Touching Matters:
Caste and Complicity

by

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Abstract

"Touching Matters" is a research project that explores the intra-actions between the Indian caste system, the associated practice of untouchability and the figure of the sacred cow in the Hindu religion. In this study, traditional academic methods are used in exploring the history of the caste system and its shifting modalities, by exploring concepts such as purity, hierarchy, identity and agency. This research combines B.R. Ambedkar's theory of the origins of the Untouchable and the emergence of untouchability, with Judith Butler's concept of the materiality of the body and Karen Barad's concept of intra-actions.

Statement of Intent

When the research for this thesis started, I was still in India where many of the pandemic-oriented social distancing practices were still in place. I had begun research into historical texts, relevant news stories, theories and artwork that could be related to the preliminary thesis proposal I had applied to OCAD University with, which was at the time titled “Caste and Casteless-ness”.

The subjects and themes that this work deals with, are of great personal importance to me and the people of my country. Any exploration and research on caste reveals hierarchical power-relations and intricate binds that tie us to certain institutions and traditions.

The experience of this reveals that although our cultures are shared and mixed in a country as big and diverse as India, we do not share equal access to them. While some may find the subject matter of the work polarising, the research and the outcomes of this work reveal that deep inside our shared histories, is the potential for mutual growth and respect.

My intention with this work is not intended to harm or call out any particular group. Rather, I seek to foster more of such potential for mutual respect and cultivate more interest in the subject matter for all the people of my home, my country.

Acknowledgments

Firstly, I would like to thank my primary advisor Dr. Sugandha Gaur, for guiding me through this process and providing me with valuable input and advice that contributed to my thesis. I also want to thank my advisory committee, my secondary advisor Jay Irizawa and my external reviewer Kestin Cornwall at large for encouraging me to pursue new ways to explore a subject matter that is very personal to me and the people of my country.

I would like to extend this appreciation to the many friends I made in the OCAD U community for expressing so much interest in my research area by suggesting additional viewpoints and sources of knowledge I would not have come across on my own. I thank Kashfia Arif Ahmed for her critical eye, Rimaz Mohamed for his enthusiasm and vast knowledge of our shared heritage and Asabe Mamza, Rhea Nambiar and Mihyun Maria Kim for their encouragement and being great friends. I would also like to thank one of my earliest mentors Tanvi Mishra, for being a source of inspiration.

I would especially like to thank my parents, Sushiela Ruben Ilango and Brigadier SS Ilango, my ma and pa, for encouraging me to pursue this step of my career. I thank them both for the sacrifices they made and for teaching me that effecting change starts in knowing the self, better.

I would also like to express my gratitude to the earliest leaders of the anti-caste movement. It is no easy task to criticise one's own culture, especially in the context of a nation as diverse as India where many things are left unsaid in the pursuit of momentary progress. I am therefore indebted to this movement, the people who spearheaded it, and those who continue to do so, for the knowledge it produced which continues to shape me, and for its monumental contribution in shaping the country I call home.

KEY TERMS

Ahimsa: A philosophy of non-violence[1] that exists in the Indian religions of Jainism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. It espouses the ethical principle of not causing harm to other living things.

Brahmin: A brahmin[2] (also spelled 'brahman') is the highest ranking of the four social classes of the caste system and are traditionally associated with priestly duties and knowledge of sacred texts.

Kshatriya: A kshatriya[3] (sometimes also referred to with the term "rajanya") is the second highest of the four classes. They are traditionally associated with security and administration of the state.

Vaishya: A vaishya[4] is the third class in the caste system. They are traditionally associated with agricultural work and trade.

Shudra: A shudra[5] is the fourth class, traditionally associated with artisanal and menial labour that is considered unskilled.

Untouchable: An 'untouchable'[6] caste is any of the castes engaged in labour that is considered to have polluting effects. There is certain overlap between the duties of an 'untouchable' individual and a shudra individual, such as manual labour, but an 'untouchable' caste is generally perceived with a certain amount of stigma. Although the term is used in autobiographies by individuals who are descendant from, or belonging to, an untouchable caste, in everyday conversation "formerly untouchable" is often used.

Dalit: The more common caste identity term that is used in the present day, for individuals descendant from, or belonging to, formerly untouchable castes, is the word "Dalit"[7]. Coined by the low-caste leader Jyotiba Phule in the late 19th century, the word is derived from the Sanskrit-language word "dalita", which translates to "scattered" or "broken". The identity term was coined as an act of political agency.

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1 The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Ahimsa." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 29 Aug. 2023, https://www.britannica. com/topic/ahimsa.

2 The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Brahman." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 29 Aug. 2023, https://www.britanni- ca.com/topic/Brahman-caste

3 The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Kshatriya." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 29 Aug. 2023, https://www.britanni- ca.com/topic/Kshatriya.

4 The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Vaishya." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 29 Aug. 2023, https://www.britannica. com/topic/Vaishya.

5 The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Shudra." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 29 Aug. 2023, https://www.britannica. com/topic/Shudra.

6 Sur, Priyali. "Under India's Caste System, Dalits Are Considered Untouchable. the Coronavirus Is Intensifying That Slur." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 16 Apr. 2020, www.cnn.com/2020/04/15/asia/india-coronavirus-lower-castes-hnk-intl/in- dex.html.

7 The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Dalit." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 29 Aug. 2023, https://www.britannica. com/topic/Dalit.

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Introduction

This research project explores the relationship between the figure of the cow, an animal that is considered sacred to Hindus, and the practice of untouchability that pervades throughout India's caste system.

Caste is a birth-based system of social division which classifies its constituents into various groups in a graded hierarchy, determined by the purity of the occupation each group is assigned. This hierarchy is informed by religious and cultural beliefs described in ancient sacred texts, and thus engineers an interdependence and embeds a measurement of power, or lack thereof, into the caste-identity of each group. In so doing, the caste system conceives of and perpetuates a society in which the economic structure is always already mediated by religious and cultural factors, ensuring the availability of a labour force as well as the entrenchment of upper caste groups in positions of power.

The most salient features of the caste system, present today in varying degrees, are that of hereditary occupation and the idealising of endogamy. In the first, caste groups remain dominant in their assigned occupation, while in the second, marrying and reproducing within one's own caste group is highly preferred. As a social institution, caste has endured for over 3500 years in the Indian subcontinent and continues to remain core to the structure and culture of Indian society.

I am interested in the religious-social theory of caste that informs present day cultural customs, interactions and practices[8], the precedents of which are found in sacred religious texts and serve the purpose of caste-identity formation.

On a broad aggregate level, caste divides society into five main groups, of which the first four are included within the system, while the last is seen as an "outcaste" category, external to the system yet beneath it. Within each caste group

8 One such practice is that of the *upanayana* ceremony, which in the Western context may be understood as a Bat Mitzvah ceremony. Though theoretically open to all castes, it requires the approval of, and a good relationship with a well- versed brahmin priest and a significant amount of social and financial capital, which is often unattainable for Untouchables and low-castes. This ceremony is considered one of the most important events in a brahmin male's life.

are subgroups with their own caste-identity names and specialised occupations, each group links back into the primary five categories.

In the uppermost rank of caste are the *brahmins*, the priestly class, interpreters of sacred texts and conductors of religious ceremonies and rituals. This caste was also primarily engaged in composing, transmitting, and educating the next generation of priests on the sacred texts[9]. The next are the *kshatriyas*, warrior kings and aristocrats who undertake protection and administration of state and society. The *vaishyas* in the third rank are primarily occupied with agriculture and trade. The *shudras* in the fourth rank are assigned artisanal and menial labour and are meant to serve the three castes above them.

The fifth group in the caste hierarchy, referred to as "outcastes" in the sacred texts, are the Untouchables[10]. This category's name is derived from a practice known as 'untouchability', which can be defined as a general set of degrading, discriminatory and exploitative practices directed at individuals engaged in occupations that are perceived as the most polluting in the pure-impure spectrum. These may include butchery, carcass disposal, public sanitation, manual scavenging, and cleaning. Although known as Untouchables, in present day Indian politics, the group is known as *Dalits*[11].

To situate myself in this research, my own experience of caste is informed by my identity as a Dalit Christian who has lived in different parts of India, namely the national capital Delhi, and other major cities, where I have been exposed to caste-identity performance and culture in different locations throughout my lived experiences as a child, a university student, and an adult employee.

My mother's side is descendant from the fourth rank in the caste hierarchy, while my father's is descendant from an Untouchable group; both sides converted

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9 Gerety, Finnian M.M. "Vedic Oral Tradition." *Oxford Bibliographies*, 27 June 2017, www.oxfordbibliographies.com/ display/document/obo-9780195399318/obo-9780195399318-0184.xml.

10 For the purposes of this thesis paper, I will be using the word 'Untouchables'.

11 Although in the mid-19th century, the low-caste leader Jyotiba Phule, a key figure in the anti-caste movement, would coin the political identity "Dalit", which is derived from the Sanskrit word for "broken" or "scattered".

from Hinduism to Christianity presumably sometime during India's period of British colonial rule. While Hindus of all castes were able to convert, for Untouchables who did so, material gains such as education[12] and improved prospects in employment gradually became accessible. In an agential sense, conversion was also an act of self-determination as well as an affirmation of our own humanity, even if the tag of conversion (as implied through our non-Hindu names, our diets, and the presence of non-Hindu religious paraphernalia in our homes and on our bodies) should reveal our caste identities otherwise.

In seeking housing, I have been rejected as a prospective tenant and roommate on the grounds of what my diet could be. In workplaces, errors on the job have been attributed to my caste-identity. In universities, my admission has been attributed to affirmative action schemes, and myself as unmeritorious. While my experiences of Untouchability are largely urban and more subtle, they come from the same family of discriminatory and oppressive practices occurring in rural areas, where it is far more transparent.

I situate the research in the context of the current political climate in India which, since 2014, has seen a rise in acts of violence[13] and oppression directed towards the Untouchables, other low-caste groups and minorities. While in the case of religious minorities, the violence is motivated by a desire to expel groups who are perceived as non-Hindu, in the case of Untouchables, the violence is directed at those groups that engage with the cow as a source of raw material itself, either for diet or as a matter of occupation, such as butchery, carcass disposal, bone collection, leather tanning. While the current right-wing Indian government issued bans on cow slaughter, the acts of violence have been perpetrated by self-styled cow protection groups who act with impunity even on the mere suspicion of

12 Salve, Mukta, et al. "The Revolt of a Dalit Girl: An Essay By A Student of Phules' School." *A Forgotten Liberator: The Life and Struggle of Savitribai Phule,* Mountain Peak, New Delhi, 2008, pp. 70–75.

13 "Violent Cow Protection in India: Vigilante Groups Attack Minorities." Edited by Meenakshi Ganguly, *Human Rights Watch,* 28 Mar. 2023, www.hrw.org/report/2019/02/19/violent-cow-protection-india/vigilante-groups-attack-minori- ties.

intention to slaughter cows, creating a precedent that is both extralegal as well as culturally sanctioned.

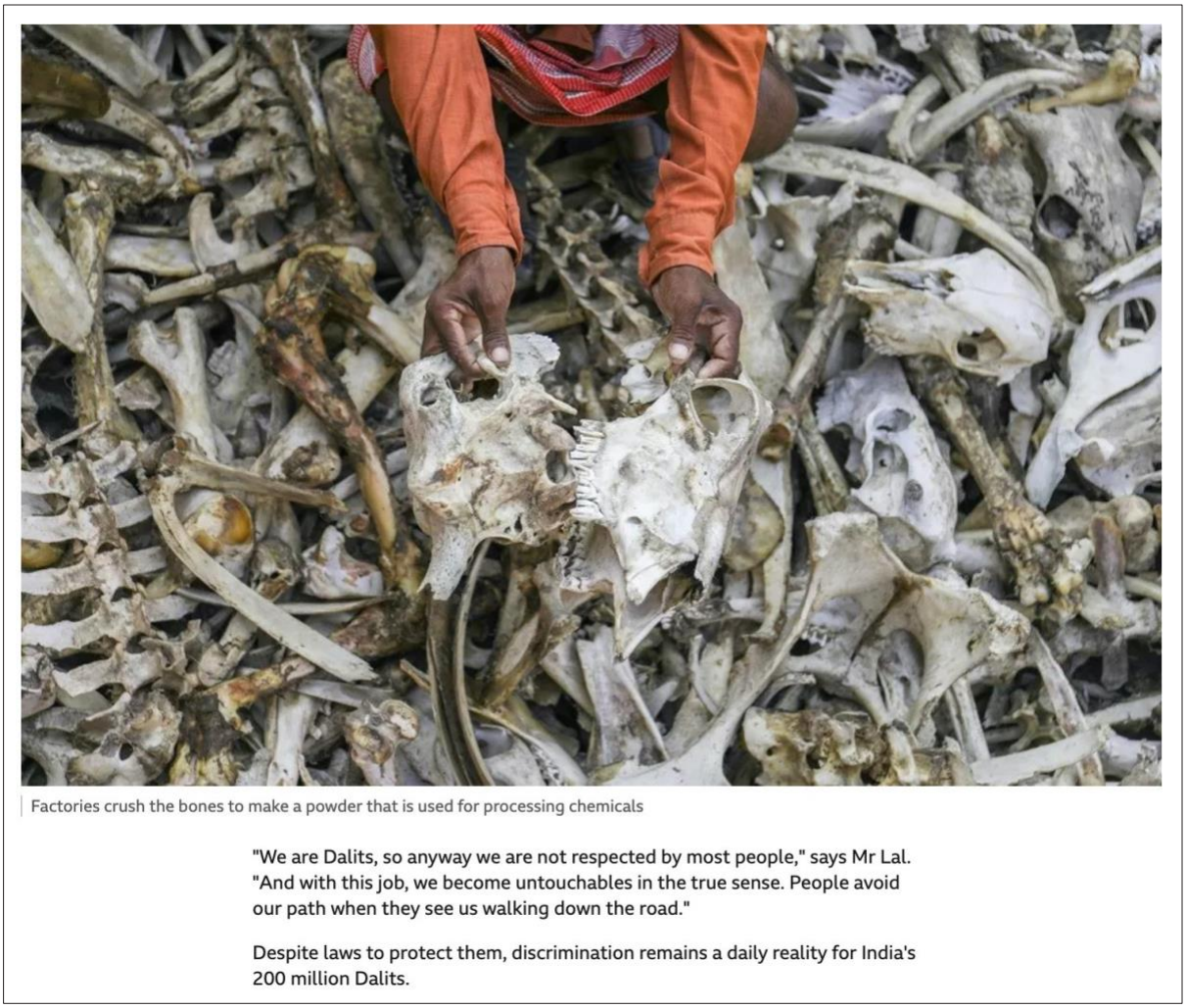
While this has led to fears and economic losses for Untouchable castes[14] and minorities[15] that have historically been confined in related occupations as well as dependent on certain diets, enacting the cow protection agenda serves a political purpose which can be read within the context of purity as associated with the caste system. In the majority of India, the consumption of beef is a cultural trait usually associated with Untouchables and religious minorities, while it is simultaneously a cultural taboo amongst most Hindus and in particular, the brahmins.

Pursuing the agenda of cow protection through oppressing marginalised groups like the Untouchables produces certain effects, which subsequently creates new cultural and political precedents that implicate all constituents of the caste system. I am interested in how this phenomenon is shaping culture, identity, and the matter of agencies between the constituents of the caste system in India.

To engage with the discourse on this phenomenon entails introspection into how we are all implicated with the complex systems of knowledge and power, practices and histories that enabled this cultural moment. I am also curious about how reading caste and untouchability through the sacredness attributed to the cow may point to possible similarities in identity formation and agency between the subjects of caste.

14 "Why India's Bone Collectors Are Living in Fear." *BBC News*, 12 Apr. 2018, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-in- dia-43710957.

15 "'You May as Well Kill Us': Human Cost of India's Meat 'Ban.'" *BBC News*, 30 Mar. 2017, www.bbc.com/news/world- asia-india-39427552.



Factories crush the bones to make a powder that is used for processing chemicals

"We are Dalits, so anyway we are not respected by most people," says Mr Lal. "And with this job, we become untouchables in the true sense. People avoid our path when they see us walking down the road."

Despite laws to protect them, discrimination remains a daily reality for India's 200 million Dalits.

Fig. 1 - A screenshot from the BBC's 2018 report "Why India's Bone Collectors Are Living in Fear". The report interviews members of a Dalit caste who collect bones for a living, and who now live in fear of violence and anxiety over how to sustain themselves, because of the state government's ban on cattle slaughter and the suspicions it raises for occupations even associated with it. (Photograph in screenshot by Ankit Srinivas).

Fig. 2 - From the streets of Dharavi (Mumbai), a slum settlement where a low-caste community of potters live and work. Many Hindu goddesses are depicted with multiple limbs, this particular cow happened to be born with an extra set. Her owner thus takes her through residential areas where she is personified as goddess with multiple limbs, while onlookers donate both food and money to her owner. (Image by author, 2015)

1. Framing the Research

1.1 Historical Origins of Caste

On the subject of the origins of caste, academics in the fields of history, anthropology and sociology cite the significance of the Aryans, an ancient ethnic agro-pastoralist group from Central Asia, who moved into the Indian subcontinent around 2000 BCE where the Indus Valley Civilisation was situated. They brought with them "an early version of Sanskrit, mastery over horses and a range of new cultural practices such as sacrificial rituals, all of which formed the basis of early Hindu/Vedic culture."[16]

One position is that of the Aryan Invasion[17] theory, which argues that the Aryans, as an agro-pastoralist group, invaded the Indian subcontinent and subjugated the native tribal population who were settled in the Indus Valley. These tribes were largely agrarian and therefore less likely to have advanced weaponry, lived in separated hamlets and interacted with each other for social and economic purposes. The theory argues that their subjugation led to either their displacement, or their enslavement at the hands of the Aryans who introduced the caste system by assigning various occupational roles to different tribes.

In contrast, the Aryan Migration theory suggests that the group actually migrated and intermingled with the settled agriculturist tribes, established a system of patronage[18] by providing protection to local tribes against other invaders, and created powerful new castes by mixing with local elites through the process of tribal initiation[19]. The growth of this pattern ushered in a feudalising effect entailing new divisions of labour and hierarchies, and a radical change in settlements from separated hamlets to neighbouring villages. Disintegrating or already subjugated tribes thus resorted to specialising in particular occupations as the self-sufficiency of

16 Joseph, Tony. "How Ancient DNA May Rewrite Prehistory in India." *BBC News*, 30 Dec. 2018, www.bbc.com/news/ world-asia-india-46616574.

