INTRODUCTION

This paper is an outcome of the ethnographic field work in northern and western districts of Tamil Nadu among Dalits in rural settings apart from reading and analysing connected literature as part of the “Caste out of Development” project. Though my particular focus was on Christian Dalit situations, the analytical grid in which I want place my findings connects to certain general thematic questions of the research as well. In large part it is a theoretical reflection on what I think as the conceptual wedge between certain aspects of actually existing situations and the discourses and the activities of governmental and political actors. I suggest that the conceptual wedge is created by the peculiar conditions of the age of the nation-state, and as this formulation is no surprise in itself, try and show how the wedge is developed. I have in the title characterised the wedge as “polemical blinders”. I hope to show in the course of the paper why I do that.

One of the research questions pursued was how far are liabilities suffered by socially excluded groups get factored in developmental plans and in what ways non-governmental and political actors address any lacunae in this regard. One of the resulting observations is that there is a certain shift in the articulation of demands at the grass root level. There is a tendency to move from cultural-political emancipatory approaches to those of right based approaches. The shift basically characterises the grievances suffered as a failure of the state in implementing statutory measures of welfare and compensation. While the causal understanding for such failures needs to invoke, justifiably and productively, the history of caste discrimination, there is a perceivable accent on the universal language of rights concurrent to the expansion of constitutional understanding of rights to include “right to work”, “right to education” and so on. Empirically the developmental ethos of last twenty years has made the issues of means of livelihood and dignified standard of living foremost concerns of rural Dalits primarily addressing the state agencies and actors. This is not to suggest that all the contradictions between dominant castes and Dalit castes have receded to the background. They certainly continue to exist often resulting in gruesome acts of violence against members of Dalit caste. Even in such situations, the role of the state actors like police and revenue officials have become increasingly crucial with the possibilities of invoking Protection of Civil Rights Act, known popularly as PCR Act, against the offenders. In many ways, the state and the legal guarantees provided by the state have come to play an extremely significant role in the day to day existence of Dalits. It is possible to derive from these observations that Dalits have considerable stake in liberal narratives of citizenship and the heuristics of the abstract political collective of national community. However, the investment in partaking in the language of rights and addressing the state actors with demands to implement remedial or compensatory measures appear to develop tensions with the dynamics of electoral politics and grass root mobilization where as culturally given becomes necessary to mobilize as a collective. At the first sight the hiatus may not be visible; but if we pursue a line of enquiry as to the capacity of injured constituencies for monitoring implementation of statutory provisions and measures it
is possible to discern inadequate channelling of political energy in such areas. Non-governmental organisations, which often double up as grassroots organisations are also unable to fill the gap to the extent required. For example, if an officer of a nationalized bank refuses to sanction educational loan to a Dalit girl, for which the officer has clear statutory mandate, it is not clear what forms of intervention is possible on behalf of the victim of caste apathy. In the limited scope of this paper I wish to present some hazy contours of the problem taking help from various theoretical sources including Gopal Guru’s insightful conceptualizations about “negative language” and the “beyond”.

I will begin with a reading of an extreme formulation of the caste question in a relatively unnoticed tract written by V.T. Rajashekar, (hereafter VTR), the Bangalore based non-Dalit editor of the magazine Dalit Voice which started publication in the year 1981. I have chosen this book because I think it offers a logical culmination of several commonly held assumptions and ways of talking about caste which I think of as constituting the polemical blinders.

2 VTR’S PROPOSAL: CASTE AS A NATION WITHIN NATION

VTR describes his book, Caste: a Nation within the Nation (2002), a summation of various exchanges in the magazine Dalit Voice, with a subtitle reading “recipe for a bloodless revolution”. We need to see what exactly is the revolution proposed in the book. Let me attempt to paraphrase the hazily laid out political agenda in my own terms for the purposes of immediate analysis. The basic premise of the book is the widely believed racial divide of India. The dominant castes of migrant Aryan extraction form 15% of the population but they retain a strong hold on power and can be described as the rulers. The rest of the 85%, the original inhabitants of India, constitute the “ruled” and are non-Aryans. The majority of the natives, described as Bahujan, belonged to various ethnic groups without any notion of hierarchy. There might have been conflicts of interests and animosity between the Bahujan groups but no in-built notions of hierarchy. The Aryans brought with them the notion of hierarchy and caste system that they practised among themselves, which then was seen to extend to the whole of the population converting the “separate but equal” ethnic groups into castes eventually to be arranged in hierarchical scales. As a result, the Aryan castes have an internal cohesion and consolidation that needs no mobilization. The Aryan castes can even propose the formal annihilation of castes since they have entrenched hold on power. For the Bahujan castes, the mobilization on caste lines is an absolute necessity if they are to dislodge the Aryan castes from the positions of power. Hence, they can annihilate caste only by consolidating and strengthening castes. Caste identity is their only means of political redemption. If the 85% of the castes realize the “separate but equal” egalitarian origin and federate against the 15% Aryan castes the latter will finally be dislodged from the citadels of power resulting in a bloodless revolution. Once this “use the thorn to pick out the thorn” dialectical process is completed caste system and eventually caste itself will wither away achieving the true annihilation of castes.

