationalisms.

For literary study and its politics, it stands in illuminating contrast with a phenomenon like World Literature, which concentrates so much of contemporary scholarly debate on the fate of literature in the processes of globalisation. Leaving 'literature' mostly untouched as it explores contemporary and historical transnational effects, the World Literature question interrogates the new vicissitudes of the nation. Dalit poetics goes straight to the question of democracy as, even in the face of monumental hegemony, the historical plasticity of political forms.

### Notes

1. I must express my deep gratitude for the exceptional research conditions which I was offered as visiting professor at the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies in October 2015, and to the particular part in this that is due to its director Chetan Singh. My warmest thanks go to the scholars that I was fortunate to meet for their invaluable and generous feedback, and particularly to Tadd Fernée, Asha S. Jacob, Uma Maheshwari, Sukumar Muralidharan, B. Ravichandran, K. Satchidanandan, Esha Shah, Albeena Shakil, Chandrasheel Tambe, and P.G. Jung for their luminous suggestions.
2. Ambedkar's key text *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) has recently been given new editorial life with the publication in 2014 of an 'annotated and critical edition', with an introduction by Arundhati Roy entitled 'The Doctor and the Saint' (Ambedkar, 2015). The essay's new political audibility and topicality in the national conversation was clear enough to warrant the need for a second edition, issued in 2015.
3. See also the entire section entitled 'Analysing and Ethnicising Caste to Eradicate it More Effectively' (Jaffrelot, 2005: 31-51).
4. Jaffrelot argues: 'Obviously Ambedkar had in mind the Brahmin's refusal to recognise Shivaji as a Kshatriya. His theory, which is based on scant historical evidence, doubtless echoed this episode in Maharashtra's history, whereas in fact Shivaji, a Maratha-Kunbi, was a Shudra. Nevertheless, he had won power and so expected the Brahmins to confirm his new status by writing for him an adequate genealogy.' This process of 'Kshatriyaisation', 'a variant of Sanskritisation', 'did not allow the Shudras to emancipate themselves from the caste system and its hierarchical structure' (Jaffrelot, 2005: 39). The Shivaji political myth was already active in Phule's *Gulamgiri* (1873).
5. Ambedkar's *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India*, composed during the 1950s, was left uncompleted (Ambedkar, 1987: 360-371).
6. A belief commonly referred to in contemporary scholarship on dalit history and politics attributes the original Marathi enunciation of the term to Jotirao Phule, writing from the 1870s onwards.
7. 'In a tribal war it often happened that a tribe, instead of being completely

- annihilated, was defeated and routed. In many cases, a defeated tribe became broken into bits. As a consequence of this, there always existed in Primitive times a floating population consisting of groups of Broken tribesmen roaming in all directions' (Ambedkar, 1990: 275.)
8. Asking 'Who is a Dalit?' the Panthers list, beyond 'Members of Scheduled Castes and Tribes, neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women', 'all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion': 'the Dalits (oppressed) of the world' (Dalit Panther Manifesto, 2013: 61-62). The recognition of 'our two great leaders—Jotiba Phule and Babasaheb Ambedkar' is explicit and identificatory.
  9. It is useful here to remember that Ambedkar and Gramsci are exact contemporaries and respond, in their singular situations respectively, to a common historical situation of global imperial capitalism and of Marxist thinking.
  10. In an autobiographical sketch, Ambedkar evoked 'his three gurus: Buddha, Kabir and Phule' (Rodrigues, 2002: 19). One should bear in mind the fact that Ambedkar's father was a devotee of Kabir. The very divided and contested opinions which still now characterise the historical evaluation of Kabir's conversion to Islam and the value of his interreligious poetic theme maintain the shifting movement of an uncertainty which, I would argue, constitutes the very power of the corpus of Kabir poetry to act and be reactivated as strictly historicising effect, never to settle the mobility of conversion into a fixed position.
  11. Prasad, a dalit organiser, poet, and intellectual based in Andhra, wrote in Telugu. He died in 2013. The plurality of languages which characterises the national phenomenon of dalit literature carries important issues, concentrated in particular around the question of translation and the special status of English, as academic language in particular. With no competence in any bhasha language, I must rely on translations into English and am restricted to the cases where these exist. Also, for the purpose of the present study, I will keep these issues to a minimum, giving linguistic information in references only. This is not without a keen awareness that I am setting aside a crucial dimension of the politics of enunciation which is my object, and I intend to devote future work to it.
  12. 'I am sensible to the many faults in the presentation of the matter,' he writes in *Who Were the Shudras* for example. 'The book is loaded with quotations, too long and too many. The work is not a work of art and it is possible that readers will find it tedious to go through it. [...] But the book is written for the ignorant and the uninformed *Shudras*, who do not know how they came to be what they are. They do not care how artistically the theme is handled. All they desire is a full harvest of material—the bigger the better.' (Rodrigues, 2002: 395).
  13. Arundhati Roy's title for her introduction to the new edition of *Annihilation of Caste* (Ambedkar, 2015).
  14. 'The conversion of Dr Ambedkar along with innumerable followers [...] was an event not only of religious significance but also of social and cultural importance,' writes Arjun Dangle. 'The Dalits now found a way to a new cultural life. Arising out of this was the need to have a separate conference of Dalit writers. [...] The first conference of Dalit writers was the event organised in Bombay in 1958 by the Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha.' (Dangle, 2009: xxvii)



15. 'Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar [...] was our Baliraja who gave away his kingdom for Truth. He was like Rawan who squandered away his kingdom for character. He was our Buddha who taught love, brotherhood and equality unto all. He was our Bhim, our king and our saviour, who blessed the blind with sight.' (Kamble, 2009: 104).
16. Mahad, a reference to Ambedkar's landmark satyagraha for access to public tanks in 1927, also evokes the public burning of the *Manusmriti* which took place on the same occasion.
17. 'Do Dalit Writers Protest Too Much?' asked a headline of the *Times of India* of May 1976. 'It is inevitable for early Dalit literature to have given expression of the torments of an oppressed people. But the note of continued protest is beginning to pall,... and writers should give a new direction to the Dalit literature movement' (quoted in Zelliott, 1992: 290).
18. Puttaiah's reference here is to Devanoora Mahadeva's *Kusumbabale*.
19. I am too limited in my grasp on the traditions that structure the sub-continent's epistemological history to be able to recognise what should be attributed to them in this issue. My point is not to reduce the genealogy to this sole influence, however powerful its determinations clearly are.
20. 'No dalit took a shortcut to a position of leadership. Innumerable hardships, sacrifices and a great deal of effort went into the pursuit of dalit aspirations before a leader could emerge. [...] And yet, by ignoring this historical process, we have failed to arrive at a dalit methodology for reconstructing history. Or, for that matter, a method for creating leadership.' (Prasad, 2013: 605).
21. If I may substitute this term to their own choice of 'aesthetics', to defuse the contradictions that I have attempted to locate in it, and in the conviction that I am not detracting from their argument by doing so.

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