17 This theory was developed in the 1850s by the Orientalist Max Muller and was built on later by future scholars.

18 Thapar, Romila. "The Theory of Aryan Race and India: History and Politics." *Social Scientist*, vol. 24, no. No. 1/3, Jan. 1996, pp. 3–29, https://doi.org/10.2307/3520116.

19 Bandhu, P., and T. G. Jacob. "A Note on Adivasi Economics and Politics." *Encountering The Adivasi Question: South Indian Narratives*, Studera Press, New Delhi, 2019, pp. 249–256.

the tribal model was collapsing, and as social defence mechanisms, closed initiations to outsiders, adopted the practice of endogamy, and abandoned the communal model of sharing lands and water resources by asserting ownership as joint family units[20] to ensure property would remain within the tribe. Modern scholarship largely favours this theory.

The opposing conclusions from the two theories are of significance with regard to how tribes in the subcontinent transformed and began showing features of caste as we know it today. If the Aryans were invaders, the emergence of the caste system could be seen as the result of one race's domination over another, and maintained by segregating and ordering the subjugated population from the ruling class. If the Aryans were migrants however, then the caste system may be interpreted as a practice emergent from the complicity of the elite natives and the submission of the weaker ones, and therefore an indigenous development.

The debate between academics and ideologues[21] on opposite ends of the political spectrum continues as evidence supporting the migration theory continues to be uncovered. The decline of the Indus Valley Civilisation, attributed to a decline in trade and environmental factors, is estimated to have begun in 1900 BCE, roughly around the time that the Aryans arrived, and is complete by 1300 BCE. What follows is the Vedic period from 1500-500 BCE, a time in which the Vedas, the oldest sacred texts, begin to emerge and from which modern day Hinduism draws lineage from.

As the sacred texts are attributed to multiple authors and have seen numerous interpolations over time, establishing the precise date of composition has political implications. Present day right-wing[22] elements seek to date the texts as preceding the arrival of the Aryans, however, mentions of materials and artifacts in the texts provide enlightening insights.

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20 Bandhu, P., and T. G. Jacob. "A Note on Adivasi Economics and Politics." *Encountering The Adivasi Question: South Indian Narratives*, Studera Press, New Delhi, 2019, pp. 249–256.

21 An additional fringe theory emerged in the late 1990s, referred to as the "Out of India" theory, which is premised on the notion that Aryans were neither invaders nor migrants, and were actually indigenous to India and spread towards Central Asia and Europe.

22 Pathak, Vikas. "DU Sanskrit Meet Pushes Back Period of Vedas to 6000 BC." *The Hindu*, 26 Sept. 2015, www.thehin- du.com/news/national/du-sanskrit-meet-pushes-back-period-of-vedas-to-6000-bc/article7692864.ece.

One such mention being that of the chariot in the oldest Vedic text, the *Rig Veda*, a text composed of hymns in the ancient Sanskrit language around 1500 BCE[23]. In the text, the warrior god Indra rides a chariot of horses against his enemies to secure land and water for his people (who referred to as the *arya*). Archaeological studies determine that as the "Indus Valley Civilization was a pre-horse society"[24], we can assume that the Aryans, who brought horses and cattle-rearing practices to the subcontinent mingled with the native cultures and together produced a cultural confluence, which finds allegorical representation in the earliest of the Vedic texts.

The Vedic corpus, although not a historical nor a scriptural work in the Western understanding, is identified as the earliest textual evidence about civilisation in the Indian subcontinent. The corpus includes hymns in which tales of gods, instructions for religious ceremonies and rituals, and reflections on morality, consciousness and reality, are all included. Their influence on the development of the institution of caste is evident in later texts that drew from them, such as the legal treatise *Manusmriti*, which I will reference in the following section.

One distinct feature about the ancient sacred texts is their following of the Indian tradition of open scholarship, which entails multiple authors writing in the same voice, interpolations and revisions made centuries apart, and therefore configuring these texts not only as philosophical reflections on culture, state and society, but as representations of the past that were constantly being iterated and reiterated.

Therefore, those with access to the technology to create narratives for representation and influencing social organisation, have great power in shaping state, culture and society, as well as what is admitted into the historical and cultural archives.

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23 The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Rigveda." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 17 Sept. 2022, https://www.britanni- ca.com/topic/Rigveda.

24 Reich, David. "The Collision That Formed India." *The Caravan Magazine*, 1 Oct. 2018, https://caravanmagazine.in/ science-technology/what-genetics-reveals-about-indian-origins. Accessed 4 July 2023.

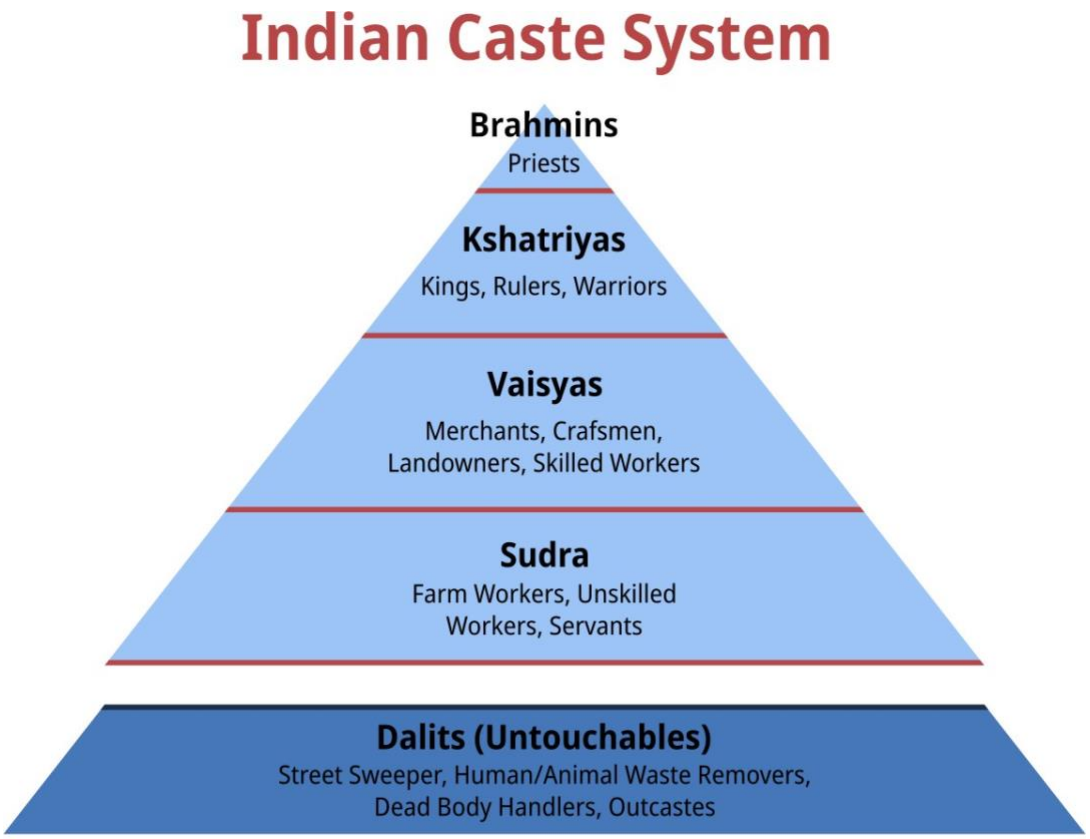

Fig. 3 - A diagram of the Indian caste system used to teach the concept, by Donald Johnson and Jean Johnson, who served as editors-in-chief of the teacher's guide "India: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives" (New York: Asia Society, 2004).

1.2 Organising Caste and Prescribing Purity

The earliest mention of the castes by name in the Vedic texts occurs in a hymn in the *Rig Veda*, the first text in the Vedic corpus, composed between 1500-1000 BCE. The hymn in question is the *Purusha Sukta*[25], which narrates the creation of the universe through describing the sacrifice of a cosmic man, a primeval being called the *Purusha*. From this being, the elements of nature, the seasons and animals are created, but when describing the emergence of humankind, the hymn narrates the birth of humans through their caste identities, essentially equating creation with classification:

> "When they divided Puruṣha how many portions did they make?
> What do they call his mouth, his arms? What do they call his thighs and feet?
> The *Brahman* was his mouth,
> of both his arms was the *Rājanya [Kshatriya]* made.
> His thighs became the *Vaiśya,*
> from his feet the *Śūdra* was produced."[26]

This hymn is the only instance in the Vedic corpus where the caste identities are mentioned by name.

In the legal treatise *Manusmriti*, which drew from the Vedas and was codified in 200 CE[27], the caste identities are consistently mentioned with regard to the occupations they are assigned, as well as in relation to laws made specific to each caste. Where the Vedas differ from the Manusmriti in that regard, are that while the former communicates ideals for society more allegorically, the latter employs more instructional and prescriptive language, and essentially creates different social practices and legal systems for each caste.

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25 Jamison, Stephanie W., and Joel P. Brereton. "SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ORGANIZATION." *The Rigveda: The Earliest Religious Poetry of India,* Oxford University Press, New York, New York, 2014, pp. 57–58.

26 I have italicised caste names in this excerpt. The remainder of this thesis will referring to the *Brahman* as "Brahmin", the *Rājanya* as "Kshatriya", the *Vaiśya* as "Vaishya", and the *Śūdra* as "Shudra", to establish continuity with how these caste names are used conventionally in present day discourse.

27 Pattanaik, Devdutt. "What Exactly Is the Manusmriti?" *DailyO*, 1 Feb. 2017, www.dailyo.in/lifestyle/hindus-ma- nu-dharmashastra-manusmriti-vedas-devdutt-pattanaik-mythology-15412.

Framed as a dialogue between a teacher and his disciple, the fame of the Manusmriti was known known “long before the arrival of the British”[28] and served as the basis for modern Hindu law[29] when British colonial rule solidified. It narrates 1034 laws towards the brahmins and 971 to the kshatriyas. In contrast, only 8 laws are attributed to the vaishyas, and 2 to the shudras, the descriptions for which are extraordinarily brief[30].

The fifth group, the undefined “outcastes”, or Untouchables, are unseen in the hymn of the cosmic man, and also do not appear by one unitary name in the Manusmriti. The text vaguely refers to “outcastes” without specifying one single occupation or trait. It alludes to them with contempt, sometimes defining them as the children[31] of brahmin women who procreated with the lower shudra men, or as past-life sinners, or as engaged in the most polluting labour. In ancient travelogues from non-native visitors, they are described as living separate from the rest of society, and as meat-eaters who engage in hunting, fishing and butchery.[32]

The text places great emphasis on the matter of purity and instructions for its maintenance, particularly for brahmins (priests) and kshatriyas (kings), while simultaneously contradicting itself at various points. For example, when a close or extended family member dies, an individual is temporarily tainted with impurity, however the duration of impurity differ per caste: “A Brahmin is purified in ten days, a Kshatriya in twelve, a Vaishya in fifteen, and a Shudra in a month”.[33] Yet, in the very following section, the text states that the “taint of impurity does not affect kings,

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28 Olivelle, Patrick. “Introduction.” *Manu’s Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the Mānava-Dharmaśās- tra*, Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, 2007, pp. 3.

29 Bilimoria, Purushottama, “The Idea of Hindu Law”, *Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia,* Volume 43, 2011, pp. 103–130.

30 Olivelle, Patrick. “Sources of Manu: The Traditions of *dharma* and *artha*.” *Manu’s Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the Mānava-Dharmaśāstra*, Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, 2007, pp. 40–41.

31 Although the Manusmriti idealises endogamy, it permits upper caste males to marry females of lower castes, though frowns upon the union, and instructs that the upper caste male must not allow the lower caste female to exert great influence over the conduct specific to his own caste. As such, it also makes provisions for upper caste males to have multiple wives pro- vided they be lower in the caste hierarchy. For higher caste women to marry and produce children with men of lower castes however, both parties are ostracised.

32 Fâ-Hien. “A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms.” Translated by James Legge, *The Project Gutenberg eBook of A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms, by Fâ-Hien,* Mar. 2000, www.gutenberg.org/files/2124/2124-h/2124-h.htm.

33 Olivelle, Patrick. “Chapter 5.” *Manu’s Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the Mānava-Dharmaśāstra*, Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, 2007, pp. 142-143.

votaries, and those engaged in a sacrificial session; for they are seated on the seat of Indra and are ever one with *brahman*"[34].

The text also configures particular human bodies as agents of pollution. If a woman has recently given birth, she must observe a period of impurity, while her husband merely has to bathe to restore his own. A woman can also cause impurity if menstruating. With regards to the shudras in the fourth rank, as well as outcastes, if a brahmin were to see one in a public area, or touch one, or even touch someone who has touched one, he would require a ritual of purification which may include sipping water immediately, or bathing and reciting religious verses.[35]

As such, the laws in the Manusmriti which recommend segregating the three upper castes from the shudras in the fourth rank, cursorily refer to the outcastes as well. For example, regarding whom to never share living spaces with, one law specifies both "outcastes" as well as "lowest-born people"[36], suggesting that despite the differences between the two, there are similarities in how they are regarded.

However, noting that caste primarily orders the division of labour, a high-born brahmin is as dependent on a low-born washerwoman for the cleaning of his clothes as she is on him for funerary rites, permanent segregation is not practical. The separation of the pure from the polluting is not fixed but maintained. "A lower caste person does not have a polluting effect while performing his duty to the higher caste"[37] as this interaction constitutes "a religious exchange of services"[38]. Rituals of purity serve as remedies for upper caste interactions with lower castes that accidentally occur outside this framework, while within the framework, the higher castes can avail the services from polluting castes, without fear of a permanent loss

34 Italicised in Patrick Olivelle's original translation. The word "brahman" in this instance, though etymologically relat- ed to the caste name, is used to refer to a principle of supreme reality, consciousness, and signifies auspicious qualities.

35 Olivelle, Patrick. "Chapter 4." *Manu's Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the Mānava-Dharmaśāstra*, Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, 2007, pp. 120-143

36 Olivelle, Patrick. "Chapter 4." *Manu's Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the Mānava-Dharmaśāstra*, Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, 2007, pp. 120-143

37 Mickevičienė, Diana. "Concept of Purity in the Studies of the Indian Caste System". *Acta Orientalia Vilnensia,* Vol. 4, Dec. 2003, pp. 242, doi:10.15388/AOV.2003.18279.

38 Mickevičienė, Diana. "Concept of Purity in the Studies of the Indian Caste System". *Acta Orientalia Vilnensia*, Vol. 4, Dec. 2003, pp. 242, doi:10.15388/AOV.2003.18279.

of purity.

What is also notable about the text is the particular emphasis it places on the brahmin's role in society, by drawing on his attributes as they relate to other castes. The text lists the virtuous activities that a brahmin should do to maintain his purity and virtuousness, while simultaneously addressing activities for other castes that contribute to their own virtue and purity, in relation to the brahmin himself.

Even in the case of kings, arguably the only caste-identity that could contend with the brahmin for superiority, the virtue of the kshatriya (king) is dependent on the "refusal to turn back in battle, protecting the subjects, and obedient service to Brahmins—for kings, these are the best mean of securing happiness".[39] Morality, purity and virtue become both the brahmin's mission, as well as his attributes. 'Doing' virtuous activities, and 'being' virtuous become inseparable in the brahmin identity, suggesting that anyone else aspiring towards such an identity should emulate the brahmin, or effectively be in service of brahmin-ism.

In the instances of transgressing these laws and codes of conduct, either deliberately or inadvertently, punishments and penances are also particularised per caste. If a shudra man engages in consensual sexual relations with a higher caste woman, he may face a loss of possessions, corporal punishment or loss of life, while for higher castes, the penalty may be a monetary fine.

The brahmin male is treated markedly different, for if he should sexually assault a woman, the punishment would result in a fine, or shaving his head, which the text (compiled in 200 CE) treats as a brahmin death penalty[40]. While the Manusmriti considers an actual death penalty applicable to other castes, only in the case of the brahmin male is the death penalty more of a theatrical gesture. Additionally, the text also decrees that no matter the sin, a brahmin should never be executed.

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39 Olivelle, Patrick. "Introduction." *Manu's Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the Mānava-Dharmaśās- tra*, Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, 2007, pp. 39

40 Olivelle, Patrick. "Chapter 8." *Manu's Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the Mānava-Dharmaśāstra*, Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, 2007, pp. 187

Bearing in mind the amount of laws dedicated towards the brahmins and the kshatriyas, the focus on maintaining purity in relation to women, lower castes and outcastes, it can be inferred that the Manusmriti is a code of conduct for upper castes, and particularly for brahmins. Brahmin males are thus framed as eternal carriers of the highest amount of purity, while on the other end of the spectrum, women are configured as cyclical carriers of impurity, while low castes and outcastes as perpetual carriers and therefore a constant existential nuisance to the pure.

It can be inferred that the ultimate project of caste, as dictated through the Manusmriti, is to realise a society in which all constituents operate on a common belief that they are elements of a whole, but only in relation to the hierarchy as described by religion. How the text imagines such a society is through instilling into all constituents of caste, a sense of segregating oneself from those who carry a polluting touch, while simultaneously aspiring towards the level of purity of the brahmin.

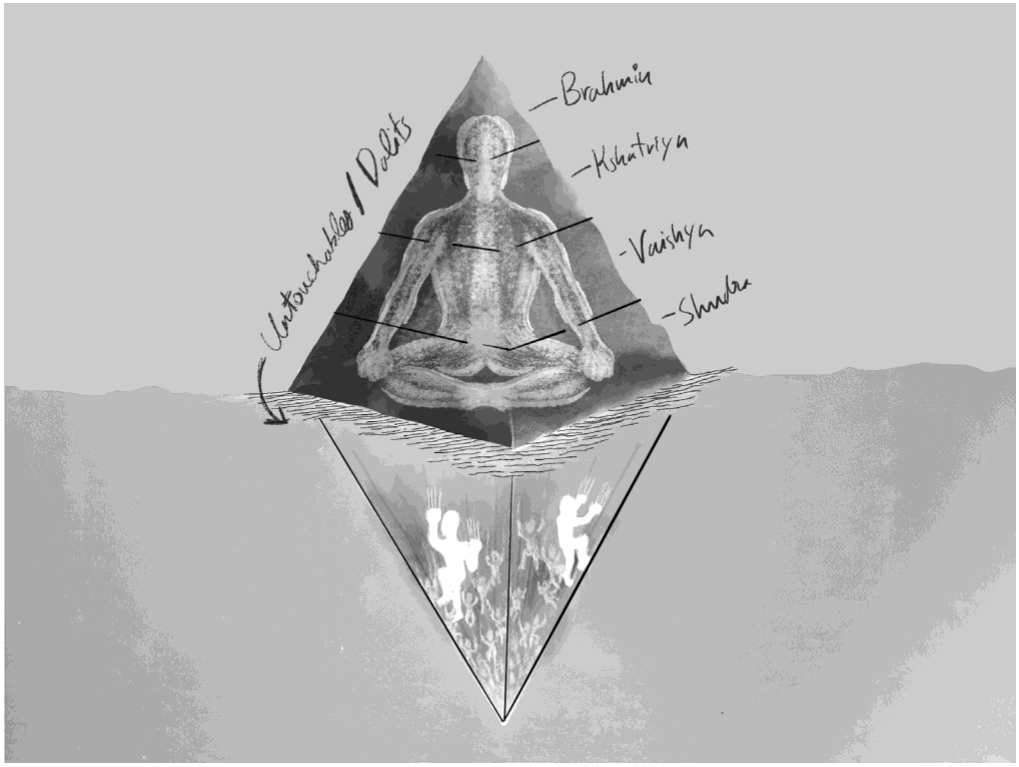

Fig. 4 - An interpretation of the caste diagram from the "Purusha Sukta" hymn, in which the unseen Untouchables are found as excluded from the system yet beneath it. (Image by author).