VTR’s book has a revelatory tone and is far from meeting the protocols of reflective and analytical modes of academic writing. In my limited survey, I do not find that the book in


2 I should thank Prof.Sasheej Hegde for providing me with a copy of this book. Rajashekar V.T. Caste: A Nation within the Nation (hereafter NWN) was published by Koshy Mathew for Books for Change (A unit of Action Aid Karnataka Projects), Bangalore, 2002.
circulation even among activists. Apart from being full of arbitrary postulates, the book also bears no novelty in proposing Dalit-Bahujan federated opposition to Manuvadi castes after the BSP-SJP experiments in the UP politics. However, as already noted, the significance of the book lies in its ability to crystallize some of the widely held assumptions about the role of castes in politics. It declares caste identity as the only sensible means of political mobilization. VTR heaps scorn on poverty reduction discourses and governmental action to reduce poverty.

Bahujan development, which means the development of India, is possible only when the Bahujans capture political power. It is possible to capture political power only by strengthening ‘Caste Identity’. There is no other way. The way shown by the Hindus – that is the ‘poverty eradication way’- has proved to be a futile one.

India’s Union and state governments, controlled by the ruling class, have launched a plethora of social welfare and development schemes and spent, during the past 50 years, billions of rupees to relieve the ‘poverty’ of the ‘weaker sections’. What has happened to these funds? The enormous money spent was like pouring water on the Sahara desert. So much so, the ‘weaker sections’ became the weakest and the ‘poor’ became poorer. What went wrong was the diagnosis of the patient. Had the ruling class accepted the criterion, taken up each oppressed section on the basis of its caste, allowed formation of effective caste associations of every jati (caste) and used these associations as the agencies to implement these schemes, the funds would have been used much more honestly and effectively. Revolutionary developments would have taken place if the energies of our caste associations had been used to uplift members of different jatis. This is because a caste leader cannot afford to cheat his caste samaj (caste people) for fear of ex-communication, if not physical assault.

In this quote we immediately come to see why caste should be treated not just as community but as a nation. It is because the caste samaj is bound by kinship affinities which can deploy the age old sanction of ex-communication or even resort to physical assault if a member or a leader acts against the common good. VTR continues extolling the virtues of jati. “A jati association is like an extended family and when every family is taken care of, the whole society is protected. This is the miracle of caste.” He takes enormous pains to make it clear that caste without caste system, that is hierarchy, is the only way the hegemonic sway and actual holdings of power of the 15% Aryan castes can be challenged. For the sake of details we should know that this 15% is made up of 5% comprising the well known Brahmin, Bania combination, the architects of the oppressive system and the rest of 10% comprising of other Hindu castes supporting the Brahmin, Bania combination like Thakurs, Kayasths, Patels, Khammas, Marathas, Reddis, Bumihars, Vokkaligas, Lingayats, Nairs etc. In the oppositional block of native inhabitants making up 85% of the population, the Scheduled Castes and Tribes make 30%, Backward Castes make 35%, Muslims 10%, Christians, Sikhs and Buddhists together make 5%. The political task at hand is to remove the 15% from their entrenched positions of power and end their hegemonic sway. “If each jati among the Bahujans seizes its due share in power, property and privileges, where is the question of one caste dominating the other? Where is the question of the formation of another caste system among the Bahujans?” In mirroring Marxiological discourse in his remarkably un-Marxist project, VTR repeatedly alleges that the 85% can do it only by developing caste consciousness which will make them realise this historical task. VTR is of course well aware that the Dalit castes have antagonistic relationships with the BC castes, who in many places

3 Rajashekar V.T. NWN p.38
4 Ibid p.vii
are the actual oppressors of Dalits today. In the entire text he just pays only a passing attention to this pressing feature, a veritable challenge to his notion 85% historical block. Ironically, he uses the Marxist language of contradictions and the need to identify principal contradiction at a purely ideational level ignoring the very theoretical foundation of Marxism which is historical materialism. The book is replete with quotations from Mao-Tse-Tung.

India is the most complex country in the world. There are contradictions within contradictions here. Nations within Nations. But Dalit intellectuals and revolutionaries, who are the natural leaders of Indian revolution, must first identify the principal contradiction and forget the minor ones to fight and eliminate the principal contradictions. If our people do not understand this vital point and continue fighting over minor and non-antagonistic contradictions only, the vaidik rulers will take advantage. Right now, the different Bahujan castes have failed to identify the principal enemy, Brahmanism. This is again due to lack of caste consciousness.

VTR devotes a chapter to Dalit castes and sub castes. He takes up the example of Malas and Madigas in Andhra Pradesh, chastising Malas for working against the emergence of Madiga identity. He strongly objects to the bogey of Dalit unity that is used against the consolidation of caste identities among Dalits. He even claims what is often termed as sub-caste is the real caste. He admires Brahmins, who he celebrates as the natural masters of laws of contradiction, for uniting above their sub-caste identities when threatened by other castes. Hence, the problem is not the consolidation of every caste or sub-caste identity. If only caste consciousness develops, people can understand who they should unite with and who they should fight.

I will conclude my discussion of VTR’s book with one more observation. He thinks the cities camouflage caste antagonisms which leads him to celebrate the village not only for tenaciously retaining caste identities, but also for allowing the eruption of “caste wars”. He wishes the same would extend to the city from the village, where the Brahmin, Bania combination is at its most powerful state. VTR naturally does not acknowledge that most often the raging caste wars in the villages are within the 85% block. He doesn’t tell us how that would transform into a fight against the principle enemy once caste war moves to the city.

In short, VTR exemplifies how caste based politics can get completely reduced to an ideational level with no reference to political economy as one of the sources of, if not the primary source of, conflicts. If caste is just an extended family with pervasive equitable distribution, he cannot explain why there are rich and poor people in each caste, and why large sections of poor Vanniyars no longer vote for their own political party known as Pattali Makkal Katchi, a party that fuelled the political imagination of VTR. He can explain every historical change only by appealing to some mysterious mechanisms of consciousness. For example, he marvels how the Iyengar Brahmins have buried their sectarian differences in temple affairs through the development of caste consciousness, paying no attention to the fact that the temple properties and administration are now controlled by the government no longer providing the impetus for sectarian war. In the rest of the paper, I want to think on what allows for or mandates this absolute culturalisation of caste contradictions resulting in the eclipsing of the contradictions in the turf of labour extraction, wages and surplus generation which are strongly linked to the functional relationships of castes. Before I elaborate on that, let me briefly present some broad outlines of Dalit situations in villages. In other words, I will juxtapose the purely ideational universal with the empirical, contingent and the local manifestations of caste.

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5 Ibid p.73
UNREPRESENTATIVE SAMPLES:
A FEW ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES ON DALIT SITUATIONS IN VILLAGES

The first thing to be said, not as a cautionary note but as part of substantial finding itself, is that no amount of quantitative or statistical data can capture the mindboggling ways in which the dynamics of caste relationships is changing in villages today. All empirical, ethnographic observations such as mine only point to some possible trends and should not be taken to represent reality as a whole, whatever it may mean. The differences between two villages separated by mere five kilometres are so startling that the only thing that can be generalized is that it is not possible to generalize anything. This does not make ethnographic observations such as mine irrelevant but only demands more ethnographic work since capturing the unfolding of historical processes today in all their myriad ways can be instructive in learning to extract models of social change as a general phenomenon. I will now proceed to present my overall observations in a highly condensed form to suit the purposes of this paper.

The villages are split entities. The non-Dalit residential area is spatially segregated from the Dalit residential area. In the districts of northern and western Tamil Nadu I visited, the non-Dalit residents today mostly consist of castes officially listed as most backward or backward. There are, if at all, a few families of “forward” castes like Chettiaris, Naickers, Reddiars, Vellalas and rarely Brahmins. In many parts of Tamil Nadu the area where the non-Dalits live is known as the “Ur” and the area where Dalits live is known as the “colony”. Ur in Tamil is an interesting term. Valentine Daniel has made the insightful observation that Ur is a person centric term related to the substance or essence of the place, whereas village or Kiramam in Tamil is an administrative category. Extending the conceptual scheme from his observation to the present situation in many districts, it is extremely significant that Dalits are located outside the Ur but within the Kiramam or Village. The inclusion is formal and the exclusion substantial. Given the spatial scheme and the underpinning ideology it is important to counter a normative statement like “The village has x (a school, a ration shop, a water tank)” with the question whether x is located in the Ur or colony. The foremost demand of the Dalits in the colony is parity with Ur in the provision of amenities and share in the yields from village common property and resources.

In many villages where some form of employment outside agriculture is available in the surroundings, the flagrant, humiliating features of untouchability of yesteryears are no longer practised or at least are in the decline. In most places the Pannaiyal system, where a Dalit family is bonded to a land owner’s family has ceased to exist. If Dalits go to work in the fields of non-Dalits it is purely on the basis of daily wages over which they have come to have decent bargaining power; for example, one informant told me that nowadays they insist that breakfast given to labourers should include poori and potato. However, there are still struggles of all kinds over sharing of resources like water where Dalits are discriminated against.

In many villages what Dalits claimed as their immediate need is credit facility to acquire or augment their meagre holdings of land, to improve irrigation or to enable cultivation. Outside of agricultural activities, Dalits still need credit for acquiring or owning the means of production. They need access to good primary education and support for higher education. They need basic amenities for decent life like sanitation, roads, shelter and so on. The desperation caused by their inability to improve their standard of living often results in alcoholism among men leading to further deterioration of living standards. Lack of credit facility and accumulation of debt from private sources or landlords are the bane of Dalit life.

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What can be extracted from these observations is that intervention is needed at the level of each village to see how Dalit lives can be improved and to explore what injuries they suffer from. Both political and NGO actors have still not been able to reach out to all the villages, though they are making a difference wherever they are present. There is still scope for some creative thinking about the kinds of intervention needed and possible with the limited amount of energy garnered by political and civil society mobilizations. It is precisely in this area of thinking about possible interventions I locate what I have variously described as hiatus between concepts and actual situations, wedge between perceptions and actions, polemical blinders and so on. I will now move on to an attempt to delineate what I think is the problem using contemporary political theory.