1.3 The Sacred Cow Mother

The unique situation of the brahmin in the context of a society that holds his conduct to the highest of standards, is where the cow as a sacred animal becomes relevant, as the latter becomes entwined in maintaining the purity of the former. According to the Manusmriti, should a brahmin commit homicide, the penalty is decided based on the caste-identity of the victim. If the victim was a kshatriya, the brahmin may purify himself by donating 1000 cows and 1 bull. If the victim was another brahmin, a temporary 3-year exile as a wandering ascetic is ordered. If the victim was a vaishya, the same exile but for 1 year, or a donation of 100 cows and 1 bull, and if the victim was a shudra, a 6-month exile or a donation of 10 cows and 1 bull.

In other transgressions considered unbecoming of a brahmin's code of conduct, the cow is once again recalled as a tool for purification and penance. Should a brahmin drink liquor, one amongst various penances are to drink "boiling-hot cow's urine, water, milk, ghee, or watery cow dung until he dies"[41].

Should a brahmin accidentally kill a cow[42], his penance would involve bathing in cow urine, living in a cow pen wrapped in the hide of the same cow and attending to a herd for 3 months. Once this period is complete, he should give 10 cows and 1 bull, or all his possessions to one who is versed in the Vedic texts (by this definition, the recipient would most likely be another brahmin).

Additionally, the cow is also mentioned in other Hindu texts in a variety of contexts. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, an allegorical text considered a moral treatise, the major deity Krishna is depicted as a cowherd and a cow protector. In the *Arthashastra*, an instructional text on statecraft and economy, the activities of cattle-rearing and cow protection are considered economically significant as well as virtuous. In a myth from the epic poem *Mahabharata*, a wish-granting cow goddess

41 Olivelle, Patrick. "Chapter 10." *Manu's Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the Mānava-Dharmaśāstra*, Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, 2007, pp. 219

42 Olivelle, Patrick. "Chapter 10." *Manu's Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the Mānava-Dharmaśāstra*, Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, 2007, pp. 220-221

named Kamadhenu emerges and comes to be seen as both a deity, as well as the abode of deities.[43]

In the Manusmriti, five materials/products obtained from the cow make distinct appearances in purification rituals and religious ceremonies and are repeatedly referred to as sacred offerings. These materials/products are milk, curd, ghee (purified butter), urine, and dung. However, as evinced from the penance for a transgressing brahmin, the cow is materialised as a sacred offering herself.

In an economic sense, the cow enables and supports a variety of industries and occupations. The first three of the sacred offerings are products used in diet, while urine is used medicinally, dung as fertiliser and cooking fuel, and both as disinfectants. The cow thus supports sustenance, hygiene, and economy, each of the sacred offerings comes with an associated practice.

The possibilities the cow enables in both the material world as well as in the religious-cultural institution of caste subsequently earn her the moniker *"gau mata"*, translated as "cow mother", a source of the material that supports actual life, a site for the performance of virtue, and an object for the restoration of purity.

43 Korom, Frank J. "Holy Cow! The Apotheosis of Zebu, or Why the Cow Is Sacred in Hinduism." Asian Folklore Studies, vol. 59, no. 2, 2000, pp. 194. JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/1178915. Accessed 13 June 2023.

Fig. 5 - A gouache painting titled "Sri Krsna with the flute" dated to c. 1790-1800. The painting depicts the major deity Krishna as a cowherd, surrounded by cows as well as milkmaids. Krishna is considered a supreme god and plays a major role in the sacred text, the "Bhagavad Gita", in which he helps the legendary prince Arjuna overcome many moral dilemmas while going into war. (Image from the Freer Gallery Collection, artist unknown).

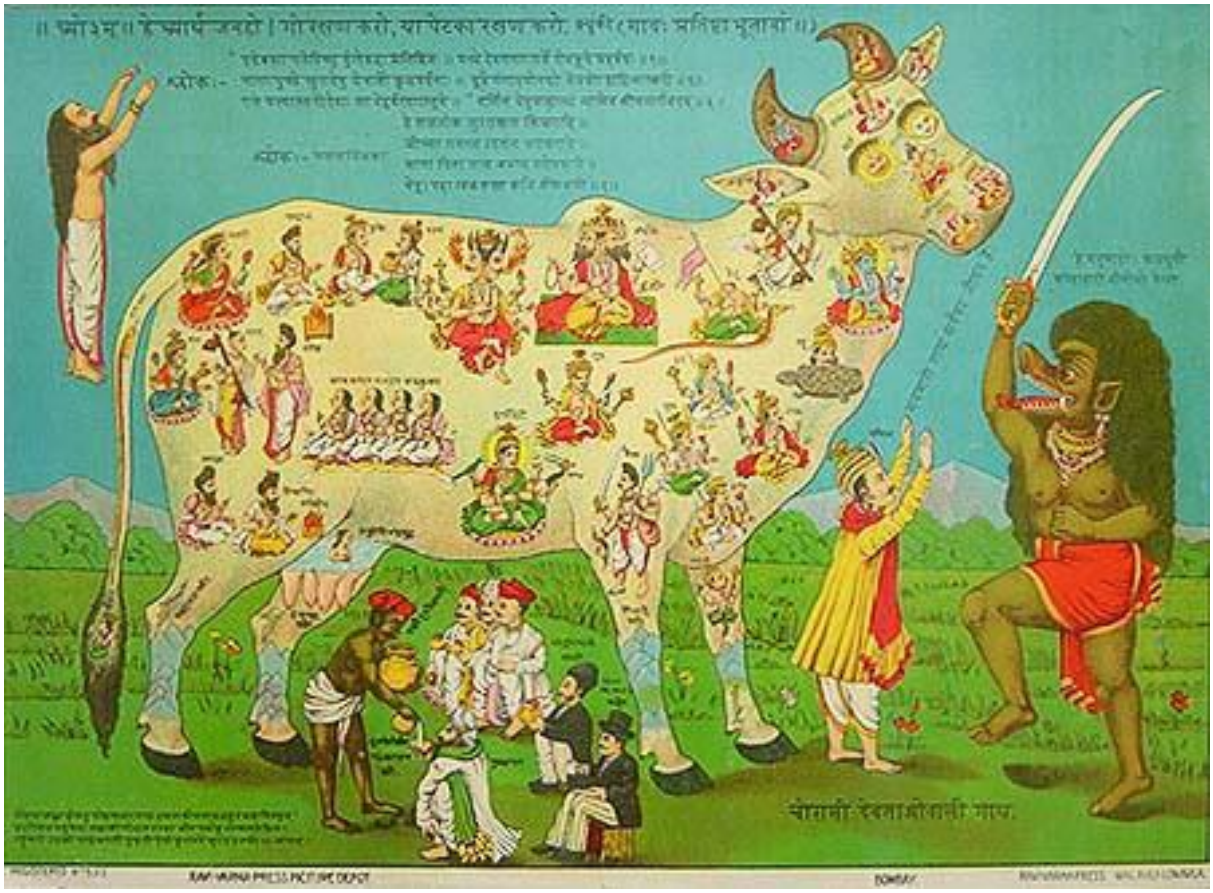

Fig. 6 - An 1897 lithograph by the painter Raja Ravi Varma, in which the wish-granting cow goddess, Kamadhenu, is seen with numerous deities scattered all over her body while offering milk to humans near her udders. Ahead of her is a demon with a sword who arrives to slay her, while a man in front of her persuades the demon not to. (Image by the artist Raja Ravi Varma, published by the Ravi Varma Press, Karla Lonavla).

1.4 The Sacred as Material

While present day notions on the cow's sacredness would signify she is inviolable, numerous references in Vedic texts point to the sacrifice of the cow as a sacred act itself. The sacrifice of animals such as the cow, ox and horse, is a recurring feature of Vedic culture and played a quintessential role in the religion. The sacrifice could entail slaughter and then dedicating the animal into a sacred fire, or a slaughter followed by the "priestly caste and custodial performers of the sacrifice, [eating] readily of the consecrated beef"[44].

In an excerpt[45] from one of the texts in the Vedic corpus, dated to c. 1200-800 BCE, is a commentary by the ancient sage Yajnavalkya:

> Let him not eat (the flesh) of either the cow or the ox; for the cow and the ox doubtless support everything here on earth.
>
> ...
>
> Hence, were one to eat (the flesh) of an ox or a cow, there would be, as it were, an eating of everything, or, as it were, a going on to the end (or, to destruction). Such a one indeed would be likely to be born (again) as a strange being, (as one of whom there is) evil report, such as 'he has expelled an embryo from a woman,' 'he has committed a sin;' let him therefore not eat (the flesh) of the cow and the ox. Nevertheless Yajnavalkya said, "I, for one, eat it, provided that it is tender.

In an excerpt from the Manusmriti, a product made of cow remains is referenced for the penance of a transgressing brahmin who in "killing a licentious woman belong[ing] to any of the four classes, he should give a leather bag, a bow, a goat, and a sheep, respectively."[46]

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44 Korom, Frank J. "Holy Cow! The Apotheosis of Zebu, or Why the Cow Is Sacred in Hinduism." Asian Folklore Studies, vol. 59, no. 2, 2000, pp. 187. JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/1178915. Accessed 13 June 2023.

45 This excerpt is from the *Śatapatha Brāhmana* section in the *Yajur Veda*, the third of the four Vedic texts, which is best known for containing extensive knowledge with regard to prayers, rituals and sacrificial worship.

46 Olivelle, Patrick. "Chapter 11." *Manu's Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the Mānava-Dharmaśāstra*, Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, 2007, pp. 222

Fig. 7 - A photograph from 2008 of a Hindu priest from the Nambudiri caste in Kerala, India, performing a Yajna (the Sanskrit word for "sacrifice") by throwing offerings into a consecrated fire. (Image by Ashish Bhatnagar, Wikimedia Commons).

Both excerpts are noteworthy for their insights into the economic activities and the shape of culture contemporaneous to their composition.

While the much older Vedic texts can be regarded as representations of society's ideals, their content can be viewed as philosophical dialogues on culture, rather than mandates. The cow features as an important entity in the corpus, and various Vedic texts make reference to both its sacredness, as well as the desirability of consuming her flesh after sacred ritual sacrifice as well as domestic rites[47].

The excerpt by Yajnavalkya, figuratively links the integral role of the cow in the economy with a deserved sacredness, while simultaneously making reference to feasting on its flesh as a matter of taste. The commentary may have been made in reaction to a shift in cultural ideals regarding the cow, but in itself, does not signify a dissonance between maintaining cultural ideals as well as one's freedom of choice.

In contrast, while the Manusmriti makes many references towards the sacredness of the cow, it also mentions the use of leather but excludes the cow entirely from its instructions of the sacrifice of other animals. Leather has been used in the subcontinent for some 2 millennia prior to the Manusmriti, and continues to be used, however, the text considers the caste engaged in leather work as amongst the lowest. The text also does not refer to the source of the raw material required for this caste group's occupation, nor to the caste group itself, which when noting the instructions in the excerpt about the penalty, necessitates this caste's labour and access to that very material for the fulfillment of a transgressing brahmin's penance.

While it is established that upper caste purity is not threatened when interaction with polluting castes constitutes a religious exchange of service, from this excerpt, it can be extrapolated that the presence, generational production and productivity of the polluting castes plays a role in the maintenance of purity itself.

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47 Mahaprashasta, Ajoy Ashirwad. "'The Cow Was Neither Unslayable nor Sacred in the Vedic Period.'" *Frontline,* 5 Feb. 2021, frontline.thehindu.com/cover-story/the-cow-was-neither-unslayable-nor-sacred-in-the-vedic-period/arti- cle23593282.ece.

2. Methodology and Methods

2.1 Methodology

This project employs a research-creation methodology as outlined by Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuk. In their article *"Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and "Family Resemblances"*, Chapman and Sawchuk define research-creation projects as epistemological interventions into dominant narratives, which may act as innovative forms of cultural analysis. Research-creation also supports the simultaneous pursuit of the theoretical and creative aspects of the topic to be explored.

Chapman and Sawchuk specify four sub-categories of research-creation which, in the purview of the term 'family resemblances'[48], are interrelated in how they have certain commonalities and differences in how they frame the relationship between research and creative production, and which they support mixing of in the name of experimentation.

As this project explores the contemporary forms of an ancient cultural practice through the themes of touch, purity, identity and culture, I largely look at text-based historical research, and draw on two of the categories from Chapman and Sawchuk's methodology: "research-for-creation" and "creative presentation of research". These approaches entail traditional academic research methods such as reading through primary sources, journal articles, gathering relevant concepts and ideas and important points of reference. They advocate making links with archival sources, analysing the relevant technologies and the history of associated themes, as well as using subjective, tacit knowledges as a way of "being in the game"[49]. They also favour experimental creative practice in exploring the topics of research, such as illustration and creative writing, through methods such as autoethnography.

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48 Chapman, Owen, and Kim Sawchuk. "Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and 'Family Resemblances.'" *Cana- dian Journal of Communication*, vol. 37, no. 1, Apr. 2012, pp. 5–26, https://doi.org/10.22230/cjc.2012v37n1a2489.

49 Chapman, Owen, and Kim Sawchuk. "Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and 'Family Resemblances.'" *Cana- dian Journal of Communication*, vol. 37, no. 1, Apr. 2012, pp. 5–26, https://doi.org/10.22230/cjc.2012v37n1a2489.

Autoethnography[50], as outlined by Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams and Arthur P. Bochner, is a qualitative research approach in which a researcher engages in introspection through documenting personal experiences and observations regarding a specific cultural phenomenon.

By identifying and comparing against existing research and examining relevant cultural artifacts, the researcher can produce an understanding of a culture for insiders and outsiders, and subsequently, depict it patterns through elements of storytelling. In doing so, the researcher explores their own cultural identity and examines its influences on perception.

One technique explained by Ellis, Adams and Bochner in their overview for doing autoethnography is that of the personal narrative. In personal narratives, authors view themselves as the phenomenon and write evocative narratives specifically focused on their academic research, and personal lives, and are advised to be accompanied by more traditional analysis and/or connections to scholarly literature. Personal narratives propose to understand the self or some aspect of a life as it intersects with a cultural context, and "invite the audience to enter the author's world, to reflect on and understand their own lives,"[51] and think of identity as an emergent process.

50 Ellis, Carolyn, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner. "Autoethnography: An Overview." *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, vol. 12, no. 1, Art. 10 Jan. 2011.

51 Ellis, Carolyn, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner. "Autoethnography: An Overview." *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, vol. 12, no. 1, Art. 10 Jan. 2011.

2.2 Concepts and Theories

I am interested in exploring the theory of the emergence of the Untouchable and of the practice of untouchability in its relationality to the figure of the cow in the caste system, as proposed by the scholar and social reformer B.R. Ambedkar, through the concept of the materiality of the body as put forth by gender theorist and philosopher Judith Butler, and the concept of intra-actions as proposed by the physicist and philosopher Karan Barad.

I am also interested in both Judith Butler and Karen Barad's approaches to the notion of the "apparatus", which Butler conceives of as a regulatory, disciplinary mechanism, and which Barad thinks of as a productive one.

Through exploring Ambedkar's theory with Barad and Butler's concepts, I intend to explore the work of the influential Dalit artist Savindra Sawarkar, whose body of work is reflective of his family's and his own experiences as a Dalit, his imagination both informed and inspired by the radical thought of Ambedkar.

B.R. Ambedkar

B.R. Ambedkar, who hailed from a Dalit community, was a prominent Indian jurist, economist, scholar, and social reformer whose academic contributions include his extensive writings on the origins of the caste system and its prevalence.

In his 'Broken Men Theory' Ambedkar proposes that the Untouchables existed prior to the practice of untouchability, and occupied a specific niche in economy which remained a mainstay throughout the evolution of Vedic society. Through studying history, analysing sacred texts and historical artifacts, Ambedkar speculated that the practice of untouchability emerged from a clash between the egalitarian and non-violent philosophy of Buddhism and the threat it posed to the privileged status of the brahmins. In the effort to protect their status, the brahmins exalted the cow as a sacred figure by both adopting the practice of its veneration, and inscribing its sacred status into the sacred texts, linking their purity with it. In doing so, they produced

a framework which solidified their sacred status in state and society, and could be maintained through the practice of untouchability.

Judith Butler

Judith Butler is an American philosopher, gender theorist, and feminist scholar, best known for her work in the field of queer theory and gender studies. In her work “Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex”, Butler discusses her theory of gender performativity, in which she argues that gender is not an inherent or fixed characteristic of the body, but rather a social and performative construct which is regulated by a set of norms established through cultural and linguistic practices.

Butler further argues that performativity is not a singular ‘act’ in time, but a time-related process that entails the iteration and reiteration of that set of norms, which in her theory on gender, views it as an apparatus that materialises the ‘sex’ of the body. Although Butler focuses on gender with regard to the materiality of the body, her theory on performativity suggests that bodies do not just perform gender but can also perform other social constructs.

Karen Barad

Karen Barad is a feminist philosopher and physicist known for their work in the fields of feminist science studies, philosophy of science, and poststructuralist theory. In their theory of “agential realism”, Barad discusses their concept of ‘intra-actions’. While in interactions, bodies are considered as being independent from each other, in Barad’s concept of intra-actions, bodies and their agencies materialise in the specific arrangements of their encounters, existing in a state of mutual entanglement of each other.

In Barad’s view, an apparatus is a tool of measurement, made not only of discursive practices such as language and culture, but also of particular material arrangements, which include not only the phenomena being observed but the

subjectivity of the observer as well. Barad introduces the concept of “agential cuts” to highlight how boundaries are created within the apparatus to differentiate between various entities, including the body. These cuts are not pre-given or natural but are produced through specific practices and discourses. In Barad’s view, performativity plays a role in the materiality of the body, but its materialisation is also entangled with material-discursive practices, such as religion and caste, which shape how bodies are perceived and treated.