4 TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COLLECTIVE

In the liberal paradigm, the State is seen to be a threat to the freedom of the individual. It is a truism that in modern political rationality the individual is the bearer of rights and free will. However, both the State and the individual are the products of liberal thought. In the succinct expression of Michel Foucault “Never, I think, in the history of human societies---has there been such a tricky combination in the same political structures of individualization techniques and of totalization procedures.” There is one more caveat: the free standing individual is a legal fiction since almost everyone is born with communal affiliation of one kind or the other. Nevertheless, the state treats everyone as entering into contractual relationship with others. In the eyes of the state the entire populace is an aggregate of contracts which it presides over through a sovereign juridical apparatus. In this sphere the only way in which political action is possible is through representative democracy, civil debate and appeal to the just implementation of statutory provisions. Hence, ideas such as citizenship, state and civil society are all part of a single conceptual scheme which is neutral, disinterested and casteless. This will remain so even when the state recognises inherited disparities, disputes among social groups and proposes compensatory, remedial measures. Hence the first condition of liberal or rather modern political thought is to see society as an aggregate of individuals to be governed by laws created by democratically elected representatives.

However, such an arrangement of democracy cannot exist without some delimitation which is where the territorial nation comes in. The nation is the enlarged and imagined political community which has superseded the numerous communities with fuzzy boundaries which find their members individuated by the modern political rationality. In other words, we have the “nation”, an imagined notional community at one end that defines population of a given territory and the “state” governing individuals sans cultural identity at the other end. The nation-state submerges or seeks to submerge various kinds of actually pre-existing communal belongings in the middle which are variously erased, delegitimized, enumerated and contained in some notion of cultural pluralism in such a way these belongings do not compete with the imagined political community of the nation.

The various communal affiliations exorcised from the individuated citizen in the public domain recede into the sphere of the private. In a way this is the pre-condition for the birth of the nation. It is the agentive action of the private sphere that imagines and brings forth the nation, as can be derived from Partha Chatterjee’s famous argument about the “inner”

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domain where the sovereign nation finds its genesis\textsuperscript{8}. However, it is the privileged social groups whose inner domain forms the ideological basis or the hegemony required for the nation. There are necessarily several other groups which are external to this act but are assimilated to the nation through various strategies of accommodation. In the words of Connolly, “A liberal nation, then, would be one in which the national majority extends tolerance to an assortment of minorities clustered around the vital centre. Such an image is compatible, then, with variety and diversity and difference. It is how diversity and difference are imagined in relation to a constitutive cultural centre that is definitive.”\textsuperscript{9} Partha Chatterjee captures this phenomenon succinctly in the title of his second book on nationalism: “Nation and its fragments”. Fragments, in his scheme, should not be understood to describe groups of numerical minority. He treats as large a constituency as that of women a fragment in so far as the nation’s primary imagination, which sets up nation’s cultural centre, goes.

The inner or the private spheres of the fragments keep imagining an alternative conception of the nation and themselves as a political collective. The actual governance of the state, particularly in an electoral democracy, is where the consolidated power is accessed by various social groups or communities. In Chatterjee’s words: “The state is also an existent as a site at which the subjects of power in a society interact, ally, and contend with one another in the political process.”\textsuperscript{10} Hence private sphere, in its collective public thrust, is also the constant source of political re-imagination where narratives of the community create opportunities for accessing power. Further to the act of sharing power, the communities also may constantly strive to re-characterize and re-narrate the nation since the original narrative has to be modified according to newer power alignments where the alternative conceptions and narratives of the fragments are accommodated. The walls of parliament are getting filled with more and more icons.

The fulminations of the inner domain or the private sphere of any conceivable and emergent collective within the nation state’s jurisdiction can be described to yield either or both of the following trajectories: one, make its own history through carving out its share of national sovereignty or by tapping sovereign power, which will hence be part of the historical process of the nation itself. Two, refuse to be contained within the pre-assigned description of the nation state and make a difference which will transform its sovereign inner domain and pose a fresh challenge to the status quo produced by national consensus. William Connolly calls the second as the politics of becoming, of which we will see more latter. It is possible to read in Gauri Viswanathan’s discussion of Babasaheb Ambedkar, that his participation in drawing up the constitution securing statutory remedies for Dalits as part of the first trajectory and his leading mass conversion to Buddhism as the second\textsuperscript{11}.

In either case the political collectivization of the individuated members of a community tends to see itself operating in the template of the political community of the nation. Hence its ability to focus on the implementation of statutory provisions, the domain of the state and the individual becomes limited and needs to be supplemented by civil society actors mostly in the form of non-governmental organisations. If I am to provide a weak example for the sake of clarity, it is possible for political organisations to demand that a state run primary school should be opened in a village but it is not possible for them to monitor the quality of teaching.

\textsuperscript{8} Chatterjee, Partha. The Nation and Its Fragments in The Partha Chatterje Omnibus, OUP Delhi, 1999. (hereafter NF)
\textsuperscript{9} Connolly, William E. Why I am Not a Secularist, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999.p.89
\textsuperscript{10} Chatterjee, NF, p.207-8.
A different deliberative body like parent-teachers association is required to carry out the function. However, it should be born in mind that in situations of embedded social exclusion politics permeates even the most mundane of everyday activity.