2.3 Research Questions

- In what ways can the caste system be understood as an apparatus in relation to the materiality of the body?
- How does the figure of the sacred cow feature in the materialisation of the Untouchable’s body?
- Can a self-representational narrative of an Untouchable’s perception be explored through the material-discursive practices of caste?

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 The Broken Men Theory

In 1948, Ambedkar put forth a hypothesis on the origin of the Untouchable castes and linked it to his later work on beef consumption as the premise of the practice of untouchability. His hypothesis, today known as the “Broken Men Theory”[52], is a subjective interpretation of the historical origins of caste, supported by his own studies of the Manusmriti and other sacred texts concerned with governance, which he aligned with the practice of untouchability as faced by himself and his community.

The theory proposes that in the age of primitive society, recurring intra-tribal warfare between nomadic tribes and those settling into a sedentary way of life continued unevenly as the sedentary tribes became wealthier and less focused on advancing their defence mechanisms. Those sedentary tribes living in areas such as the edges of village settlements or outside the borders were more vulnerable to attacks and would often be either completely annihilated, or defeated to the extent that they would be rendered as “a floating population consisting of groups of Broken tribesmen roaming in all directions”[53].

Now splintered from their original tribal organisation, and in search of any means of survival, these ‘Broken Men’ were left to secure transactional relationships with unharmed tribes by adopting occupations such as patrolmen and would be compensated with surplus food, leftovers, or animal carcasses. However, as outsiders, they were unable to be initiated into the tribe itself, and therefore lived on the edges of the village settlements. Ambedkar concludes this hypothesis with the notion that the ‘Broken Men’ were the pre-Untouchables[54], and lived as second-class members within the tribal framework.

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52 Ambedkar, B. R., et al. “The Broken Men Theory: Beginnings of a Reading.” *Beef, Brahmins, and Broken Men: An Annotated Critical Selection from The Untouchables*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2020, pp. 322–340.

53 Ambedkar, B. R. “Broken Men, The Pre-Untouchables.” *OutlookIndia.com*, 3 Feb. 2022, www.outlookindia.com/ website/story/broken-men-the-pre-untouchables/217661.

54 Ambedkar, B. R. “Broken Men, The Pre-Untouchables.” *OutlookIndia.com*, 3 Feb. 2022, www.outlookindia.com/ website/story/broken-men-the-pre-untouchables/217661.

Ambedkar bridges this section of his hypothesis with the Manusmriti by noting the words “Antya, Antyaja and Antyavasin”, featuring in the Manusmriti as additional descriptors of individuals regarded as part of polluting castes. In his view, the words are derived from the Sanskrit arc word “Anta”, used in sacred texts to denote “the end”, and when attributed to humans, are taken to mean those who are created last. However, Ambedkar ventures to argue that the ‘Untouchable’ already lacks location in the Hindu creation theory, and the ‘last’ place is that of the shudra in the fourth rank. He conjectures that the word actually denotes those who lived at the ends of the city, the village, or the outskirts of any settlement.

Ambedkar links this inference with the emergence of the practice of untouchability itself, which he argued resulted from the clash between Vedic cultural practices of animal sacrifice, and the non-violent philosophy of Buddhism, called *ahimsa*[55]. He situates this section of his hypothesis between the 3rd century BCE and 2nd century CE, when Buddhism was not only adopted as the state religion, but, in Ambedkar’s presupposition of its democratic ethos, was generally more attractive to the public as well as the ‘Broken Men’, who he believed existed in some form as the referents to the ‘outcastes’ mentioned in the Manusmriti.

In his reign from 268-232 BCE, the Buddhist emperor Asoka issued a series of imperial reforms that “displaced the Brahmins from their privileged position”[56], chief among which was a ban on animal sacrifice, the key ritual that had enshrined the position of the priestly brahmins in state structure. These reforms, instituted as rock and pillar carvings, supported Buddhist interpretation of morality, purity and virtue.

In a pillar edict erected in the year 237-236 BCE[57], 22 species of animals are listed as exempted from slaughter, among which is the category of “all quadrupeds

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55 Lodrick, Deryck O. “Symbol and Sustenance: Cattle in South Asian Culture.” *Dialectical Anthropology*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2005, pp. 61–84, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10624-005-5809-8.

56 Olivelle, Patrick. “Introduction.” *Manu’s Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the Mānava-Dharmaśās- tra*, Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, 2007, pp. 43

57 Hultzsch, Eugen. “The Delhi-Topra Pillar.” *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum,* edited by Eugen Hultzsch, vol. 1, Clar- endon Press, Oxford, Oxfordshire, 1925, pp. 119.

which are of no utility and are not eaten”[58]. Ambedkar argues, that as cattle-rearing and the dairy economy had already demonstrated the utility of the cow, its exemption from slaughter could not logically be included in the reform. Additionally, the edicts did not ban eating the flesh of the cow or any domesticated animal for diet, and were founded on the Buddhist principle of non-violence by preventing the “slaughtering animal for sacrifice which [Asoka] regarded as unnecessary”[59].

Ambedkar speculated that Buddhist philosophy, having treated caste hierarchy as more fluid, had essentially issued a challenge to the brahmins, whose superiority was visibly declining as Asoka’s rule created a precedent in which the kshatriya (king) had himself declared new rules for state and society, therefore partly subsuming the role of the priest. To recover lost ground, the brahmins began to venerate the cow and opted to “not only to give up meat-eating but to become vegetarians”[60], while followers of Buddhism continued to eat beef.

Ambedkar further argued that after the decline of this Buddhist empire in the 2nd century CE and the usurping of the throne by a Hindu emperor who had the support of the brahmins at large, their place in state and society was restored. He also speculates that the Mansumriti may have been commissioned by the rulers of this new empire in collaboration with the brahmins, as a means of marking a break from the Buddhist empire that had preceded it.

Ambedkar concludes his hypothesis with stating that with the inscription of a copper-plate in 465-466 CE, which ends on the statement, “killing a cow was looked upon as an offence of the deepest turpitude…as deep as that involved in murdering a Brahman”[61], the practice of untouchability could now be seen in its nascent stage.

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58 Thapar, Romila. “Appendix V.” *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2015, pp. 264–264.

59 Ambedkar, B. R., et al. “Why did the non-Brahmins give up beef-eating?” *Beef, Brahmins, and Broken Men: An Annotated Critical Selection from The Untouchables*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2020, pp. 170

60 Ambedkar, B. R., et al. “What made the Brahmins become vegetarians?” *Beef, Brahmins, and Broken Men: An Anno- tated Critical Selection from The Untouchables*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2020, pp. 195

61 Ambedkar, B. R., et al. “What made the Brahmins become vegetarians?” *Beef, Brahmins, and Broken Men: An Anno- tated Critical Selection from The Untouchables*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2020, pp. 197

B.—Indor Plate of Skandagupta.—The Year 146.

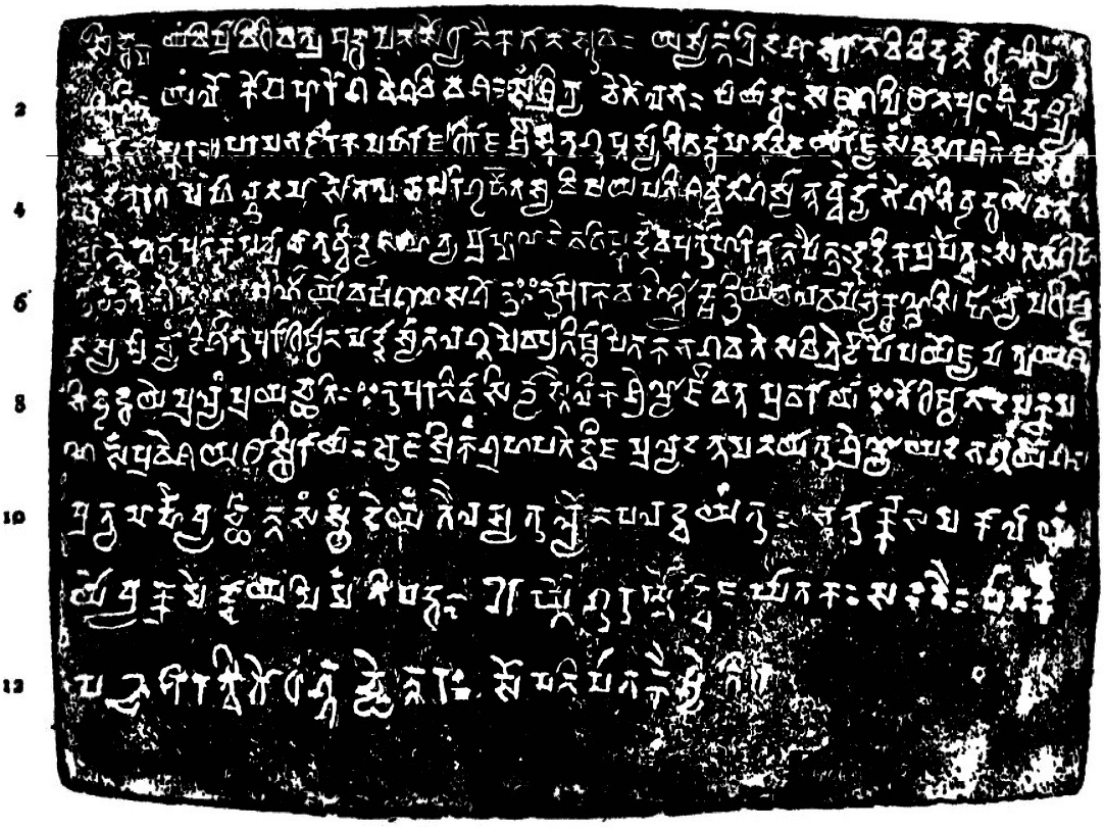

Fig. 8 - Indore Copper-plate Inscription of Skandagupta (465-466 CE) - The very last line states: "Whosoever shall transgress this grant that has been assigned,— that man, (becoming as guilty as) the slayer of a cow, (or) the slayer of a spiritual preceptor, (or) the slayer of a Brâhman, shall go down (into hell), invested with (the guilt of) those (well- known) five sins, together with the minor sins."

(Image by John Fleet, published in "Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum", 1888)

3.2 Contextualising Ambedkar

While in my view, Ambedkar's theory is certainly profound, what it lacks is the material evidence which it conjectures the emergence of untouchability from. In referencing the position of 'Broken Men' in the primitive society section of his hypothesis, he draws attention to his own caste which worked as patrolmen (amongst other duties) for the village which they lived outside of. His delineation between the emergence of the 'Broken Men' as the pre-Untouchables, and the much later emergence of the practice of untouchability is notable, as he theorises an agency in the former which was drastically decreased once consumption of beef became a defining trait for the Untouchables themselves.

Additionally, Ambedkar refers to 'cow-worship' on part of the brahmins as part of a tactic in declaring their superiority to the Buddhists. However, attributing the brahmins alone with deploying worship as a tactic itself, appears somewhat unjust, for to effect such a cultural shift would require the complicity of the state machinery as well. Further, the philosophy of non-violence, 'ahimsa', is not specific to Buddhism alone, it features in other Indic religions such as Jainism. The term itself originated in the very Vedic texts that discriminatory treatises like the Manusmriti emanated from, although it features minimally in the Vedic corpus compared to the Buddhist texts, as well as appearing to mean 'harmlessness'[62] rather than 'non-violence'.

Nevertheless, Ambedkar's approach to both matters must be read in the context of his own identity as a Dalit who sought to uplift his people by communicating their plight. Coming from experiences such as that of his own community and several others being denied access to public water tanks on the premise that their impurity would pollute the shared water resource, his approach being one of defiant materiality via speculation can be read as an effort to produce both tacit and situated knowledge.

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62 Lodrick, Deryck O. "Symbol and Sustenance: Cattle in South Asian Culture." *Dialectical Anthropology*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2005, pp. 61–84, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10624-005-5809-8.

3.3 Materialising the Untouchable Body

In researching the modality of the caste system and its relation with the cow in producing untouchability, themes that consistently emerge are those of purity, labour, hierarchy and sacredness.

However, I am also curious about knowledge in this respect, and the various knowledges associated with caste and how seamlessly they may or may not parse between the various constituents of the caste system. To know how to act towards an Untouchable, would require knowing what marks the body of an untouchable as so. The process of knowing is linked with the process of observing, to then act on a new observation would entail already having a register of what one can see as an embodiment of the profane, an act that could only be associated with an Untouchable who interacts with certain matter, such as cow flesh, cow hide, cow carcass, cow bones.

For an action to take place agency is required, which would entail that knowing and observing is also a material becoming, because an agential enactment must occur for one to become that which one is differentiating oneself from.

The notion of caste materialising the body of the Untouchable then is complex, as the concept of the body's materiality influences our orientation towards the world in both physical and psychological terms and is influenced by specific contexts and locations. Embodiment is a performative aspect of existence, subject to individual interpretations and improvisations. Abstract models provided by dominant cultures shape cultural practices, but it is in their enactment that these practices materialize, thereby influencing the inculturation of the body. Since these practices are performative and specific to particular contexts, they inherently incorporate improvisational elements. The combination of incorporating and inscribing practices collaboratively creates cultural constructs.

Judith Butler expanded on these notions of integrating and inscribing practices and emphasized how the physicality of the body is a creation that arises within power

dynamics, shaping its structure and imprinting it with ideas such as biological sex and gender. Butler questions traditional interpretations of creation and the linguistic frameworks employed when discussing it.

According to her, creation is not a singular action or a straightforward process initiated by an individual resulting in fixed outcomes. Instead, creation is temporal, operating through the repetitive reinforcement of norms. When Butler describes the physicality of the body as a creation, she avoids relying on linguistic determinism or cultural constructivism. She underscores that creation presupposes the presence of someone or something (like culture, discourse, or power) accountable for the action, suggesting the existence of an 'other' cultural and discursive realm from which the individual body emerges, only to discover itself already fixed in a representation that predates[63] them.

By refuting metaphysical assertions and dismissing the subject's agency in favor of a substitute agent, Butler presents the physicality of the body as stemming from a complex network of power relations, with agency emerging after the materialization through enactments. This perspective reveals the constructed nature of the naturalized concepts of social constructs such as gender and its associations with sex. Butler views social constructs, such as gender, as the apparatus, built on discursive practices, that materialises the body. Its performance involves a continual repetition of regulatory norms, and it is through this performance that the materiality of the body comes into being. While theatrical performances have actors preceding their roles, the performance of dominant norms leads individuals to become the roles they inhabit. Thus bodies are not born into the construct ascribed to them, but rather perform it.

Karen Barad however thinks of the notion of discursive practices associated with performativity as limited, in that the emphasis placed on language supersedes

63 Butler, Judith. "Introduction." *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, Routledge, London, 2015, pp. 12–13.

what is being defined. Barad places importance on ‘phenomena’ rather than practices, which are produced from the apparatus. Barad thinks of the apparatus as a tool of measurement, in which what is being observed, the “object”, and the observer, the “subject”, are part of the material arrangements of that apparatus. The knowledge produced from this apparatus is thus an entanglement between both what is being measured, as well as the subjectivity of the observer themselves.

Barad thus thinks of the apparatus as ‘productive’, in the sense that it produces knowledge, but as a momentary stabilisation, keeping in mind that the observer exercises agency in interpreting the knowledge produced. Barad’s concept of “intra-actions” becomes relevant at this juncture. When bodies interact, they do so with a degree of independence from each other, however, when bodies “intra-act”[64], they do so in co-constitutive ways, such that individual entities materialise and their mutually entangled agencies emerge from within the relationship. These bodies do not exist without each other as abstract, independent individuals, but do is in relation.

In Butler’s conceptualisation of the apparatus, the Untouchable body inhabits its own untouchability in a self-reflexive manner, aligning itself with the discursive practices that precede it. Barad’s apparatus sees the Untouchable body as implicated in its own materialisation, bringing into view agency and ethics in an entangled way in which agencies become intra-agencies that operate within apparatuses to produce effects and mutual agential cuts.

In Barad’s conceptualisation, the intra-active relationality between Untouchables and non-Untouchables reveals the former as embodying the potential for the experience of marginalisation and the latter embodies the potential for ostracisation upon contact. The Untouchable body emerges only in relation to the non-Untouchable body. In this framework however, with the notion that all bodies may have agency through intra-action, the language of power that underlies their

64 Murris, Karin, et al. “Intra-Action.” *A Glossary for Doing Postqualitative, New Materialist and Critical Posthumanist Research Across Disciplines,* Routledge, Abingdon, Oxfordshire, 2022, pp. 70–71.

mutual differentiation is not accounted for. Enacting a mutual differentiation delimits the possibility of touch for both in their mutual entanglement in a history of conflict.

Applying Butler's understanding of performativity in critiquing the social construct of caste may lead to the new possibility of questioning the validity of the category itself. To be "Dalit" is not merely to inhabit the body of an Untouchable, as the word is a political identity. As Dalits, we refer to ourselves as 'Dalits' in the context of political protests[65], agitations for our rights, as well as in a form of counter-culture such as beef-eating[66] festivals.

However, in governmental or institutional documentation, which require individuals to list whether they are of a particular caste category, Dalits would write specifically "Scheduled Caste". A Western equivalent of the same practice would be when students applying to universities, or individuals making job applications, are asked to self-identify if they belong to a minority. The word "Dalit" by itself cannot have come into being without the Untouchable body already having been materialised through caste, to identify as "Dalit" is an agential enactment.

Caste is not only discursive, as it materialises bodies through the measuring of purity and through the production of impurity, creating boundaries that define what is touchable to each constituent of the system, in turn serving to consolidate caste-identity. In thinking with Barad's 'apparatus', I imagine if in the future, a new terminology could emerge or be used to understand the relational agencies between Untouchables and non-Untouchables. In seeking to understand the apparatus as a way to produce phenomena, I explore the possibility of a creative self-representational narrative which encapsulates an Untouchable's perception of the material-discursive practices of caste.

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65 Yengde, Suraj. "The Harvest of Casteism: Race, Caste and What It Will Take to Make Dalit Lives Matter." *The Caravan Magazine*, 3 July 2020, caravanmagazine.in/essay/race-caste-and-what-it-will-take-to-make-dalit-lives-matter.

66 "Violence Breaks out at Indian Beef-Eating Festival." *BBC News*, 16 Apr. 2012, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-in- dia-17727379.

3.4 Dalit Art and Imagination

In this section I will discuss the work of the influential Dalit artist Savindra Sawarkar, and his depictions of the experience of the Untouchable, as well as the Untouchable's observation of the universe.