For the political aspirations of a community, finding foothold in the state machinery and enacting legislation or effecting plan measures forms the climactic movement. Monitoring the implementation of such of the statutory and plan provisions at the local level is anti-climactic and does not appear to attract political energies. There are very few actors who actually monitor and intervene at various sites of implementation of measures and provisions. While the causes for such a situation may largely owe to the limited political strength of the injured constituencies like Dalits, there is some perceivable lack in terms of political imagination as well. At least one of the undercurrents of the tension between political organizations and NGOs is the result of the split in the domains of action. NGO action is in the domain of state, individual and the civil society whereas political action relates to the struggle in the political community of the nation through which communities seek to access sovereign power. The scenario appears to create another paradox: while it is possible to use the energies of such civil society organizations for enabling the political collectives it is hard to channel the energies of political collectives to the work of monitoring implementation. It is just sufficient to look at the conditions of government run hostels meant for Dalit students to understand the magnitude of the problem. It needs some painstaking analysis to see how political energies and civil society organisations can combine to ensure implementations of schemes and measures which should become the core of political theory today. On that note, I will now proceed to discuss another dimension of the eclipse of the empirical in political theory and action.

5 CONTAINMENT OF COMMUNITIES

Partha Chatterjee, taking the lead from Sudipta Kaviraj, points to a fundamental change modern politics has brought about to the notion of a community. “Earlier, communities were fuzzy, in the sense that, first, a community did not claim to represent or exhaust all the layers of selfhood of its members, and second, the community, though definable with precision for all practical purposes of social interaction, did not require its members to ask how many of them there were in the world.” Modern politics not only demanded an understanding of what demarcates a community from another but insisted that the demarcation becomes both rigid and transcendental. “It is political discourse of the modern kind which insists that these collectivities have a fixed, determinate form and if there are several to which an individual can belong, that there be a priority among them, so that it becomes imperative to ask: ‘Are you a Muslim first or a Bengali first?’ ‘Are you a Bengali first or an Indian first?’”

In the making of modern Indian nation Christianity and Islam which originated outside India but practiced within the nation were not only deemed to be minority religions but were expected to demarcate themselves from the newly invented Hinduism, now deemed to be religion of the majority by the primary act of imagining the nation. Following this understanding since caste was considered to be a creation of Hindu scriptures it was deemed not possible for Christianity and Islam to have its followers identified by caste. If these religions admitted caste how can they be demarcated from Hinduism? If Christians and Muslims were to have their social life governed by personal laws other than Hindu personal

12 Chatterjee, NF p.223
law and were to be awarded privileges for running their institutions without the supervision of the state, which found it incumbent to administer the Hindu endowments and temples, they needed this all too important demarcation from the majority religion. Hence no matter if people could see it as clearly as daylight that caste discrimination existed within Christianity in India, it could not be constitutionally recognised.

The case of Christian Dalits raises several important questions about the way caste and religions are treated in the age of the nation state. We need to tread very carefully the much muddied ground to look at the issue with a different analytical focus. I will first take up the question of how we understand the statutory measures with the regard to people belonging to the scheduled castes. The foremost reason is that they have been subjected to social exclusion with practices related to the phenomenon known as “untouchability”. Since these practices have been prevalent for a long and indeterminable period in history, the criterion to decide whether a particular person should be covered by the statutory measures does not ever pertain to discrimination personally suffered by the person in her own lifetime. In a proper understanding we should also take note that these groups have also suffered impoverishment over a long period of time through inadequate compensation paid to the labour extracted from them as well as by other customary injunctions like denial of rights to own property and so on. Hence, even though a person is individually covered by the statutory measures, it is done on the basis of her belonging to a group of people, a community.

We should next raise the question of how a person is recognised as belonging to a scheduled caste. As we have already seen, in a village the place of residence is the immediate marker. If the person lives in the colony or in a street demarcated for a particular scheduled caste she is known to belong to the caste. Secondly, the occupation of a person may also indicate the caste since certain services have traditionally been rendered by certain castes. For example, if a person is from the family known to take care of the cremation of the dead bodies, the person belongs to the caste traditionally rendering the service. Finally, the ultimate determinant is lineage. If it is known to any one that a person is born to parents belonging to a particular caste or is a descendant of people belonging to a caste, naturally she too belongs to that caste. It is unthinkable that anyone has ever worried about which God she worships or believes in. Socially speaking, faith has never been considered as one of the criteria for determining a person’s caste. No one needs to profess faith in “Hinduism” or Manudharma to be identified as belonging to a caste.

Let me mention the example of Mary, an NGO actor. Her house is also a place for congregation of an independent church. Mary was raised as Fathima, a Muslim. Her grandfather converted to Islam. Her lineage is known to the surrounding villages. A kinsman through lineage, devout Christian, who saw her going to college, approached her father asking her to be married to his son, who is also a pious Christian. Since the families knew each other, Fathima’s father agreed. After marriage, she got slowly attracted to Christian faith and eventually converted to Christianity. All through the conversation I had with her she always spoke of herself and her community as Dalits (identified through lineage with a particular Dalit caste). Other villagers have always thought of her as Dalit. Her faith in two of these religions that originated outside India never interfered with her caste belonging.

The state for many reasons has been unable to acknowledge this empirical reality. In its anxiety to maintain the political intelligibility of communities it has to contain them inside rigid lines of demarcation. To allow caste to permeate the line that demarcates minority religions will perhaps destabilise the fabric of its nationally imagined political community. While it is necessary contest this inertia of the state we can at least speculate theoretically about its roots. What is even more difficult is to understand is how oppositional discourses also partake in creating this conceptual blinder through their own “inertia of shared
vocabulary” to draw a phrase from Connolly. I will return to VTR for a moment to provide an example.

One of the descriptive appellate VTR gives to caste system is Brahminical Social Order. As we have already noted the migrant Aryan race is the source of caste hierarchy in his narrative. He has no way of explaining why Christianity should allow replication of caste hierarchy among its followers. One superficial answer is that it has been corrupted by “Hinduism”, which begs more questions in its wake than explaining the phenomenon. He also comes up with another extremely complicated reasoning. “The Dalits, by becoming Christians, did not become a religious group. They merely got new gods. Dalit Christians continue to be Untouchables ever after becoming Christians and in the process lose their Dalit identity. This loss of identity alienated them from their blood brothers and sisters. If the Dalit Christians had not forgotten their identity and continued to struggle along with their non-converted Dalits, they would have gained their human rights (reservations) long ago like that Dalit Buddhists did. Loss of caste identity is the sole cause for Dalit Christian deprivation.14” In all this tense, confused reasoning unfair to Christian Dalits in blaming them for their victimisation at both ends, it never occurs to VTR to consider caste as a multilayered and multi-causal phenomenon. He can never let go of the moment of origin in the migrant Aryans who should be dislodged from power in order redeem the non-Aryans. Instead of just tenaciously clinging to the originary narratives, if one can ask how and for what purposes caste hierarchy is reproduced at each instance, much of the submerged factors like labour extraction and surplus generation would come to the fore. It will certainly be inadequate to think political economy can explain caste; on the other hand, it will be insidious to remove the factors of political economy in a pure culturalisation of caste. After all, the need to decide whether caste is a religious, sociological, political or economic phenomenon arises only with the genesis of modern disciplinary thought. It is not hard to surmise that in its own historical processuality caste was all this and more.

6 UNBECOMING POLITICS

In an elaborate treatment of conversions, their underlying motives and historical contexts Gauri Viswanathan has shown that conversions have a wide range of meanings with far ranging implications for the emergence of modern nation states, their implicit cultural centres and their formal secular moorings15. An act of conversion destabilizes the self assurance of the allegedly secular nation. Understood in such a historical backdrop, the resistance of the Indian state to countenance the dual rights of a Dalit to avail compensatory discrimination in the public domain and to choose his faith in private domain can be read as reflective of deep anxieties inherited from colonial era. In respect of Dalits in independent India, conversion should be understood as an immanent spiritual need of the inner domain, like the famous conversion undertaken by Ambedkar to Buddhism. His famous proclamation that he was born a Hindu and would not die a Hindu deserves to be reflected upon with utmost seriousness. However, we need to understand such acts of conversion today as necessarily a twofold process in its basic conception. In the domain of the legality the person recognised as a member of the Scheduled Castes will remain so since the very identification is based on lineage and the forms of injustice suffered through history. While this gives her certain rights

14 Rajashekar V.T. NWN p.59
as a citizen, it does not relieve her from the burden of bearing the injured identity in her inner domain. Hence she necessarily has to create a difference for herself. In a proper political understanding, even if all conversions were to be banned in the country, a Dalit should be entitled for conversion since the person should be able to exercise the free will, the premise of liberal politics, to shape her own life so that the relief promised by affirmative action in the public domain is supplemented in the private domain as well. It is a tragedy that the prevalent political understanding is exactly contrary to this, which shows the sheer poverty of political imagination.

It will be relevant to speak of another experience of mine in this context. I mentioned my encounter with Mary, who grew up as a Muslim and converted to Christianity after marriage while all the time being recognised as a Dalit. When I narrated it in an informal conversation, a Dalit interlocutor pointedly asked me whether I thought there was no escape from Dalit identity. I was taken aback since in my mind I was only speaking in support of the demand of Christian Dalits to be counted as Dalits. It is not that my interlocutor was not aware of it. In spite of it he was frustrated because the value of conversion experienced in the inner domain appears to have been undervalued by the fixity of identity in the immediate social context. Hence, we need to understand that while Dalits want to retain their legal entitlement in the public domain they also want their self affirmation in the inner domain to be recognised. Given the complexity of the issue it is a shame on the part of the state to force hundreds of thousands of Christians to keep their faith a secret for the sake of availing their rights to compensatory measures in consequence of the socially enforced caste identity which the state has arbitrarily annexed to the legally enforced “Hindu” identity.

In order to understand why a Dalit’s right for compensatory discrimination should be coupled with the right to convert I would like to invoke Connolly’s concept of the politics of becoming since it appears to perceptively relate to the situation at hand in spite of having been coined in discussing a political context elsewhere.

“By the politics of becoming I mean that paradoxical politics by which new cultural identities are formed out of unexpected energies and institutionally congealed injuries. The politics of becoming emerges out of energies, suffering and lines of flight available to culturally defined differences in a particular institutional constellation. To the extent it succeeds in placing a new identity on the cultural field, the politics of becoming changes the shape and contour of already entrenched identities as well.”

If read carefully, this conception of the politics of becoming has the capacity to free Hinduism as well from being eternally tainted by its need to keep discrimination as its marker. If caste discrimination is socially reproduced far exceeding its originary location and purposes, whatever they be, it is important to segregate it from the religion the modern state has unwittingly enumerated as the political majority. It is counterproductive to attribute the phenomenon of social discrimination perennially to such a majority entity. This is where it becomes important to take into account the collective experiences of social transformation in the half a century following Ambedkar’s own time. One important indicator is the combination of relief in both public and private domains made possible to Dalit Buddhists. Let me explain.