Sawarkar was born in 1961, five years after the mass Dalit Buddhist conversions led by Ambedkar which his family had partaken in. As a maker of contemporary narrative art, his imagination both informed and inspired by the radical thought of Ambedkar, Sawarkar has produced a body of work which represents momentary pictorial closures to his own interrogation of caste.

The modality of Sawarkar's art making drew on sources of inspiration from layered locations, distinctly varied by the knowledge networks[67] they emanate from. These include his paternal grandmother narrating tales of the family's Dalit pasts, his study of the lists of disadvantages compiled by Ambedkar in examining the plight of Dalits, parables of Buddhist wisdom, the effect of the only recently accessible Dalit literature, his own experiences both in the Dalit village locales he hailed from and in navigating the capitalist-statist atmosphere of city spaces. The heterogeneity of the sources reveal an artist who cultivated a Dalit imagination by accessing unrecorded histories, nurtured a spiritual perceptiveness that formed his political vision, and sharpened his knowledge of the power dynamics within caste to assess how they impacted gender, politics, perceptions of the self, of history, and of the future.

Through this auto-ethnographic method, Sawarkar contributed pictorially to a movement termed "caste-life narratives"[68] that had largely been literary. Although this movement would see the documentation of those family and personal histories that were still in living memory, Sawarkar's intra-active approach enabled the creation of visuals which encompassed his own experiences, the effect of caste-oriented

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67 Tartakov, Gary Michael, and Saurabh Dube. "A Dalit Iconography of Expressionist Imagination." *Dalit Art and Visual Imagery*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, Delhi, 2012, pp. 251–266.

68 Alone, Y. S. "Caste Life Narratives, Visual Representation, and Protected Ignorance." *Biography,* vol. 40, no. 1, 2017, pp. 140–169, https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2017.0007.

Indian society on the Untouchable's experience and perception of it, as well as the Untouchable's imagination for the way through.

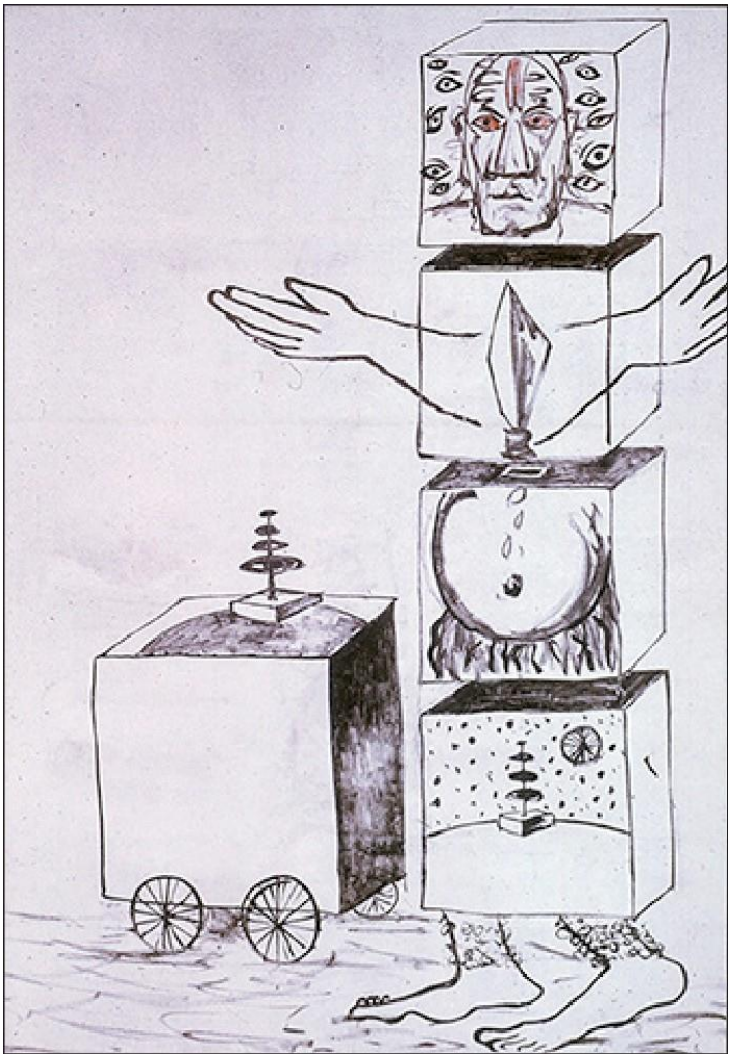

Fig. 9 - A screenshot from the article "Unsettling Art: Caste, Gender & Dalit Expression" by Saurubh Dube, showing the artwork "Foundation of India" by the Dalit artist Savindra Sawarkar.

In this regard, Sawarkar's 1986 oil on canvas painting *Foundation of India* becomes all the more captivating. Painted against a white background, Sawarkar creates a conceptual pictorial of the caste order in the utmost minimal set of conventions. Depicting the order as cubes drawn in black lines, stacked one on top of each other, with each cube's face carrying symbols that represent each class within the caste order, Sawarkar endeavoured to represent the body politic of India. Although represented as being in a vertical stack and seemingly dependent on mutual support, the cubes appear to not touch each other, a visual cue to indicate that while untouchability is a practice seemingly reserved towards Dalits, the caste code of maintaining divisions exudes the same philosophy.

Compositionally, the painting radically reimagines the perception of the caste order as described in the sacred hymns. The dominant Brahmanical narrative employs a visual language which articulates caste through the division of the cosmic man the Purusha, the primeval being, whose head, arms, thighs and feet are meant to be the divine origin points for each of the four caste classes within the system.

Such a visual manifestation in the Brahmanical imagination suggests that the caste order is not hierarchical, but rather complementary, and reflective of an ideal order where each part of the body supports the other as a form of interdependence. Perceiving such a visual manifestation as a meta-narrative that validates the caste order, the arts and aesthetics scholar Yashadatta Alone critiques such meta-narratives as products of "sanctioned ignorance."[69]

In the uppermost cube is situated the aggravated face of the brahmin, his eyes glaring red, matching the pigment used for the religious marking (the tilak, considered a third eye) at the centre of his forehead. Within the perimeter of the face of the block are numerous disembodied floating eyes, which essentially subject not just one gaze onto the rest of the Indian body politic, but a chaotic mosaic of numerous gazes. One may

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69 Alone, Y. S. "Caste Life Narratives, Visual Representation, and Protected Ignorance." *Biography,* vol. 40, no. 1, 2017,
pp. 140–169, https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2017.0007.

interpret the omniscient gaze as that "of dominant Hinduism, a conduit for the power of the ruthless Brahman, Manu"[70], the mythical figure to whom the ancient legal text Manusmriti is attributed.

Sawarkar seems to employ a humanised representational method in inverting the demonisation of brahminism, by depicting the brahmin as a beholder of the panoptic gaze, we are also offered the possibility that brahminism has foisted the gaze on itself as well, separated from its literal anatomy but clouding its worldview, offering it no room to breathe, turn, or authentically self-determine, keeping it in a state of self-surveillance to monitor its own maintenance of social order. The gaze is not merely directed at all others, but also at the brahmin's own self.

In the second cube is the martial kshatriya (the warrior king), whose arms spread out in an aggressive stance, with an upright sword or dagger at the very centre of the span. The weapon is strategically placed where the heart of the body politic would anatomically be, conveying that despite Brahmanical Hinduism historically appropriating and articulating the concept of non-violence as its most salient feature, at its very heart is brutality.

Sawarkar critiques what he construes as the hypocrisy of this philosophy by representing the kshatriya cube as having its elements stretch beyond the geometrical confines of its surface, making it clear that philosophies can be shields from criticism, but the violence used in defending them are both all too real, and very much at the heart of it.

In the third cube is the trader and agriculturist vaishya caste, represented by a rotund, almost swollen belly, bathed in sweat, and rendered such that it appears to be protruding from the surface itself. While Western newspaper comic art has frequently depicted the capitalist as a robust white elder male, bedecked in a tuxedo and often around large sums of paper money, the merchant class in Sawarkar's imagination

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70 Tartakov, Gary Michael, and Saurabh Dube. "A Dalit Iconography of Expressionist Imagination." *Dalit Art and Visual Imagery*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, Delhi, 2012, pp. 251–266.

manifests visually not only as hoarder of wealth, but as a seizer of surplus.

For many Dalits from Sawarkar's home state, food was scarce and led to Dalit cultures having to create recipes out of what they could convert into a resource for food, which in many cases was cow carcasses, a visual element that features in many other works by Sawarkar. As many Dalits were occupationally confined in carcass removal, the residual flesh became a source for making stocks of preserved meat, and substituted for oil which was often unaffordable. The memories of hunger inform this representation of the vaishya who indulged in the surplus, leaving others to either starve, or resort to food practices which led to further ostracisation.

The bottom most cube and the adjacent separated cube must be seen in conjunction, the former being the menial labour shudra caste in the fourth rank, and the latter being the Untouchable Dalits. Their vertical placements on the canvas, despite the Dalit cube seeming larger and further in the background, happen to be similar. In the face of the shudra block is an image of a Buddhist stupa and the Buddhist chakra in the upper right corner.

In the Dalit cube however, the Buddhist stupa is not a flat image on the face of the cube, but rather emerging and materialising from within it. At the bottom of the shudra block are the feet of women, wrapped in belled anklets that ring with each step, while at the bottom of the Dalit block are the Buddhist chakras functioning as wheels.

Sawarkar points to multiple tensions in this depiction, firstly that at the very bottom of the caste order are not the shudras, but women, indicating that despite the graded inequality between castes, women, especially low-caste and Dalit women, are the ultimate victims of the Brahmanical hegemony. The depiction of belled anklets also locates this commentary in the context of his village upbringing, while belled anklets can visually accentuate one's beauty, their function of ringing with each step serve the purpose of a gendered permanent registration.

Secondly, that Dalits such as himself and his community have chosen their

path through conversion to Buddhism, their existence is not premised on graded oppression or oppression of women, nor are they dependent on disproportionate divisions of labour. Moreover, in using religious symbols of a belief system he himself upholds, Sawarkar shows no discomfort with being perceived as irreverent. While even touching Hindu idols and entering temple spaces has invited violence onto Dalits, Buddhism offers utility. Its symbols are mechanisms of movements, it offers motion towards a place that Dalits were previously barred entry to, and in the absence of a caste order, its symbols represent utilitarianism, pointing to new possibilities. Thirdly, with the shudra cube's surface depicting a flat representation of Buddhist symbols, Sawarkar creates opportunity for future "political and religious solidarity"[71], primarily between classes that have been confined to menial labour, but eventually envisioning a destabilisation of a hierarchical order from the feet up.

The Dalit cube is also of particular importance in how it is rendered as markedly different in comparison to the rest. Each of the cubes provide a platform on which falls the shadow of the cube directly above it, save for the brahmin cube which assumes its place as the interpreter between the earth and the heavens. Shadows in graphic narratives are used to add depth, they are key in creating a dichotomy between a flat representation and the deliberately graphically rendered to communicate the illusion of dimensionality, of material reality and mobility. Shadows form a natural diffraction with light, the interplay of the two guide the eyes in how to decipher the narrative, and thus also its order.

In that regard, there are no shadows in the brahmin cube because of its position, but there are also no shadows in the arms of the kshatriya, as a class holding its position as warriors and kings, the musculature is not accentuated; the only shadow in the second cube is on one side of the central ridge of the dagger. If viewed independently, the treatment of the arms is that of simple line drawings,

71 Tartakov, Gary Michael, and Saurabh Dube. "A Dalit Iconography of Expressionist Imagination." *Dalit Art and Visual Imagery*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, Delhi, 2012, pp. 251–266.

gestural strokes that fly off the canvas. Yet, the arms are anchored by a dagger that is rendered to show where the light falls and where it does not. The dagger is thus the only part of this component that gives it a particular weight, Sawarkar's visual commentary being that the power of this caste rests on the physical harm it can be associated with.

Unlike the other cubes, the Dalit cube is not enclosed, no visible shadow falls upon it. It rather casts a shadow to its right, or more precisely, its back, depicting a movement away from the caste-oriented body politic. To situate this depiction in its political and historical context, Sawarkar may be pointing to the enduring legacies of Ambedkar acquiescing to MK Gandhi's demands through his 1932 hunger-strike. Ambedkar emphasised the importance of separate electorates for Depressed Classes (Dalits and Scheduled Tribes), but ultimately gave in to Gandhi's demands of only having quotas for Depressed Classes in the legislature.

Sawarkar may be drawing on history to freeze a moment of spiritual movement that was deactivated in the political space, a movement out of the order that both rejected it, yet identified and immobilised it in the peripheries. Caste is not an ideal classification of society, but the engineering of interdependence in the desire to retain privileges and power that are embedded into identities. The brahmin is depended on for procession into the afterlife. The kshatriya is depended on for security and administration. The vaishya is depended on to organise labour for society's subsistence as well as stimulating commerce. Power is embedded in each of these identities, such that there is no requirement to conceal that identity. Only in the dynamic between the Dalit and the shudra cube, what comes through is both the future and the dream of it, the possibility of new paths or the lingering hope for change in stasis, a disruption of 'utopia' or an evolution of untouchability.

4. The (Un)Freedom to Eat: A Personal Narrative

Fig. 10 - A freshly cooked beef meal, which might have an odour (Image by author).

My first research project in Contemporary Theory Methods entailed doing a daily activity. As I was still in India and midst-travel, and further expecting to need time setting up in Toronto, I opted for an activity that could be mobile. I chose to read the books “Beef, Brahmins and Broken Men”, edited by Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, and “Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents” by Isabel Wilkerson, and produce illustrations they may inspire.

The first text discusses the ancient origins of caste in India, speculating on how untouchability came to be such an inseparable feature of it. While the subject of the origins of caste have numerous contributions, many of which draw on notions of divisions of labour, how untouchability became such a core feature of it is a far more complicated and sensitive subject. This text advances a nuanced speculative theory that places the consumption of beef as a key determinant on the matter, which I will discuss in a later section.

Fig. 11 - The interior of the basement, the close proximity of all the rooms to the shared space of the kitchen (Image by author).

The second text by Isabel Wilkerson strives to abstract caste and compare the modalities of oppression in three difference scenarios: the Indian context, the Nazi-Germany context, and the Jim Crow context. I was intrigued by the ambition of such a scholarly inquiry as they each deal with particular distributions of power and agency. I was also skeptical about the text as criticism levelled against it by Indian theorists claimed that perhaps Wilkerson might have only used “caste” as a literary device to critically study race. However, as I was travelling outside of India and to a Western nation, I felt it may be of some value to my own exploration of the subject to see how my research interest may be translated outside its native cultural context.

Once in Toronto while COVID measures were still in place, I moved into the basement unit of a student-house in the downtown area, where the majority of inhabitants happened to be Indians as well. My first two weeks were coincidentally the last two weeks of an upper caste male roommate whose room was right above

mine. In that first week, I purchased a pound of beef, cooked it and placed it in our shared fridge in the basement, celebrating the first time I could buy it directly from a supermarket, rather than from a back-alley butcher. I was awoken later that night when the aforementioned roommate came to the basement to supervise the cooking of his farewell meal. Noticing the beef in the fridge and promptly identifying it had come from me, through the door, I could hear him expressing concern to the others about sharing utensils with me.

At the risk of an uncomfortable dynamic so early in the relationships with the house and my roommates, I opted to conceal the focus of my thesis, cook discreetly, be cordial, but to also document the shared spaces we all inhabited, along with any artefacts of my caste identity that could reveal me. I presume I was influenced by the simultaneous readings of the texts. I noticed how I would use my body to navigate the spaces, the formal interactions with roommates, and the energies I would commit to be unnoticeable. It was puzzling at the time to consider who was drawing the boundaries and keeping order by maintaining distances.

Fig. 12 - A receipt from FreshCo which lists the beef as "Service Meat Fresh" (Image by author).

Moreover, I also began thinking of a quote from “Beef, Brahmins and Broken Men”,

> “Living in caste society, one feels compelled to be suspicious of everything, even oneself. How much has my caste-reality affected my ability to read? Will I ever be able to escape this? Will I ever be able to read ‘normally’?”[72]

The mere act of eating beef had automatically communicated my identity, announcing a part of my identity without my needing to, or even being able to conceal. I wondered if my relationship with them would have been different had I hidden the beef, sealed it more tightly, concealed it discreetly, or eaten it all at once.

Up until that point, I was successful in creating a rather strong and informal friendship with them. Often sharing cigarettes when not wanting to consume an entire one alone. In my experience, it is an Indian peculiarity that friends may share the same cigarette, each leaving the matter of their saliva on the material of the cigarette butt, touching each other through a tool in the middle, with no regard for hygiene. Yet, my consumption of beef would mark me, even if only momentarily.

I began to consider the underlying logics of untouchability with regards to beef consumption. Do I become an Untouchable because I eat beef? Or do I eat beef because I am an Untouchable?

In the case of the former, my willingness to not aspire to upper caste sameness would declare my body as an untouchable one. My indifference to the sacred flesh of the cow pinpoints some kind of transformation in the ways I am recognised, and which may complement and attest to the clues that my non-Hindu, non-upper-caste identity seem to imply.

In the case of the latter, my identity from the start has already been registered, and the consumption of beef acts as a confirmation. I could perhaps elevate my

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72 Ambedkar, B. R., et al. “Beginnings of a Reading” *Beef, Brahmins, and Broken Men: An Annotated Critical Selection from The Untouchables*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2020, pp. 325

status by simply not consuming beef and continue to maintain good relations. But having done so, the link between who they are and who I am, how we are connected by differing cultural practices, is visibly confirmed.

In both cases however, we are trapped by the same system. To eat beef and to be an Untouchable suggests certain political alignments. The discomfort of one who is, and one who is not, being in such close quarters no doubt creates unease both ways, motivating us to perceive each other as different and observe and measure each other's purity, and effectively measure how we may interact in the future.

In Wilkerson, I came across the chapter "Trapped in a Flooding Basement", in which the author visualised the caste system as a penthouse building. The most dominant caste would be on the top floor, while the Untouchables would be in a flooding basement, in a constant struggle not to be in the most bottom. I considered that visualisation and imagined, would that not be the case on every floor?

Fig. 13 - The exterior of the house, with my window being bottom right next to the stairs (Image by author).

5. Experimental Exploration: Faceless Chess

Historically, chess is a game of tactical strategy with its gameplay dependent on the hierarchical power structures and a keen understanding of tactical powerplay. As chess pieces weave in and out of the grid, they negotiate relational hierarchies and reveal the mental processes of their puppeteers. Most players lean into the Queen's power, some players utilise the Knight's unique movements to disrupt their opponent's strategy, while others sacrifice their pawns mercilessly. Considering how these hierarchies are enforced through the design of the pieces, I imagined how the game may work if visual hierarchies are erased altogether.

In my explorations of caste and the phenomenon of untouchability, I explored a version of chess in which all pieces were identical in appearance when facing the opponent, while their true identities would only be known to the player that would play them. The altered rules for this version of chess also entailed that players could arrange the pieces in a randomised starting order, but confined to the original first two rows on either side of the board. The power relations between the pieces is not disrupted, it remains in tact, however, the measuring instruments are now the powers of observation of both players as they now attempt to not just use their pieces in the most tactful way, but observe their opponent's reactions to their own pieces.

What unfolded in this altered game design, was that players could mask the abilities of the more powerful pieces by playing them as though they were weaker ones. The Rook/Castle can move forward and backward, left and right over any number of squares. The Bishop has similar powers but only in diagonal movements. The Queen's power is a combination of the two. The pawn, the weakest pieces, and the King, the one whose capture would end the game, can both only move one square at a time, where they are differentiated is that the pawn can only move forward while the King is free to move in any direction. In such a reworking of the game, observation and measurement are disrupted. In seeking to identify the piece, enacting agential cuts are problematised. Both players are observing and

measuring each other's actions, uncertain whether the moves being played are part of a larger strategy of feigning powerlessness. Curiously, as I played the game with team members before we enhanced the concept into human-size cardboard pieces for a final presentation, what I realised was, the pawn, as the weakest piece, could deceptively pretend to be any one of the more powerful pieces.

In reimagining chess, I considered the implications of how there are only two "royal" pieces, while there are two each of all the power pieces. Only the pawn, the weakest of the pieces, numbers in the largest. Moreover, that its journey to the very end of the board into the opponent's territory, is then traded (or transformed) into any piece more powerful than it. Should its identity be discovered, the disposability usually associated with it would have no effect on the player who has lost it to the opponent. However, in concealing its identity, it can be deployed by presenting it as capable of more than it really is.

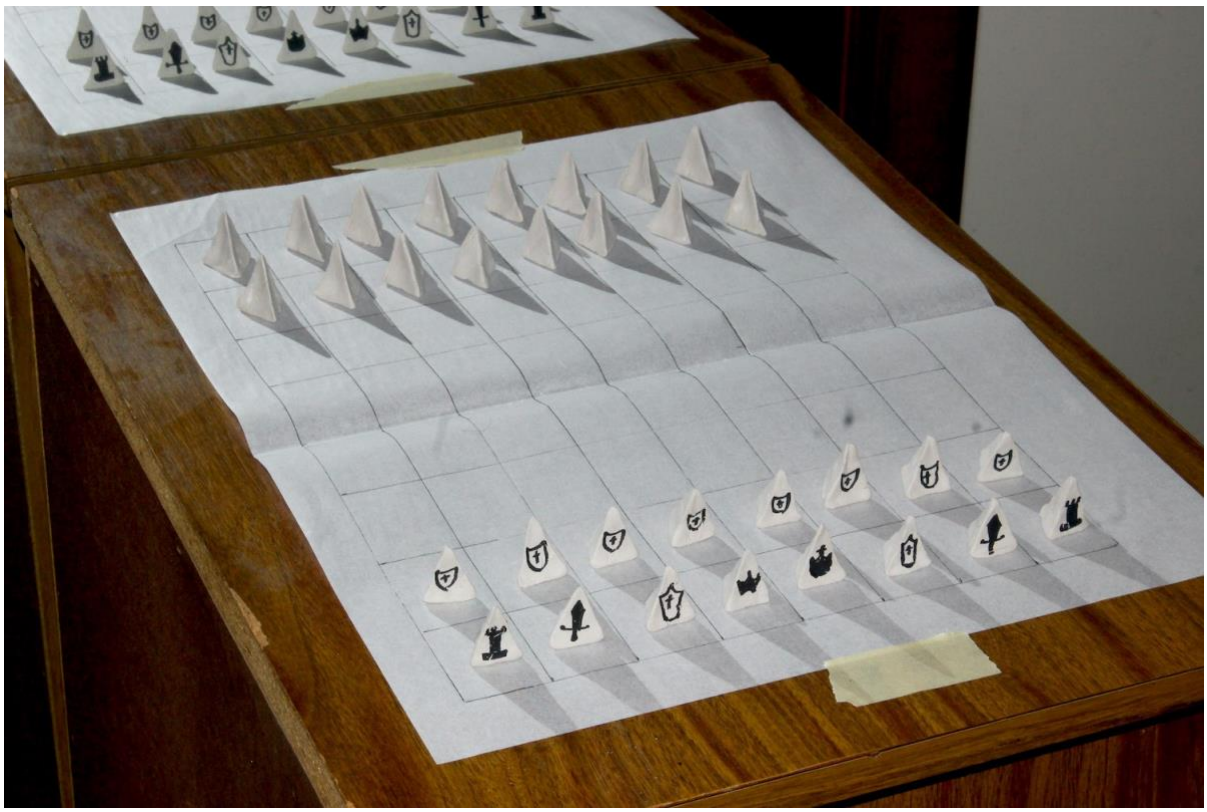


Fig. 14 - A fast-drying clay proto-type of Faceless Chess (Image by author).

6. Studio Work and Process

My studio work is influenced by my interest in Indian politics and how the elements of the material-discursive practices of religion and caste find their way in Indian political discourse. As the colour saffron is generally associated with many Hindu festivals and icons, it has been co-opted by right-wing Hindu groups to a significant extent and has become increasingly associated with them throughout the 2000s. Right-wing news outlets further use the colour in their logos and other branding elements as a way to signal to individuals who are potentially aligned with their politics.

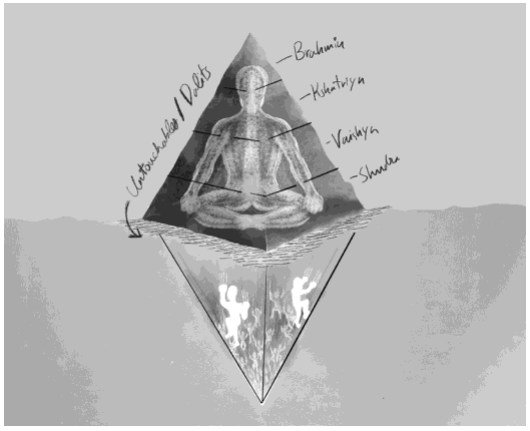


Fig. 15 - The first iteration of the caste diagram representing both the hierarchy between the upper castes and the location of the Untouchables in relation.

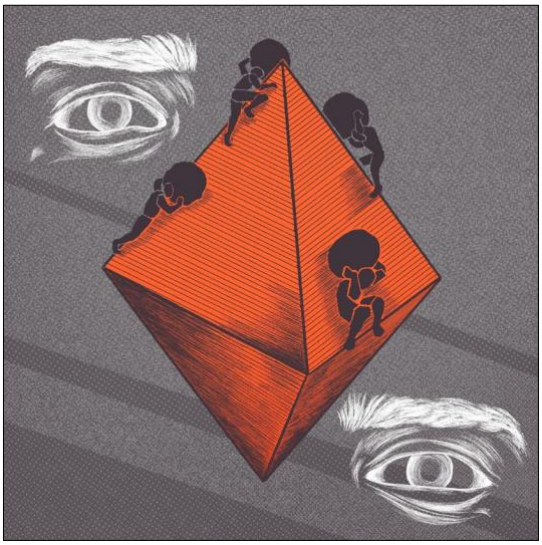


Fig. 16 - Illustration representing my experience of looking into the mirror and seeing not just the body of the Untouchable but the caste system entire, with each upper caste personified as a figure in a Sisyphean struggle.

Illustrations that comment on the state of caste and identity politics in India thus use the colour saffron to indicate its presence, in a way enacting an agential cut through the representationalism of illustration. The colour has come to be used by designers on all ends of the political spectrum, whether in support or critique.

To illustrate is to clarify or elucidate an opinion, or an argument, for the purpose of making one's meaning intelligible, the outcome of which can enable a paradigm shift for the audience it is being communicated towards. In my experience as a graphic designer, I have found that the greatest strength in illustration is how it can be used to abstract an idea, or a set of circumstances specific to a particular context, and communicate an idea through a visual metaphor. In taking cues from Savindra Sawarkar's practice as an artist with a foundation in graphics, I chose to represent my own experiences and thoughts of the workings of casteism and untouchability.

I use symbols that are both already known, as well as certain new ones from my own imagination. For example, visualising the caste pyramid not merely as a representation of a hierarchy, but as an uphill battle in which the four upper castes are caught in a Sisyphean struggle to maintain their status and identity in relation to each other.

Additionally, each of the artworks feature certain triangular forms, such as an individual staring into the mirror and seeing not the reflection but saffron lines that appear to be either ascending or descending, communicating a view from either the very top of the caste pyramid or from the catacombs.

I imagined another treatment for the caste pyramid which served as the first iteration, in which the body of the Purusha, the cosmic being, is seen as seated within the pyramid, while below him are the catacombs where all Untouchables are relegated to. When I had shown this iteration to several close friends of mine, almost all who are Dalits themselves or involved in anti-caste organisations, many were

moved by the visual as they had never really seen the ‘full picture’ that would show where and how they were located in caste society.

Through representing the four castes in a depiction where each is burdened with maintaining their identities, I depict their mutually entangled agencies as well as the hierarchy that separates them. I take further inspiration from Sawarkar’s approach in that I represent not just my experience of caste but how I analyse it through tacit knowledge. In taking signals from such an approach to illustration, I create images, that enable self-reflection. While cultural context has been crucial to this project’s aesthetic component, the value will be in the audience being able to access my work through language that enables sharing perspectives.

As my work primarily consists of representational commentaries that draw from my research into caste, my illustration process involves using visual references which I research through the internet. I also insert my own body into the artworks by using myself as a model for visual references, either through photographing myself, or observing myself in a mirror. The use of stock images as additional visual references is a working necessity of my practice which originated in my days of editorial illustration, as creating mockups for certain visuals required stock imagery. An illustration of an individual tied up in a chair or an infant could not be achieved without this method.

In designing these representations, I build a narrative of my own experiences and analysis of how the core mechanics of caste may impact all its constituents. I abstract caste-identity and untouchability by illustrating concepts such as that of being forever tethered to one’s caste identity, how the body is materialised as a subject of caste and how knowledge of all the workings of caste itself influence one’s perception.

Fig. 17 & 18 - Visual references from stock image galleries of an individual with their hands bound to a chair.

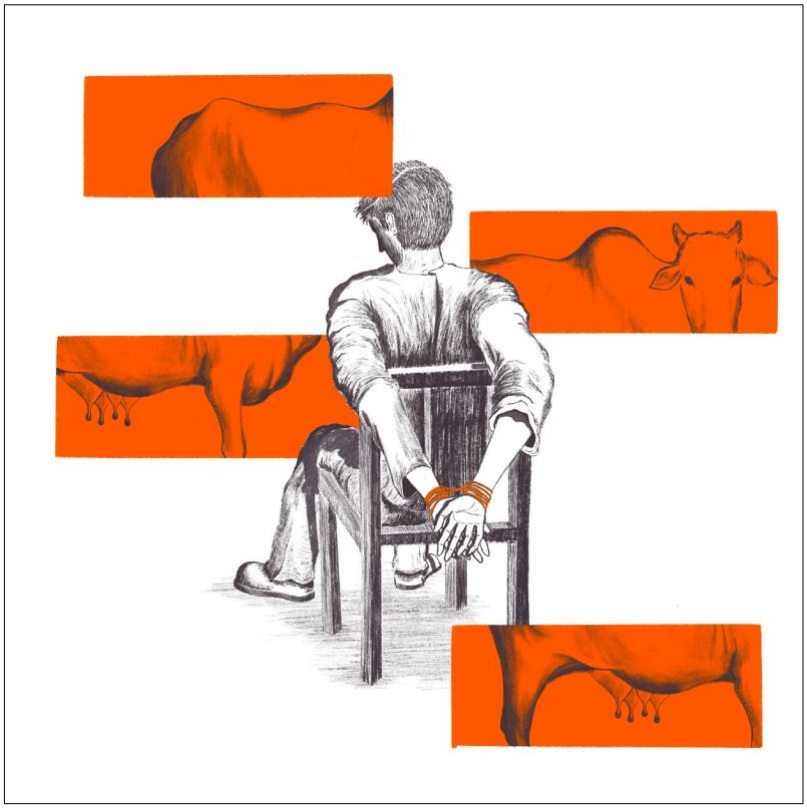


Fig. 19 - Illustration which I represent myself as a tangible body bound to a chair, trapped between only representations of the figure of the sacred cow, dispersed over four separate rectangular panels.

Fig. 20 - Visual references of my own body suspended.

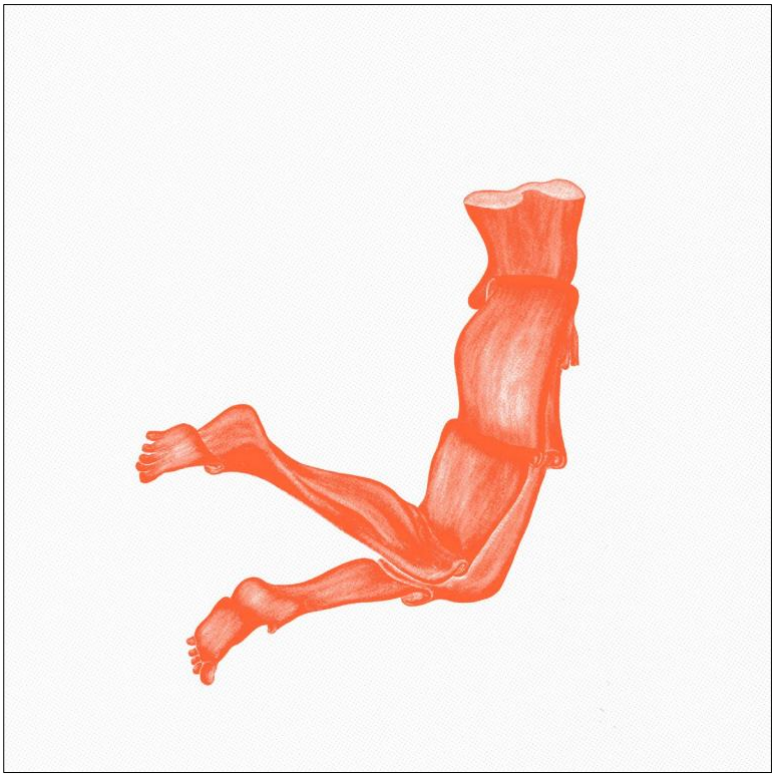


Fig. 21 - Illustration in which the skin of my body is depicted as having a leather quality, as a way to represent one of the ways in which caste materialises the Untouchable body with regard to the labour it assigns it.

Fig. 22 - Visual reference of an infant.

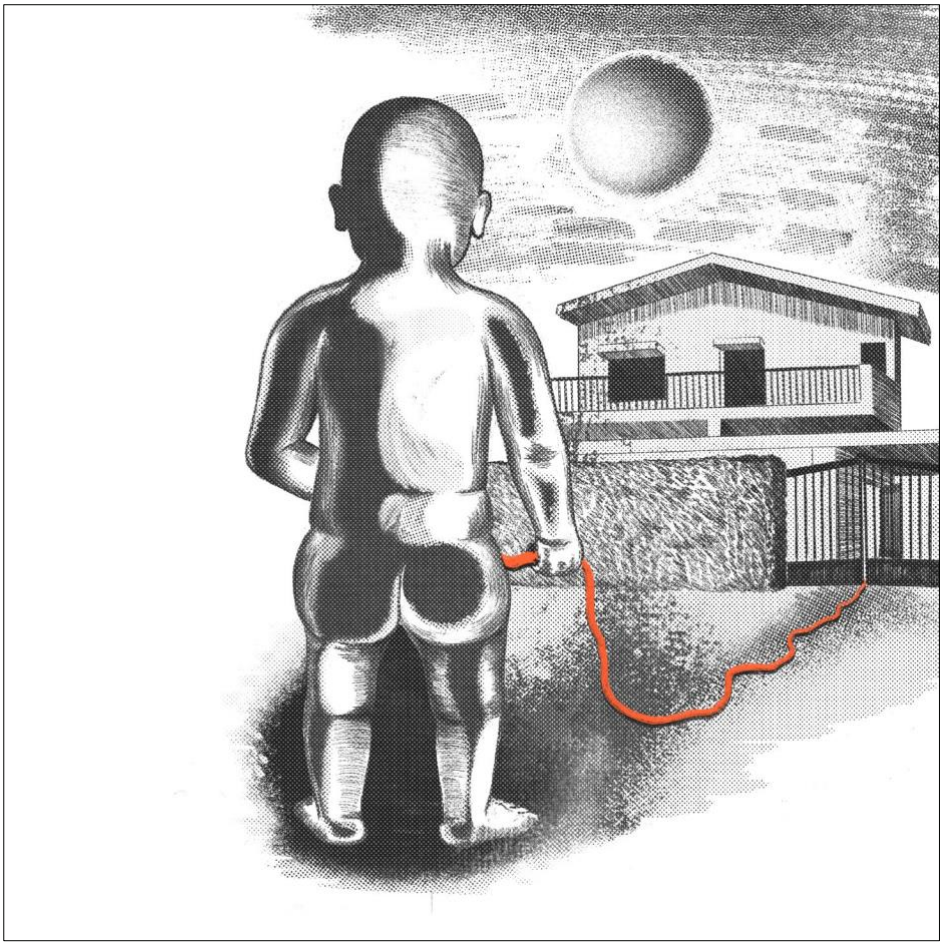


Fig. 22 - Illustration which depicts the body of the infant being permanently attached to the home it comes from, through a lengthy umbilical saffron cord. Indicating the underlying history of an entangled agency.

Fig. 24 - Visual reference of author looking at self in the mirror.

Fig. 25 - Illustration which depicts me as an Untouchable body looking at myself in the mirror, but not able to see a reflection, and rather looking at the pyramid as though from the bottom of the catacombs. This illustration is related to the first illustration in this section and are meant to be side by side.