How does the denial of the identity of the injured to Christian Dalits produce an impact on Hinduism itself? Though it is a phenomenon widely known, I would like to illustrate with the powerful narration of it in the brilliant autobiographical novel, Chronicles of Siluvairaj (Siluvairaj Sarithram) written by one of the foremost Tamil Dalit intellectuals, Raj

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16 Connolly, William E. Why I am Not a Secularist, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999,p.57.
Gowthaman. Siluvairaj, a Christian belonging to the caste of Paraiyars, a Scheduled Caste, grows up meeting with discreet and flagrant acts of caste discrimination both in his village and within the church. Finally, in spite of his considerable educational accomplishments, the priests belonging to dominant castes deny him a job in Christian educational institutions in a flagrant demonstration of caste prejudice. Compelled by adverse circumstances at home, Siluvairaj becomes desperate for a job. Learning that a Hindu pontiff in Madurai, known as Madurai Adheenam officiates conversion to Hinduism, Siluvairaj undergoes the ceremony. Once he obtains the certificate of conversion from the institution he notifies it in the Tamil Nadu Government Gazette as required. The novel ends on the bitter ironical note that the piece of paper with the Gazette notification brought him all the good things in life that his hard earned degree certificates could not do. If the same person who suffered discrimination all his life because of his caste was not given the recognition of the injured as long as he remained a Christian but could gain it the moment he called himself Hindu, it implies that the state officially recognises caste discrimination as a prerogative of Hinduism. It is doubtful whether there can be a statutory provision more invidious than this. This is the height of moral corruption a nation can suffer by its need to enumerate and contain community identities. Polemical discourses like VTR’s are not capable of producing a critique of the phenomenon since they cannot grow out of the habit of blaming Hinduism and the mythically efficacious Manudharma for ordaining the caste system. Political Hinduism is happy to take the blame as long as it can keep Dalits in its fold. It knows that numbers matter. The obvious fear is if Dalits are allowed to combine their public domain recompense with private domain acts of becoming, most of them would convert to Christianity or Islam. However, it is easy to show through perceptive ethnography that the fear is unfounded. The fear exists because political Hinduism is not capable of believing in Gods, while people are able to survive only through their belief. The long and varied history of conversion to Christianity has demonstrated the capacity of people to reconfigure divinity in ways that exceed the institutional confines of religions. In my work I could see how easily people combined their belief systems in radically different figurations of God: a ferocious folk deity and Jesus Christ on the cross. In a particular village when I went to the small built church belonging to a denomination of CSI, I was told that all the Christian Dalits have gone to a festival of a folk deity in the neighbouring village where goats are sacrificed. They do go to the church on Sundays. There is nothing very subterranean about this. The village is situated on a highway within an hour’s drive from Coimbatore.

I would like to further illustrate how becoming Hindu on her own terms can also count as an assertion for a Dalit. In a Dalit colony I found that the youngsters had taken the initiative to build a resplendent temple for Mariamman inside the colony. They were beaming with pride that they were able to build their own temple to house their God. This does not appear to be an isolated instance. There is a widespread tendency among Dalits to build a church or a temple in the colony. Often the temples are dedicated to Gods known to be associated with Dalit castes. I have also found instances where the temples are also dedicated to “mainstream” Hindu Gods like Pillayar/Vinayak. They also build churches. The youngsters who built the temple for Mariamman said that they had also built a small church since five of the Dalit families are Christians. An NGO actor half-jokingly told me that if the title deeds of reclaimed Panchami Land are distributed to the Dalit beneficiaries, they would sell off the land to build a temple. The self assertion of the community implicit in such acts flow through the conceptual divide between the private and the public created by modern secular political rationality.

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LIMITS OF POPulist REASON

To sum up the discussion so far, I have pointed to two actually existing situations which are not adequately addressed by political actors and their conceptual schemes. One is the limited political energy channelled to monitor and enforce the implementation of compensatory statutory provisions and measures. The second is the inadequacy of theoretical and mobilizational challenge to the gross injustice done to Christian and Muslim Dalits. We need to understand the relationship of mainstream political parties to these issues.

The mainstream political parties of Tamil Nadu like DMK, AIADMK and DMDK are all good candidates for understanding Laclau’s theorisation of populist reason. In Laclau’s exposition, it is a particular demand that creates a political constituency. Populist politics seeks to unite those demands under a signifier which is empty in itself, but can be interpreted to refer to any of those constituent demands. What necessitates such an act in constituting the political is the need to draw the plebs, the underprivileged/subaltern or the disempowered in to the domain of the political. Laclau further shows that in order to do that, the population is imagined to be constituted into oppositional blocks in the dynamics of populist reason. In the mid-twentieth century political mobilisation in Tamil Nadu it was 97% non-Brahmins pitted against 3% Brahmins. In VTR kind of populist reasoning it is 85% of non-Aryan castes against 15% of Aryan castes. In so far as populist reason is able to appeal to people, helps political parties and leaders to garner power this theoretical model works. What is however unclear is what mechanism exists to actually address the demands of various constituencies mobilised under the signifier. The most vulnerable, numerically insignificant constituencies appear to have no other option than to alternatively cling to one set of empty signifiers over the other set of empty signifiers.

Let us think of sanitation workers for a moment. Their actual demand is not very complicated. They want to live a decent life. They work and live in appalling conditions even today. Since most of them belong to the community of Arunthathiyars, a caste decreed at some point of time in history to take up sanitation work, it can be speculatively assumed that they voted for the DMK as long as MGR was part of the party and later voted for AIADMK. As a result of such democratic process there has been some marginal improvement in their living and service conditions. However, they still do not have any protective devices like oxygen masks, gloves that meet any acceptable standard. Alcoholism is still rampant since no one can bear the stench of the sewages and septic tanks soberly. As the salaries are too meagre to take care of the ordinary needs of the family, the situation becomes much worse with Government run liquor shops taking away most of the salary earned. I would like to indulge in a thought experiment to check the limits of populist reason.

Let us note that the nature of sanitation work involves health hazards. It can be statistically proved that the life expectancy of sanitation workers is much lower than those in other professions. Hence the wages should compensate for the risk taken. Hence let us create a demand that their pay scales should be higher than that of, say, Lower Division Clerks in the Central Government. I imagine that there will be important consequences: sanitation work will no longer be the onerous preserve of Arunthathiyar community. The “Aryan” castes will also get interested. Further, all the implements and safety measures technology can find will come into play. If capitalism can’t even change the traditional inadequate compensation paid for as important a sector as sanitation, responsible for public health, what is development for?

Which of the mainstream parties can be forced to imagine the possibility of asking this question?

It is not only issues of such kind that popular politics is unable to address. It is also possible for all the parties to agree in “principle” about a statutory measure but not implement it forever. This is the case of the Christian and Muslim Dalits. Justice Ranganath Mishra, who headed National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, has categorically said in the report submitted in 2007 that caste practices as of today have nothing to do with religion and hence Dalits are to be extended compensatory benefits irrespective of their religious belonging. Except BJP, which practices the ideology of political Hinduism, all other political parties have agreed to implement this recommendation of the commission. However, it has not been implemented. The DMK president, M. Karunanidhi, as the then Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu officially wrote to the central government in support of the implementation. Interestingly it did not prevent him from suspending an honest, efficient and popularly known IAS officer, Umashankar, who refused to toe the party line, on the basis of his caste certificate. The charge is that he falsely produced a certificate to the effect of his belonging to a Scheduled Caste while in fact he was a practicing Christian. Of course, while the existing rules allow the government to cognise such an “irregularity”, in Umashankar’s case it was a deliberate re-opening of a settled dispute since on an earlier occasion his caste certificate had been checked and ratified. Umashankar affair demonstrates that a political party can endorse a measure in principle and act against it in practice. The only thing that appears to count in popular democracy is the numerical strength of the affected community. Whatever be the theoretical possibilities of populist reason, it is seriously limited by the logic of numbers. It is obvious that no political party will ever implement Ranganath Mishra committee report since all of them fear the electoral “backlash” from the majority community triggered by political Hinduism in its own ignorance of how people approach religion.

8 BEYOND NEGATIVE LANGUAGE: LOCATING COMMUNITIES

Gopal Guru in his essay I mentioned at the beginning of the essay has theorised on two significant concepts, one of which, as already noted, is “Negative Language” and the other “Beyond”. The essay has helped me to understand the difference between Partha Chatterjee’s stupendous work on nationalism and the distinct framework of G. Aloysius in his work with an all encompassing title “Nationalism without a Nation in India”. While Chatterjee has focussed on exploring the conditions of possibility in which the nation was imagined along with the obvious inadequacies of the process, Aloysius has focussed on negating the self-evident narrations of the nation, its strategies of legitimation and its truth claims. In considering these approaches together, I find Gopal Guru’s explanation of the necessity of negative language as the source of self-affirmation of the socially excluded communities like Dalits convincing. Further his indication of “beyond” as a potential category is significant. I take the term not just to refer to an alternative conception of the nation beyond what he has characterized as “Desi” and “Derivative” but an alternative to the very process of conceiving the nation. Let me expand on this.

In so far as the nation-state has come to exist as part of what Partha Chatterjee has aptly called the global narrative of capital, all conceptions of the nation are merely appendages and after-effects to the functioning of the state. There is no doubt there will be fierce contestations in the electoral and political domain with all forms of political collectives seeking to occupy

19 G. Aloysius, Nationalism without a nation in India. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997
the space of the state through representative democracy. As I have tried to show in this paper all such self representations of the communities and collectives can only partake in the universal template of the national political community. This limits their capacity to channel their energies towards empirical local realities and redress the grievances of numerically vulnerable entities. This is where certain acts of freeing imagination from the template of the nation become essential. There is an urgent need to think of communities independently of the master trope of national community using the promise of “beyond”. Otherwise none can escape the confines of national enumeration to access higher realms of reason, politics of becoming with an ethos of pluralisation that Connolly has theorized so beneficially and realize the basic human potential for justice. Only these acts of freeing imagination from the nation can also allow re-introduction of the notions of “class” or political economy in the discourses about caste as Anand Teltumbde has been proposing. This will necessarily open up the possibility of locating community in the village where both Ur and colony can re-imagine their relationship through strengthening the capacity for “being-with”, where affirmative language can succeed negative language in the domain of the empirical realities. I am persuaded that without such re-localisations of community, actual processes of redress for several of the suffering constituencies will continue to remain extremely inadequate.