7. Exhibition

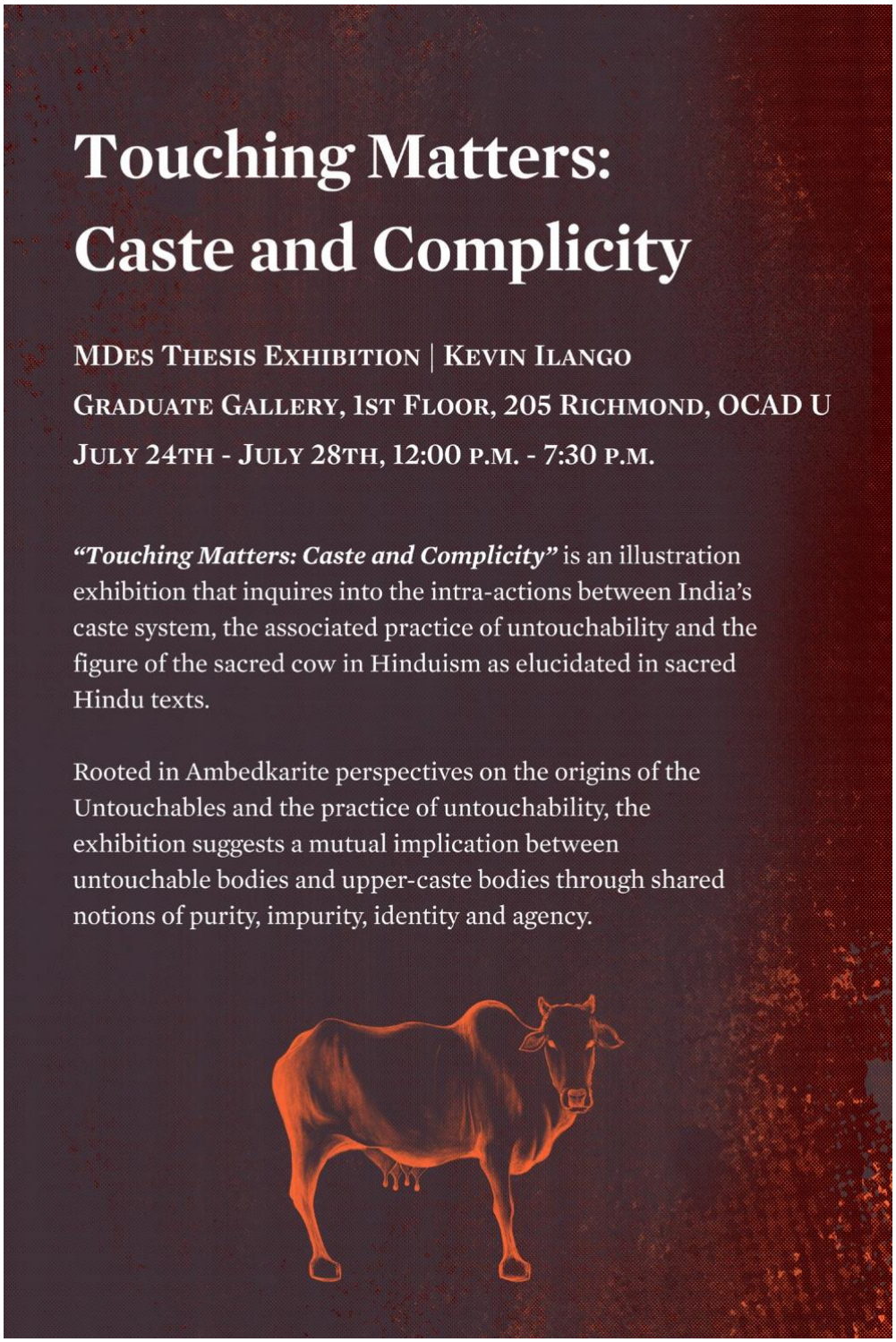


Fig. 26 - Poster and online invitation for exhibition at Graduate Gallery, "Touching Matters: Caste and Complicity"

At the exhibition at the Graduate Gallery, all five of the artworks were installed and accompanied by five text panels on which were printed introspective prompts. The text was designed with a strong serif typeface, and all the panels mirrored the colour scheme of the artworks they were paired with.

While the exhibition poster itself had a lot of context, I opted to take the exhibition as a moment to have conversations with visitors on the ideas presented with my perspective. In doing so, I could gain insight into how the material-discursive practice of caste and untouchability could be engaged with critically in a conversational manner with individuals less familiar with the subject.

On the first day, all the artworks and corresponding text panels were arranged in a horizontal layout on a single wall with key lights aimed to highlight them, while the window lighting to the gallery space was dimmed. I was seated right in the centre of the gallery space to welcome visitors, and as they observed the exhibition, we would enter into conversation behind each artwork and text pairings.

Fig. 27 - Photograph of Exhibition Installation on Day 1 (Image by author).

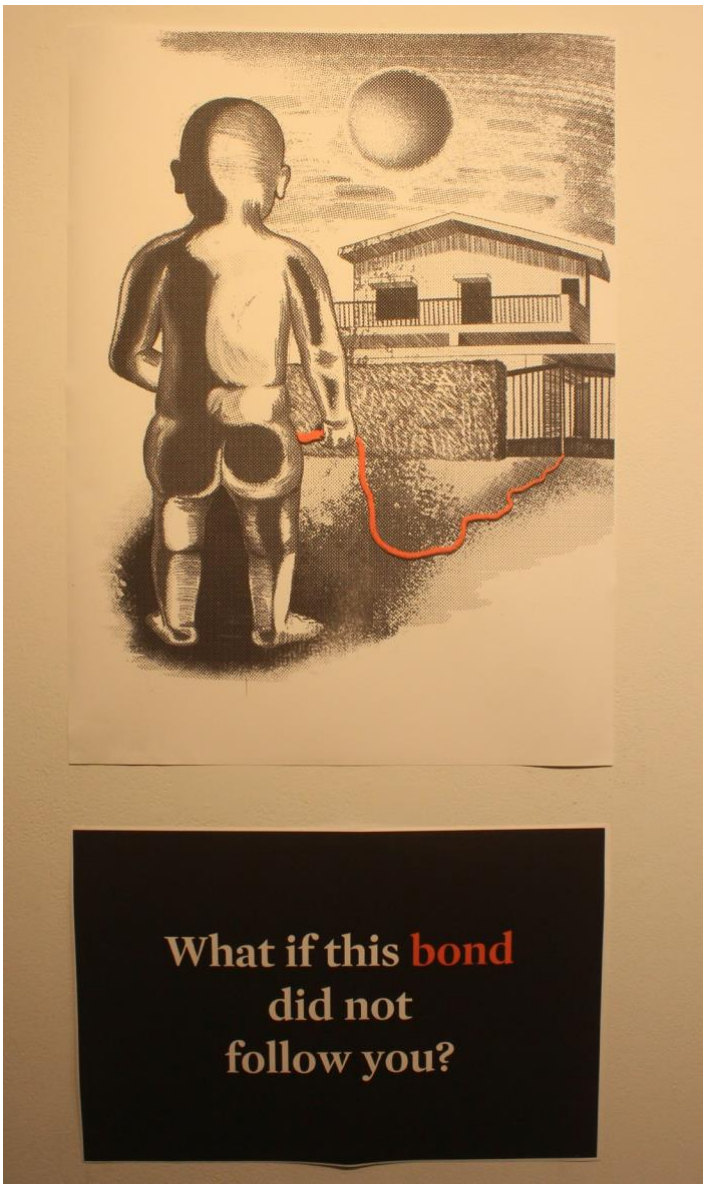


Fig. 28 - Detail of Installation (Image by author).

This pairing of art and text intended to encourage visitors to introspect over relationships with ‘the home’, the first apparatus that an individual encounters in life, and which enculturates the body with regulatory and disciplinary norms, where performativity begins. In the Indian context, it is the home and the family where caste is first taught, where the earliest of caste and culture’s expectations are determined. It is also the bond that can never break. Even in adulthood, constituents of caste carry memories of these expectations.

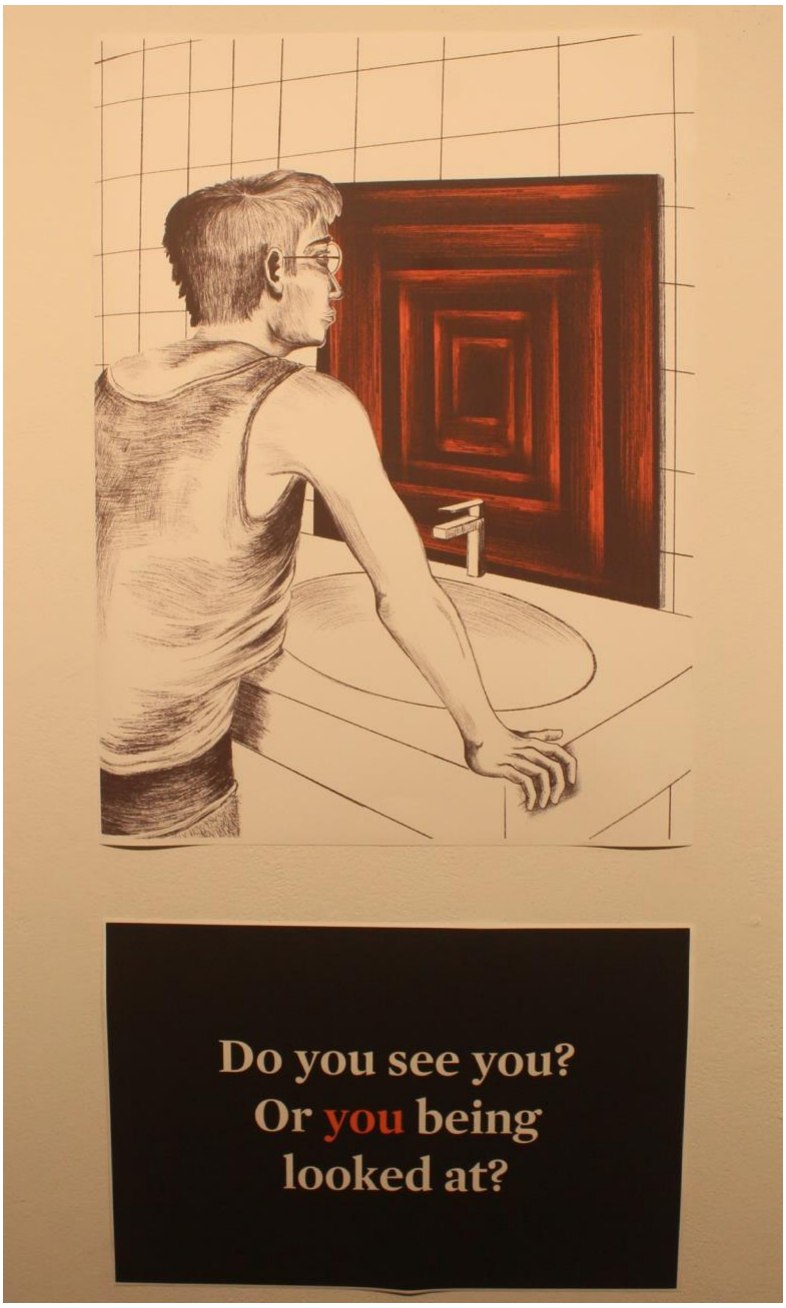


Fig. 29 - Detail of Installation (Image by author).

With this pairing, I inquired into the sense of consciousness of one's identity that occurs within the experience of caste. Caste follows in all Indians' last names, the notion of interacting with members of different castes is accompanied with a potential anxiety about if one is being true to the expectations of their caste identity. Through this pairing, I aimed to open a dialogue about the burdens of caste that fall on each individual within the system.

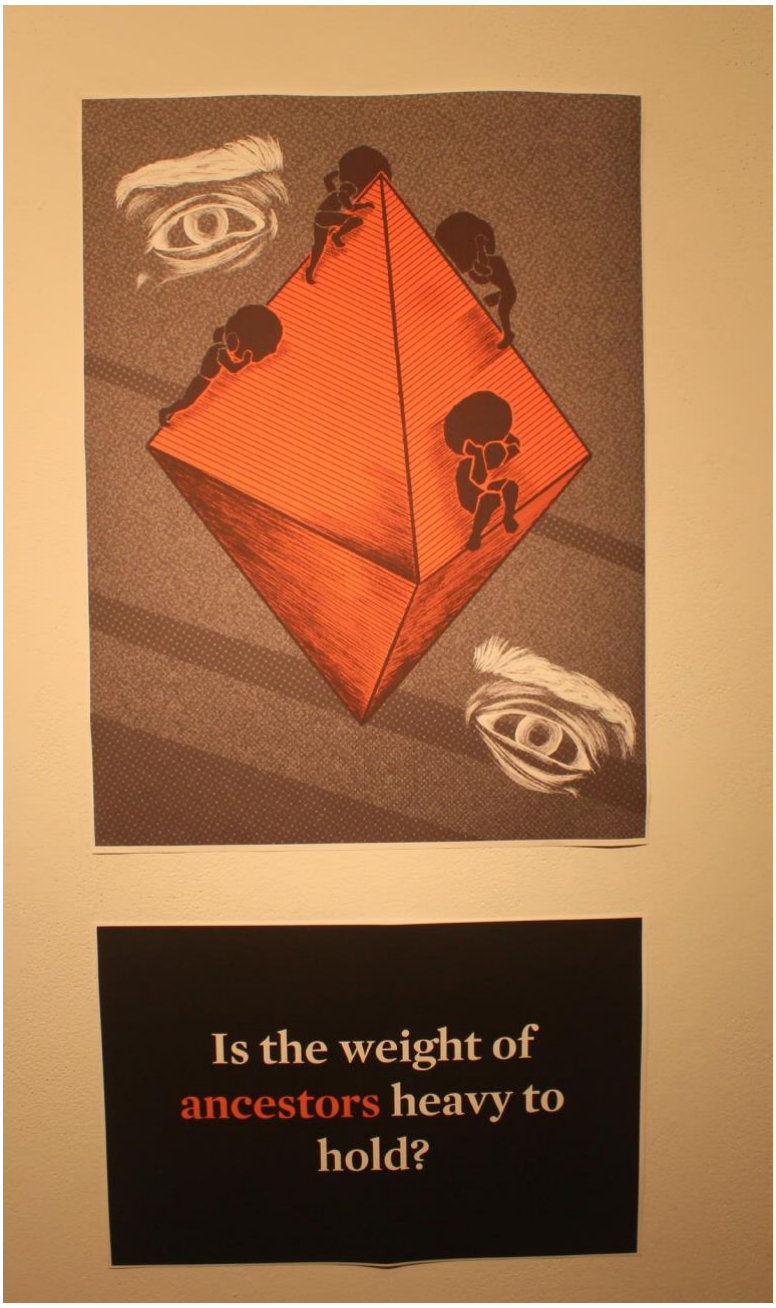


Fig. 30 - Detail of Installation (Image by author).

With the third pairing, I chose to definitively depict the pyramid and inverted pyramid structure of caste, as well as the burden of each constituent of the upper castes struggling to uphold the expectations thrust upon them by their identity. Related to the previous pairing, the artwork also contains a set of eyes looking into the mirror, suggesting an intention to inquire into the reality of the system

Fig. 31 - Detail of Installation (Image by author).

In the fourth pairing, I directly address the sacred cow as a boundary maker between the upper caste body and the Untouchable body. Through this depiction and pairing, I put the question of agency of both these bodies into the same frame, where one is bound to be seen as a consumer of beef, while the other is bound to never exercise that very choice.

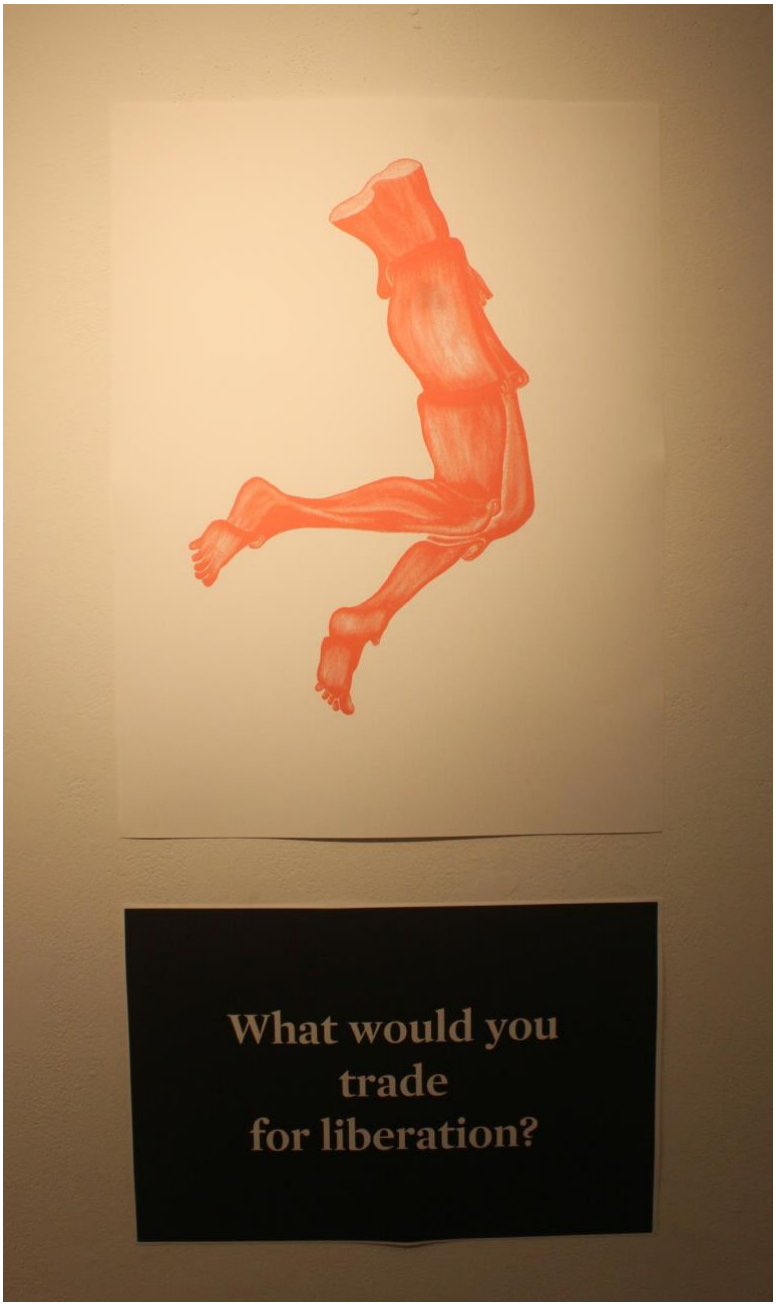


Fig. 32 - Detail of Installation (Image by author).

In the final pairing, I pose the question, if each body is regulated and disciplined by caste, materialised by how close it may be to untouchability, could one gain agency in leaving caste behind entirely.

As all illustrations were placed from left to right, I noticed visitors were only engaging with the exhibition as a linear narrative. My role as the creator and presenter of the exhibition had become more didactic than as an individual hoping to converse about perspectives beyond his own.

Therefore, the 2nd day onward, I changed the layout and placed four of the artworks on different walls, and one on the floor, breaking the sequence. I left the text panels on a nearby table and visitors were now invited to take each panel and associate them with the illustration they felt it fit best with.

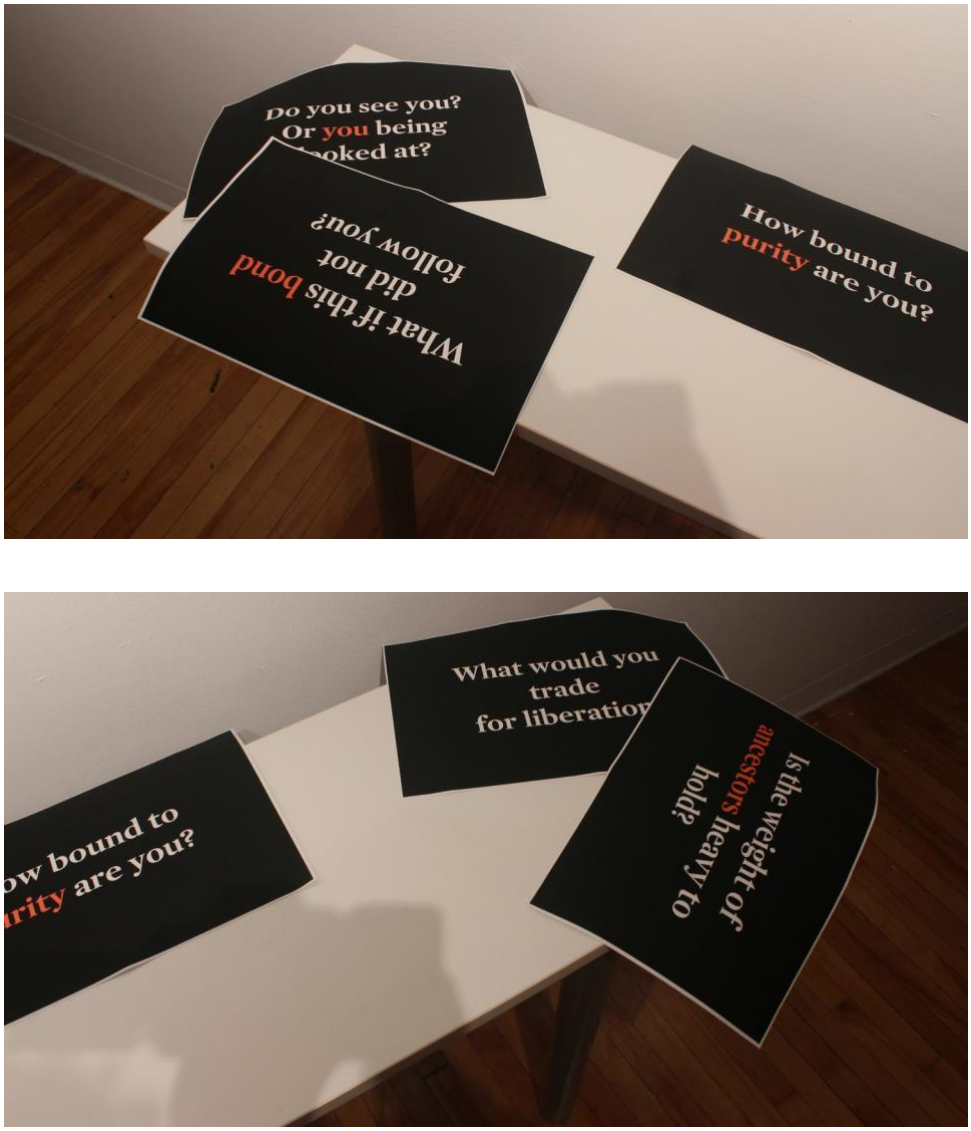


Fig. 33 - Detail of Installation (Image by author).

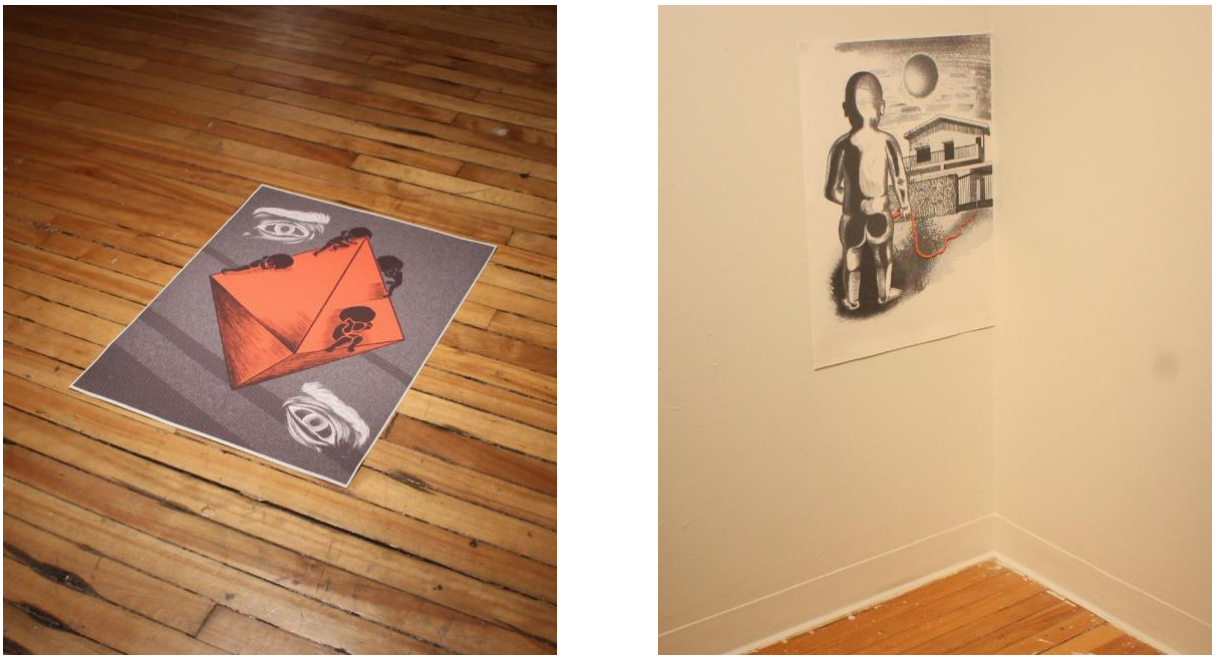
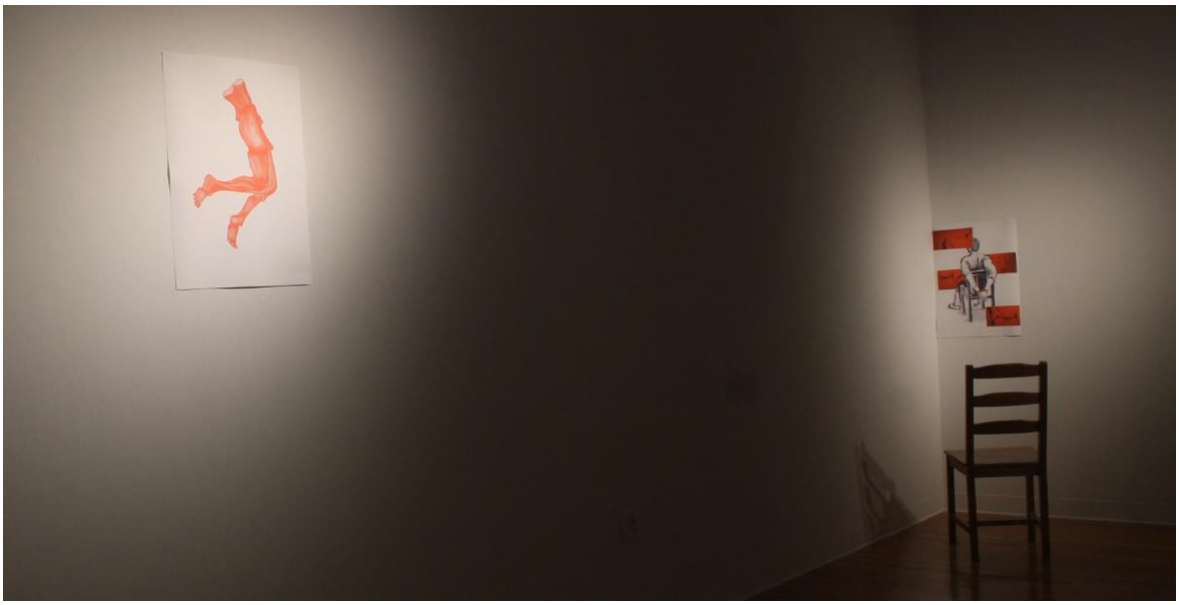


Fig. 34 - Detail of Installation (Image by author).

Altering the layout of the exhibition was done instinctively regarding which area of the gallery each artwork would be placed in, as well as what could be done to make each piece more immersive. Placing an artwork on the floor allowed visitors to see it from different orientations. Placing others at different heights, adjacent to certain objects, would evoke different starting points for conversation.



8. Observations

The following section is a discussion of some basic observations that are resultant of intra-actions that took place in the form of conversations.

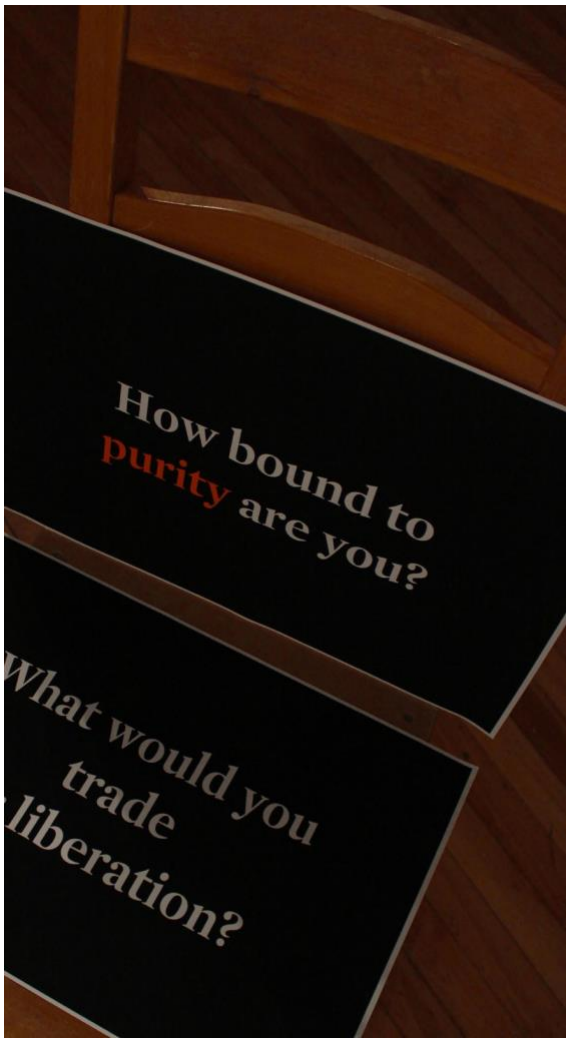
Once the exhibition had become interactive, the visitors became creative with how they engaged with the subject matter by doing their own pairings of text and artwork. While some were still curious about whether their pairings were ‘correct’. I insisted that there is no ‘correct’ answer. They experimented with the exhibition by adding multiple text panels to the artworks, changing them around numerous times, working collaboratively with others to create their own narratives.

Fig. 35 - Detail of Installation (Images by author, photographed with permission).

Many recognised the symbol of the four castes in the Sisyphean struggle, and did not differentiate between them despite each figure being at a different height, often remarking that the artwork had depicted them as equally burdened.

Further, visitors placed the text panel about being bound to purity with the illustration of the cow. When we discussed it afterwards, I replied that the figure with hands tied-up could be either an upper-caste body or an Untouchable body, as both are immobilised with regard to the cow's role in culture, entwined in their mutual performativity of caste.

One significant conversation was about how India is changing and growing,



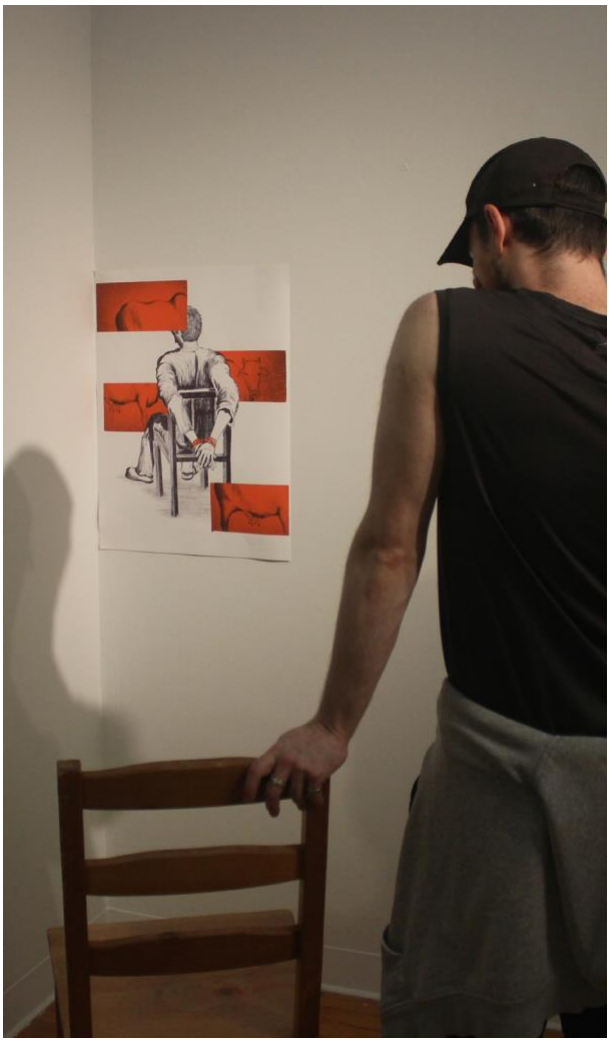


Fig. 36 - Detail of Installation (Images by author, photographed with permission).

socially as well as intellectually. It was discussed that caste is slowly becoming a global topic, and without sensitive articulation, it could invite discrimination against all Indians and in particular Hindus who do not believe in upholding these constructed divisions. I concurred, as that would be a great irony since the anti-caste movement at its core has always been about equality.

Other interesting points of conversation made were that of locational context. Having arrived in Canada, many felt slightly freer of the performative constraints of their lives in India. Which led to a brief discussion regarding the privilege of class versus the privilege of caste, and the particular nuances regarding how the ability to move from where untouchability is native, allows dilution of caste performativity.

Finally an individual of South Asian heritage had a very lively discussion with me regarding the exhibition. The conversation veered towards how in migrating to a country like Canada, one could be free of caste, and he did in fact feel liberated. He further commented that the cow is only an excuse in India, only a symbol, used to galvanise others as a means of constructing agency amongst the disempowered.

He claimed that as a matter of principle, in Canada, all the impure labour usually associated with the Untouchable body in India, is requiredly so undertaken here by individuals of all castes. He further pointed out that in his ancestral village, caste was tackled first and foremost by delivering education to the masses, which is why he was proud that he could raise his children in a country where it is locally unrecognisable.

This last conversation struck a chord with me. Many visitors who came to the exhibition had a context of caste and engaged with each prompt meaningfully, this gentleman included. However, the ones who lacked the context of caste did not really engage meaningfully with the prompt regarding being bound to purity.

I do not imagine purity as a social value can be eradicated, it is a tenet that sustains the divisions between people, but if perhaps it could be diluted through

education, it may be a start. Through education, my ancestors were able to eventually deliver agency to my parents.

Through the intra-active space created by this exhibition, numerous valuable conversations were had that informed my sensibility towards this subject matter and the future of its research. Each visitor both provided me with perspective and I towards them, in an agential act of mutual knowledge generation. In intra-acting over art that unsettles, agency can be created.

Fig. 37 - Detail of Installation (Images by author, photographed with permission).

9. Conclusion

“Touching Matters: Caste and Complicity” is a project that explores the practice of untouchability in India’s caste system and the integral role played in its perpetuation by the sacred cow mother figure. This intra-active exploration posits that the sacred cow is core to the apparatus of caste through which the upper-caste body and the Untouchable body mutually materialise.

This project is rooted in a research creation methodology which incorporates traditional academic research methods and autoethnography, for the purpose of linking a historical research with my own experience, compounded with the creative aspect of illustration.

Traditional academic methods were used in extensively researching the works of B.R. Ambedkar concerning the origins of the Untouchables and the emergence of untouchability, and which were subsequently explored through Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity and Karen Barad’s concept of intra-actions. Through utilising Ambedkar’s thesis on the role of the sacred cow being integral to the emergence of the Untouchable body, the research considered Butler’s theory of performativity that social constructs materialise the Untouchable body.

My autoethnographic explorations of sharing living space with an upper-caste individual, along with additional research into the concept of purity within caste, together contributed to my final thesis illustrative exhibition. At the exhibition, various visitors explored my artwork, my research, and through intra-actions in conversation, explored an aspect of my life and reciprocated by allowing exploration of an aspect of theirs. This research enabled me to explore an aspect of my culture and my country through creating a space where critical engagements on the subject of caste could occur. For art to be able to unsettle, is an agential enactment.

Reflecting on my personal narrative, given the environment that I was in, I perhaps took a bold decision in exercising the freedom to eat what I wanted,

and which resulted in marking myself out. If the material of beef would be enough to ostracise me, then future interactions with the same individuals in that setting could not have been possible. In thinking over this, I began to wonder that while untouchability can follow caste, and effect new power relations, practices that would be associated with Untouchables that the upper-castes would not engage in, such as a diet of beef, or meat at all, is also a form of intra-action.

I consider then that caste may be a unit of culture that is always becoming. Within that understanding, I consider that perhaps caste can never be abolished, but untouchability, even in the ways it materialises the relational hierarchy amongst upper castes between themselves, could be addressed in new ways.

Through my exhibition, I sought to inquire about the commonalities between upper-caste bodies and Untouchable bodies, what it is they share, how they both emerge through the apparatus of caste. In engaging with caste through abstract questions that would entail visitors to introspect, while in conversation with me about the artwork, the visitors as well as myself were transforming during the dialogue.

As a former history student and an illustrator with an inclination towards political journalism, I am enamoured by the power to enable conversations that the method of creative research presentation offers.

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Sri Krsna with the flute. ca. 1790. Washington, DC. Freer Gallery of Art Collection. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper.