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Making the Forked Tongue Speak ... An Ethnography of the Self

KALPANA KANNABIRAN

The consciousness of caste is constitutive of the self in caste society. It is also embedded in the realities of class, which structure the experience of bare life itself. In order to rupture caste formations, it is necessary to engage self consciously in the politics of becoming, regulating notions of the self, de-schooling and politicising the self in new ways that push you to belonging elsewhere. This essay maps the trajectory of becoming, through an exploration of the textures of subjectivities by revisiting family folklore, personal experiences and professional practices.

In memoriam: For my grandmothers Pankajamma (1903?-1994), Sama (1924-2005) and Chudamani (1924-2007), with humility, respect, love, and gratitude.

I am indebted to Kancha Ilaiah for forcing me to re-examine my assumptions in studying caste – especially my relationship to sociological scholarship. This essay is part of that process that began around 20 years ago. S Anand persuaded me to attempt this essay. Kannabiran, Vasanth and Venkat have discussed various aspects of family history and folklore with me and have helped me reflect on the implications of these stories. These are concerns we share and I have learnt different ways of seeing from them. Raj Mohan Tella, Upendra Baxi, Peter Fitzpatrick, Z M Yacoob, Kathy Sreedhar and S Anand read and commented on this essay. Each of them has seen a different version, because it has changed in response to each of their comments. I have felt strengthened by their engagement with my ideas.

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Out, damned spot! Out, I say!...

What need we fear who knows it,

when none can call our power to account?...

...What, will these hands ne'er be clean?...

Here's the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, oh, oh! (Macbeth, Act V, Scene I)

To bounce like a ball that has been hit became my deepest desire, and not to curl up and collapse because of the blow (Bama, Karukku, vii).

1 Constituents of the Self

How does one begin to articulate a social location that straddles brahminism, orthodoxy, liberalism, non-vegetarianism, intermarriage over four generations (inter-caste and inter-religious), brahmin communism, non-brahmin religiosity, feminism, opposition to caste, communal preoccupations with colour and beauty, “harijan” cooks-cum-caregivers right through childhood, witnessing the habitations of aged brahmin child widows and uneducated brahmin women’s resistance to bigamy seven decades ago, the subjugation of wives through domestic violence, hearing stories of the elopement of a brahmin wife-mother from the agraharam to live with a parayar husband in the cheri in the same town? How did homosexuality figure in the discursive realms of the heterosexual brahmin family six decades ago? How may a child receive and understand the everyday denigration of a dalit Christian grand aunt – the abusive resonances of “parachi” – by an extremely principled and upright great grandfather (her father-in-law) even while he lived in her home? What are the ways a brahmin son-in-law may find to repudiate conjugality as revenge against the daily humiliation by his wife’s family for being raised by three widows – his mother, grandmother and grand aunt?

How does one cope with seeing that children born of intermarriage between a sudra man and a brahmin woman are treated as fully brahmin – the erasure of the non-brahmin (and non-Hindu) self in mixed marriages? Or being told that these children are “chandala” since they are the progeny of pratiloma unions by enlightened friends in jest? And then learning that parents did in fact get scheduled caste certificates for their children using this argument, till the claim was explicitly rejected in the law? What are the possible ways in which one may resolve the brahminism of sudras, the brahminism of Syrian Christians, or the dominant caste consciousness of Reddy and Nadar Christians (exemplified in the single practice of untouchability – the defining trait of brahminism) with the anti-brahminism of a brahmin having encountered the possibility? How does the

practice of untouchability and caste endogamy by these (and similarly placed) groups situate them apart from brahmins, in relation to dalits? Does it?

How may we articulate nurturance and care that is located firmly within kinship but outside the parameters of brahminism within brahmin contexts as critical to the development of consciousness?

The consciousness of caste is constitutive of the self in caste society – embedded in the fact of being, underwriting it in deep seated yet often unarticulated ways. It is also entrenched in the realities of class, which structure the experience of bare life itself. The caste-class nexus produces an array of articulations that tell stories of the complex contradictions between consciousness and survival, which are also stories of the caste system. This is not to argue that this consciousness cannot be ruptured or that the self cannot be reconstituted. It is necessary even while examining the ruptures, to delineate what elements of caste-class remain solid and unshaken, and what parts allow for a reconstitution. Even while there may be significant ruptures around you, in the normal course, these will have the status of folklore – of stories that you hear, of heroism that you see and believe but cannot “know”. In order to know what the rupture of caste consciousness means, it is necessary to engage self-consciously in the politics of becoming, regulating notions of the self, de-schooling and politicising the self in new ways that push you to belonging elsewhere.² This process of reconstituting the self can only be intentional and the result of a carefully crafted strategy.

This essay attempts to map the trajectory of becoming, by definition in the making, through an exploration of the textures of subjectivities by revisiting family folklore, personal experiences and professional practices.

2 Marriage

Inter-religious and/or inter-caste heterosexual marriages have taken place in my family for four generations.

On my father's side, there is the story of a musician aunt who left her brahmin husband and five adolescent children to live with a dalit mridangam³ player in a cheri in Chennai. Several years later, as the wife, she was informed of the brahmin husband's death, and allowed to attend the funeral, but warned by the sons not to “create a scene”. In a starkly different story, my father's first cousin (the only son followed by five daughters) was disinherited by his father because he married a dalit woman. Thrown out of his job in a popular hospital in Nellore, he left his wife and children behind in search of work. After several difficult years and unsuccessful attempts to find work, supported part of the time by my paternal grandmother in Madras, he decided to go through “shuddhi”⁴ after which he committed suicide. His body was taken in a procession through Nellore to be buried by the Pennar river by the dalit community to the drumbeat of “A brahmin has become a Madiga”.⁵ Both these people lived in fairly orthodox brahmin communities and the instances of intermarriage even in successive generations are few and far between.

On my mother's side, the picture was very different. My great grandfather, the eldest of five brothers was the only one to marry a brahmin woman – an orthodox one who had to deal

with brothers-in-law and a son who brought in non-Hindu wives, cooking for them and their communist comrades from different faiths who were frequent guests, yet keeping the kitchen out of reach. The second brother married a Catholic woman several years older than himself; the third entered a common law marriage with a parayar woman, a former sex worker who returned to sex work after his premature demise; the fourth, a political activist, was single, and the fifth married a Muslim-Hindu woman.⁶ After three generations which saw both endogamous and exogamous marriages, in my generation brahmin endogamy is non-existent.

Breaking out of the circle of endogamy, however, does not by itself lead to a breaking away from the caste system. It leads instead to a re-figuring of caste consciousness in troublesome ways. The absolute non inclusiveness of dominant peasant communities on questions of caste, their easy and uncritical acceptance of the legitimacy of the brahmin, the adoption of extremely brahminical lifestyles, the tacit condonation of extreme forms of violence and discrimination against dalits by non-brahmin peasant communities, the absolute rejection of reservation for dalits and the righteous assertion of their own privilege of access to education and employment constantly interrupt my occasional interactions with my extended non brahmin affinal family. This has been a cause for extreme discomfort for me – praxiologically – because those very practices and the consciousness that undergirds them mirror the grounds of their own exclusion by brahmin communities.⁷

The grip of heterosexuality has remained unruptured, even while practices of homosexuality – very few known instances – are acknowledged. Rajappa, a paternal uncle, a posthumous child, was an emotional and material support for the extended family – providing a home and education to cousins who had been virtually abandoned by their father. He was forced to marry at a young age, and never touched his wife. Part of his hostility to his wife was traced to the constant humiliation he faced in her father's home in their early years of marriage for being raised by three widows. But the more immediate reason for his abstinence from any sexual relationship with his wife was that he was homosexual. There was anger in the family that was materially dependent on him, but the source of the anger, his homosexuality, was never openly spoken about. His orthodox aunt who was very fond of him wished at one point that some woman, *any woman*, would come up to her holding a child and say it was born of him. At the time of his premature death in his 40s, he was married, childless and in a relationship with a man several years younger, who married and raised children after his death. The intimacy between the two was evident, and the partner, a friend of the family, visited daily. And yet, the space for intimacy was not the family home, nor was there an explicit mention of the character of the intimacy. It was “known”, always wished away, and remained ever present.

3 Politics and Family

Formal politics has been an accepted way of life in the family for close to a century – more specifically communism. Two of my maternal great grandfather's brothers Kitta Thatha and Ranga

Thatha – were founding members of the Communist Party of India, and known for their work in the communist movement. Kitta Thatha, was a founder-leader of the Madras Harbour Workers' Union, and Ranga Thatha a legendary communist lawyer in Delhi.

My maternal grand uncle, Venkat, went to Ferguson College, Pune, after school, where he got involved in the communist movement, discontinued his education and courted arrest during the peak of the movement in the 1940s. He tells little stories of his long association with Kosambi, his tutor at Ferguson, and his relationships with other communists of the time, especially in Andhra. He distanced himself completely from the party after the movement was called off and spent all of his working life in a hospital for poor people – Ramchander Davakhana as it was popularly known. After he retired from the hospital he began to pursue his other passion, agriculture – and has over the past two decades become perhaps the most diligent practitioner of permaculture in the country, helping several groups set up farms and bringing together a small community of people interested in the philosophy of permaculture. He has been a communist all his life, rejecting all markers of caste and religion, and has lived life on terms that were entirely different from anybody else in the family. He is the primary caregiver to my younger daughter and responsible for all decisions that concern her – at school, home, everywhere.

My paternal uncle, Chellappa peripa, a respected political scientist, was a communist hero during the time of the Telangana Armed Struggle. My father's family, however, with the exception of his mother and in the last few years his communist brother, was largely absent from our lives, figuring in episodes that were few and far between.

My own sense of the two sides of the family through my growing years was quite unambiguous – my paternal side was orthodox, and my maternal side was radical. And it was my maternal side, apart from my parents, that is, who provided me with a politico-cultural context.

My mother, a teacher, the first woman president of the largest college teachers' union in the state in the late 1970s, feminist writer and poet, supported the family with paid work since the birth of her first child, taught us to be different and struggled fiercely to create and sustain that space for us. The family over four generations was extremely close knit; my mother, the first female child after two generations, holding people and lives together at enormous personal cost. My father, communist by belief, a widely revered civil liberties leader taught us democracy by example, and showed us how to keep our faith in justice and good conscience through the most trying times. His work over the past four decades has centred on opposing caste and atrocity in courts at every level and arguing in courts and outside on the indispensability of reservation to democracy in India. These were ideas we grew up with and ideas that shaped our consciousness and thinking from as far back as we can remember.

Diversity was central to our context, as also political radicalism of which opposition to caste was central. When I think back now, however, I do begin to see a much more complex layering of the habitations of radical politics in these two contexts. Practices of difference were constantly interrupted by scattered practices of

brahminism – especially language, though not diet, social intercourse or ritual.⁸

4 Foremothers

In my paternal grandmother's home in Mylapore, non-brahmins did not enter the kitchen. It would be incorrect however to freeze Paati (my paternal grandmother) into a completely orthodox mould. She had the courage to question the fundamental assumptions of the patriarchal brahmin family without a thought about the consequences or suffering she might have to undergo as a result, which she did. And in the face of the suffering, she was stoic. Although she put up with extreme battery by her doctor husband even while her children watched, terrified, for years, she walked out of his house with four of her five children and with no formal education or wealth when she was told that he was bringing in another wife. She never returned to him, the story of my father's childhood and youth being one that is underwritten by extreme poverty and deprivation. Much later when her third son (who was dearest to her and who she had chosen to merge her share of the property with) asked her to leave "his" house and she came to live with us, my father told her quietly that while her dietary requirements would be respected, she would have to eat food cooked by the non-brahmin cook who lived with us. She was past 70 then, did not really have a choice, and came to terms with it without any fuss. But also her dispossession in a very ironic sense was complete.

The feeling of destitution is one that haunted Paati till she died when she was past 90. The one hope she clung on to was that her husband's pension would somehow miraculously find its way to her, the legal first wife, even 30 years after his death.

Paati spoke Tamil and Telugu, understood every word of English although she did not speak it, had a transistor always on next to her ear, never missing a news bulletin, and knew of events before anyone else in the family had read the papers. She was living with us at the time that I decided to marry, and I do not once remember her asking what caste the boy was from. Had it ceased to matter to her?

The second figure that frequently passed us in the shadows was that of Chinga Thatha, my father's paternal aunt, a child widow. None of her brothers were willing to support her, so she lived with my paternal grandmother, her sister-in-law. When my grandmother and her children moved from Nellore to Madras, Chinga Thatha moved with them and stayed in Mylapore till she died, occupying a small room in the back of the house and being supported by my uncle. She wore a dull brown sari, no blouse, no jewellery, and generally lived in the shadows. All the years that we saw her as children, we never exchanged more than a passing greeting. We were told that she was a "child widow" but at that time, knew nothing of the painful consequences of enforced widowhood. Many years after she died, I was told by my father that when her brothers asked her to tonsure her head, she asked for a piece of land or an allowance so that she could pay the barber's fees every month, whereupon the demand for tonsure was withdrawn.

The third person, my grand aunt, Sama aunty, was dalit Christian, who came from a very poor family. Sama aunty,

unlike my brahmin foremothers married at 40, was educated, a qualified nurse in government service till her retirement as theatre head nurse in one of the largest government hospitals in the state. She spent most of her working life living alone in Warangal where she was posted, visiting her husband on weekends. She supported her family through her pension after her retirement and joined the Ceylon Pentecostal Mission, spending all her time in prayer, living an extremely reclusive life. The only place she visited apart from the weekly visits to church was my mother's home in the neighbourhood – the home of their favourite child. Sama aunty, a quiet, but strong presence in the house, extremely affectionate and caring, turned her home into a play space for her grand daughter, great grand daughters and their playmates. She taught the children of her domestic worker and saw them through school, following their progress from one day to the next. Shards of memories remain of the caricaturing of her and her church by the “liberal” brahmin family she married into; recounting of odd comments by her father-in-law who lived in her home in the last years of his life and yet referred to her derogatorily as “parachi”; the sense that she was generally seen as an outsider – not one of “us” by most in the extended family. And yet, there was nothing about her demeanour that conveyed to me the pain or hurt she certainly must have felt. She was a tremendous emotional support to my parents, my children, and me and was never materially dependent on anyone till she died when she was past 80 in 2005.

The fourth person, dear friend and collaborator, was my maternal grandmother, Ammamma. We spent practically every weekend in our childhood and adolescence with her; my brother lived with her and visited us on weekends for a few years when he was very young; I would dip ever so frequently into her reservoir of recipes, her wealth of connections with small but precious shopkeepers in General Bazaar each of whom she knew personally; she and my grandfather took care of my daughter when she was put in a school close to where they lived – supervising her lunch, taking her swimming, reading stories to her and caring for her till I returned from work every day for four years.

Ammamma

Ammamma was married as a child at 13, coped with an extremely caring, alcoholic and abusive husband who threw her out of his house frequently. Thirty of the 60 odd years that she had lived with him, were married with the shame of having to cope with the common, public knowledge of her husband's alcoholism and waiting endlessly for his sobriety while he lay senseless in other cities while on work and at home; a husband who was abusive and unpleasant to the extreme with the rest of the family including his children; a man who sold his house without consulting her when she was 70 years old, forcing her to be utterly dependent on her children for the rest of her life, as he was too. Finally when she was 80, he assaulted her with a deadly weapon and left her for dead. It was in this condition that we brought her to my parents' home where she lived for the last four years of her life. In a sense these were the times most filled with moments of joy, because there were always friends, family and great grandchildren around her, but also the times most filled with dejection

over a life laid waste. But she resolutely refused to despair. She laughingly recounted a conversation between her and her husband – “he would keep asking me to take off my thali. I listened for a while and finally told him: ‘I am not wearing this for your longevity. It is gold, and it will see me through my difficulties. That is why I will not take it off.’” She referred only rarely and fleetingly to her enormous hardship – “I have never had a home that belonged to me” – scribbling furiously in English on scraps of paper when she felt overpowered by her memories, and dismissed my ever present fury over the way she had been treated with an off hand click of the tongue.

Somewhere along those years, she had quietly removed the thali (or was it taken away from her?) and wore a plain gold chain instead. When Ammamma died, the gold chain, a pair of bangles and a nose ring were her only assets. The money that her children had given her at different points in her turbulent life as financial support was locked into bank deposits that she left untouched.

In all her conversations with so many people who recounted this when she died in January 2007. Ammamma never ever lost her interest in the people she met or their work, in seeing places, in teaching everyone around her – grandchildren, great grandchildren, domestic workers and nurses especially – how to read, write, sing, cook, knit. If they knew Telugu, she would teach them English. If they knew both, she would teach them Tamil. If they learnt Hindustani music, she would teach them Carnatic music. She barely went to school, but was literate in English and Tamil and a voracious reader. She helped me with my doctoral and postdoctoral work. She first translated *Dasigal Mosavalai* (“Web of Deceit”) for me years ago, and thoroughly enjoyed doing it. She understood and identified with the struggle of the devadasis and their difficulties.⁹ Ammamma read my work with interest, and was bothered that she could not always understand everything I wrote – “your standard is too high”, she would say with her characteristic laugh.

5 Food and Language

We were from my earliest memories, a meat eating family with no taboos on meats that we could not eat. My father often joked that once a brahmin crosses the boundary of food, it matters little whether he eats a goat or a buffalo.¹⁰ Even within meat consumption, however, there were markers – utensils, culinary practices, daily diet – that set counter brahmin assertions apart. The politics of food manifested itself in other ways as well. Kittu Thatha, I heard ever so many times, developed cirrhosis of the liver from eating too much of fermented rice, a diet he adopted in order to become one with the dock workers he lived and worked with. So, while it was the food, it was not really only the food.

Never having lived in Tamil Nadu, my siblings and I had never learnt the distinction between brahmin Tamil and non-brahmin Tamil. The only Tamil we spoke was the Tamil spoken by brahmins. This was the language my first-born learnt to speak, because it was the language we spoke at home in Andhra – our mother tongue, surrounded as we were by Telugu and Urdu-speaking people. When she was two years old, at a meeting near Chennai, a Tamil dalit friend turned around and commented to me with a grimace – “My god! She speaks just like a brahmin!” My second

child never learnt to speak Tamil and barely understands it, constantly demanding translation into Telugu or English.

Both Venkat and Kitta Thatha had grown up in rather orthodox brahmin environments but they were markedly different in every memory of mine – *they spoke a very different language*, one that I could not always understand. I did not quite understand the boundary defining function of speech in Tamil culture till much later – the only difference I saw and understood was that between spoken and formal Tamil, the latter being completely incomprehensible to me. With both these forefathers, the decision to speak differently was a conscious one identified in terms of the cultures of the working classes – which are also cultures of non-brahminism. And although there was no identification that we, as children, made overtly between language and caste, nor was this identified explicitly to us, it was clearly a key element in the constitution of the declassified self. E V R Periyar's response to frequent queries about why he was supporting a brahmin (Kitta Thatha – A S K Iyengar) always was 'Iyengar paapaan alla' (Iyengar is not a brahmin).¹¹

Insiders-Outsiders

Summer vacations to Mylapore to Paati, my orthodox paternal grandmother, were a regular feature. There was in all those vacations no encounter with anyone who was different that ruptured or even mildly interrupted the dominant stream of consciousness. Rather those that were different met us frequently – every day – but at a distance that I later understood was physical because it was social. Thaay, the domestic worker, was in an important sense a care giver and confidante to my cousins who lost their mother in infancy. The question by my cousin, "Thaay, what does amma mean" kept getting repeated and kept circulating in family circles, without any sense of puzzlement that it was thaay who had been asked the question and not anyone in the family. Mothering across caste – the familiar, yet distant figure of the "breast giver", sustaining yet marginal to the upper caste self.¹² And yet this was not exactly the case in my own family.

Deevana, who cooked for us, took care of me and my siblings throughout our childhood and growing years, my brother and she totally devoted to each other, did not give me the same sense as Thaay. Deevana, like Thaay, was dalit – she was a dalit Christian. We went to church with her a couple of times. We studied in a Christian school and learnt hymns and the prayer, "Our Father, thou art in heaven..." in school, but did not learn any Hindu prayer at home. A consideration of caste and religion were completely absent in everyday domestic deliberations in my parents' home. Our home in Hyderabad was not overtly mapped by caste. We never visited the temple, but observed Saraswati puja (where our books and musical instruments were put before the goddess of learning at home with no ritual), Deepavali (a bath at the crack of dawn, new clothes and crackers, again no ritual), and Pongal (when we flew kites, ate chakkarai pongal and made balls of coloured rice that we put out on the terrace).

We developed therefore an understanding of poverty (from my father) and of struggle (from both my parents) but not an understanding of caste, except knowing that we belonged to a caste by birth that we were completely alien to by upbringing. That

we belonged to a caste we did not belong to. It was this contradiction that distanced us from our cousins and extended family in the brahmin strain and drew us emotionally closer to our "mixed" family.

Identities are mapped on the dual axes of caste and dominance. Although theoretically, the caste system cannot accommodate hypogamous (pratiloma) unions and the progeny of such unions "fall" into the panchama category, the practical mapping of identities at an everyday level accommodates dominant strains through an erasure of the non-dominant ones, so that children with brahmin mothers and sudra fathers (mine for instance) are treated as quite properly brahmin, by brahmins. Eugenicist assumptions (of which the "merit" argument in anti-reservation debates is but a part) unabashedly draw a causal link between "brains" and brahmin ancestry.¹³ You can leave caste without caste leaving you.

Another part of this process of constituting consciousness was for talk ever so often to revolve around the fairness of skin and beauty without any blemish and the sense of immense pride all rolled into one, where the women in my grandmother's and great grandmother's generation were concerned. The dark ones in the family were identified as being different, fairness – read with beauty – constituted as the natural attribute.¹⁴ There was also the normalisation of brahminism through the jocularity of casteist caricatures and abusive habits in mixed environments.

Being a family that has seen many mixed marriages of many kinds over four generations, our extended family is diverse. Teaching children the protocols of caste, while painful, has been necessary in order to enable them to resist early. Why, for instance, did some brahmin families in the neighbourhood serve water to my children but not to their Christian cousin? Why did these families prefer to go five blocks for drinking water during a water shortage rather than fetch water from my Christian grand aunt's well in the next street? Why did my grand uncle then refuse diwali sweets from these families? Why do I now ask my children to come home if they want a drink of water in the middle of playtime, rather than ask for it in any of the brahmin homes in the neighbourhood? Why must they not accept water from these houses?

Erasures and Silencing

The reification of identity and the refusal to grapple with the complex processes of identity formation fractures and dissipates inter-caste dialogues on the annihilation of caste. The non-brahmin constituents of myself are based in kinship, alliance, affective ties, culture and politics over four generations, while the brahmin constituents are based in descent and speech. The superimposition of descent and speech over emotion, culture, politics, alliance and kinship in this instance results in a completely distorted representation of the self, because the foundations tell another story. The difficulty of dealing with a brahmin location is something that must be understood and articulated. Theoretically and experientially, the brahmin identity is the one element in the self that cannot be priced apart from its complicity in perpetuating untold social suffering. Apart from the fact of the infliction of suffering on people of other castes and the erasure

and silencing of other identities, we have witnessed deeply entrenched practices of extreme forms of domestic violence and alcohol abuse that were completely accepted and absorbed by women across three generations, and witnessed by children who have been scarred in the process of bearing witness.

The absorption and silencing of the internal ruptures in brahmin contexts – both demonstrated in the lifetimes of my brahmin foremothers – is, I would argue, yet another critical part of the constitution of brahmin selfhood.

In my experience, elements of consciousness and practice have constantly been splintered either by direct resistance or by contrary practice, so that even while receiving/“inheriting” a brahmin subjectivity, I was also receiving/inheriting/creating its negation. My argument is that it is not the self-conscious practice of sanskritic ritual and untouchability that marks the brahmin, but the micro-practices of being in that social location [seemingly – even self-consciously – distant from practices that derogate human dignity], that constitute the self and entrench it in deeply problematic ways. And this is borne out by my experience in fieldwork as well.

Sociological Encounters

The determination to be someplace where I would not be “located” took me to Tamil Nadu for my doctoral fieldwork. My contacts – anti-caste activists (non-brahmin of course) in the People’s Union for Civil Liberties. I travelled around on my own to Madurai, Dindigul, Theni, Periyakulam, Virudunagar, Sivakasi, Nellore, just about any place that anybody gave me a contact in, met people who did not know anything about me, slept in strange places – the guest room of a Christian priest who lived on church premises, an orphanage steeped in squalor and full of children living in the most deprived conditions – and tried to make sense of what I wanted to do with myself, and where I wanted to take my work. All this while, I was also coping with trying to understand a tongue I just did not know, speaking it the only way I knew it, realising much later that it had immediately marked me out by caste (and sub-caste!) and had conditioned responses of the people I was spending all my time with.

During this period, I also began to see and understand closely for the first time the tensions between dominant caste non-brahminism and dalit assertion especially within the church – protestant and jesuit. Syrian Christian friends told me quite casually how “untouchables” were not allowed into their homes in Kerala and how they were originally nambudiri brahmins who had converted to Christianity. A dalit nun spoke at length about the harassment she was subjected to within her church on account of her being a dalit woman. A jesuit priest told me how Christianity was organised around caste in south India, to the extent that there were churches in Tamil Nadu where dalits stood on the fringes of the church, while the dominant castes sat in the centre and received communion after the latter had left the church. Also of how entire churches were segregated on the basis of caste. Interestingly all my informants in Tamil Nadu were clergy from different orders – practitioners and believers in liberation theology who were battling with practices of caste within the church.

Finally I moved to a village near Virudunagar inhabited by Telugu Kammavar Nayakars (or Vadugans – the northerners) who

had settled in the ‘karisal kadu’ (the black cotton soil belt) and spoke Telugu in the way that I spoke Tamil – apparently frozen in a mode that one just did not hear any more in Andhra. It was a comfortable, secure context and my interactions went relatively smoothly, the jarring note being that I would be introduced to everyone as an Iyengar gunna (the brahmin girl). I was no longer sure what this meant, but I had no reason to mistrust my hosts in the village. What made me much more welcome here was the fact of their Vaishnavism which from their point of view immediately tied us into bonds of kinship – that I did not understand. I did not know the work of the Alvar saints, nor the hagiography, but it did not matter. The kinship, flagged by speech remained secure and lulled me in a sense through three long trips to the village. Finally a year and a half later, I was close to winding up my fieldwork – my last day in the village. At six in the morning, I was sitting and checking my field notes, when the kamma priest of the village, an elderly gentleman of 60 years, walked in after his ritual bath and worship. Before I knew it he stretched out prostrate before me – unwashed, unkempt (this was something that compounded my distress at the time) – and said he was leaving for the Alvar Tirunal, and being an Iyengar lady, I was Ammavaru¹⁵, so he was seeking my blessings. This completed the circle of my traumatic experience of caste in Tamil Nadu. I took the next bus into Madurai and never went back.

I decided then that while I would be part of movement politics, I would not do fieldwork for purely research purposes, because as a researcher, I found I had no way of determining my insertion into the social spaces I was entering, and the ways in which I was situated in them were completely unacceptable to me. Having been schooled in the brahmanical mode right through my university education in the social sciences, and having been deschooled from brahminism at home for the most part, the sharp contradictions between my formal education and socialisation hurled me into a whirlpool that obliterated the distance between the personal and the professional in the most startling manner. Nothing that I had learned in sociology/anthropology in all those years prepared me for the churning that I had begun to experience at a deeply personal level in the course of my work, research and writing.

Displacing Brahmanical Pedagogy

When I began to teach in a law school many years later, I introduced caste through the work of Ambedkar and Phule and juxtaposed Srinivas’ notion of sanskritisation with Kancha Ilaiah’s notion of dalitisation.¹⁶ Senior students went further, reading critiques of caste through the writings of Mahasweta Devi, Bama and Namdeo Dhasal. The results were stunning. Conversations began to open up in unimaginable ways. These were students between 18 and 20 years of age.

One set of responses pointed to a deep discomfort with the standpoints I was bringing into the classroom. Why did I persist in introducing readings that painted Hindu society in negative terms, although they also conceded that of course Ambedkar is the father of the Constitution – a difficult fact for law students with a stated interest in human rights to dismiss; why did I seem to approve of Ilaiah’s obvious irreverence and unconcern for all that is brahmanical – his extreme and irrational views that

“smacked of the Cultural Revolution”; “doesn’t the notion of dalitisation sound a bit far-fetched and irrational when compared to the notion of sanskritisation?” Why instead of talking so much about caste and untouchability, could I not focus on the greatness of Hindu philosophy? All of this outside class of course. In class, the lectures were met with complete silence and an occasional inane comment on Manu or the origin of caste in the different body parts of brahma the creator, the hierarchy of the body (the head held aloft while the feet bite the dust) reflecting the hierarchy of caste – the brahmin emerging from the head, the sudra from the feet. To which my response – a recounting of Gaddar’s song on origins that the panchamas are the only ones born as human beings are born – is always met with a shocked, even disapproving silence.

Caste in the Dominant Narrative

The obsession with caste in the dominant narrative is after all the hallmark of those that cannot lay a claim to merit. The meritorious, in this view, exist outside the parameters of caste. Virtual spaces, personal blogs for instance, interestingly, provided a much needed release from the self-imposed compulsion to assume “caste-less” or “caste-free” postures by dominant caste students. They could, as one such blog did, oppose the views of Ambedkar and Kancha Ilaiah and defend the interests and concerns of the “20 brahmins” in the class of 80¹⁷ – questioning in the process the logic of introducing a dalit standpoint in teaching non-discrimination, equality and more fundamentally, caste. The blog in this case was a space that was free from the “constraints” imposed by the Constitution on imagining equality and entitlements based on caste. It was a space that was private, yet the private was public (did not feminism say long ago that the personal was political?) and assumed a culturally homogeneous readership – brahmin students. These virtual spaces created the possibility to resist ideas thrown up in the classroom and align unabashedly in defence of caste inequality, and in defence of the exclusionary rhetoric of the dominant castes, not by recourse to the overworn “merit” arguments, but by simply asserting a brahmin identity.

A second set of responses used the literature I was introducing as a springboard to reflect on personal predicaments, dilemmas and difficulties. Students began to speak to me – directly and indirectly about the micro practices of caste on the campus, in their homes and in the homes of their friends. A non-brahmin student narrated a conversation that she found troubling with a brahmin classmate who uncritically accepted the use of a different set of utensils by her father (an IAS officer) when his dalit colleague visited him; other students from dominant groups admitted in class to the difficulty of dealing even notionally with the idea that anyone who came to your home must be served water in the same glass that you would drink from; dalit and adivasi students spoke of the caricaturing of “reserved” students (“she looks like a reserved candidate”) and of the covert and overt forms of discrimination they faced – in buses when they went home on vacation, in their neighbourhoods and in the schools they studied in.

Some dropped out unable to cope with the environment and stating only in private what the reasons for withdrawal were; others

went on the brink of nervous breakdowns dealing with the realities of caste discrimination in their peer environment; some had to cope with the impossibility of sustaining the economic resources necessary to avail of quality education; and yet others struggling with English language teaching for the first time in their lives, had to find emotional reserves to cope with being told that they had got into the institution by “accident”, that they did not really deserve to be there. A second generation dalit student said in the course of a small interactive session that she learned and experienced the realities of caste for the first time in the university.

Through it all, there continues to be resistance to taking issue with caste discrimination, and naming it as such publicly and on record on all sides. Conciliation, mediation, negotiation, stand offs – are orally manoeuvred, for the most part by students, so that “caste politics” does not sully the record of inter-student relationships. The dictates of “batch solidarity” mask the fractures within, and dominance based on caste/community privilege is overwritten by the struggle for dominance between different batches as it were.

The process of engaging with caste is far from linear. The opening out of the field of caste to discussion, reflection, dissent, conflict and resolutions at the experiential level, immediately opened out the fields of academic work in very positive ways.

On the one hand, non-dalit students in their course work began to write on manual scavenging, social exclusion on the campus, in the contexts of migration, with reference to transgender people, LGBT communities, minorities and so on, in the process also attempting to interrogate the basis of their own subjectivities and the sources of their privilege. The process of working on these issues generated a wider debate among non-dalit students on the realities of caste discrimination and subjugation.¹⁸

On the other hand, dalit students wrote papers that countered the notion of “merit”, and dominant caste hegemony in decisions on capabilities in institutions of professional education, rupturing standard notions that undergird “institutions of excellence” and justify their existence. What was in fact happening was the trauma and pain of bearing discrimination, which was now being translated into pedagogy and being used in class and outside to bring home the meanings of discrimination to the larger university community. By laying claim to the space of these institutions and dismantling their core ideological premises, these students, miniscule in number were actually churning the university system and forcing non-dalit students out of their complacency through a simple strategy of plain speaking.

“Ragging” practices began to include asking a fresher to read and present Ilaiah’s *Why I Am Not a Hindu* in five hours in the men’s hostel.

There were doubts as well on how one could balance individual interests against class entitlements. Personally, students asked me, how would I react if I lost my job to a “reserved” candidate? To which I said, quite honestly, that I welcome the opening out of university employment to dalit scholars, regardless of any personal implications. I have tried with a little success to explain to students that one cannot pit individual predicaments against class entitlements and have tried to unpack the “merit” argument and demonstrate the hollowness in its core. The question is not

really one of loss of opportunity. What is important and necessary is to merge an individual possibility with the larger goal of equality.

For close to a decade, I have received separately different sides of the reaction to the curriculum – one side because perhaps I was identified as someone doing a doublespeak – someone who “belonged to them” but was deliberately speaking an alien tongue; the other side because I belonged with them and opened out the space for a different reality and a different articulation of apparently familiar realities in the classroom; yet another because I was attempting to demonstrate the possibility of speaking differently, and in so doing, pointing in the direction of a politics of becoming as distinct from being.

In terms of writing in a substantively different curriculum, the key elements consisted of looking at caste through the prism of Articles 15 (2) and 17 of the Constitution (discrimination based on caste and the ban on untouchability) and the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act, 1989; equality jurisprudence – reservations that focused on scheduled castes and scheduled tribes; to look at family forms other than the familiar patrilineal, patrilocal one; sexual orientation and critiques of heteronormativity. The idea was to use Articles 15(2) and 17 to crack open fields of social exclusion and marginality, and to use these Articles to understand the textures of discrimination and violence in Indian society.

“The Brahmin Has Become a Dalit”...

Order in caste society has specifically been based on foundational violence – within the family, in the larger multi caste communal space and in the terrain(s) of citizenship(s). In interrogating the

bases of this violence, it is imperative to radically re-examine the bases of the constitution of non-dalit consciousness.

The brahmin (and brahmanical) stream of consciousness, even when it does not overtly participate in the foundational violence or its perpetuation, at several levels encounters choices that eventually lead in one of two directions: to a condonation of the violent history (of which asserting irrationality of an intergenerational view of violence is part); or to foregrounding a dalit stream of consciousness as the vantage point for an understanding of the ways in which caste constitutes the self.

It is of course only the second path that would take us forward in our endeavour to annihilate caste. The one observation that has reverberated through this essay with different resonances in radically different contexts is “the brahmin has become a dalit”. The commonality in the contexts of course is that each time it has been the owning of the brahmin by the dalit – the complete inversion of the exclusionary logic of relationship within the contexts of brahmanism – through kinship, politics, and ideology.

Reaching the point of proximity where that embrace is possible – the second path – involves an enormous struggle with the self. Taking the second path, would mean, for non-dalits across different communities, to excavate the basis of consciousness, to peel off each layer of memory and see what lies beneath it, and to interrogate the location of the self on multiple axes (which is brutally unsettling) – in short, to embark on a process of becoming through a churning of the self that would lead to a radically different site of belonging.

NOTES

- 1 A derogatory reference to a woman of parayar caste.
- 2 I have elsewhere examined the relevance of William Connolly's arguments on the politics of becoming and Martha Minow's response to an understanding of dalit politics in India, see Kannabiran (2006). See also Connolly (1996) and Minow (1996).
- 3 A percussion instrument.
- 4 Literally “cleansing”. The purificatory ritual that marks the brahmin's return to his caste after a period of “defilement/pollution”.
- 5 Two different accounts of the reactions to the drumbeat: “The Brahmin community froze in fear and horror”. And, “There is bound to be that vengeance. It is not unexpected” – both true, explain different sides of the experience.
- 6 This is the only instance I know of intermarriage with a Muslim person in the family. The religious-cultural spaces in the extended family have been Hindu and Christian. Muslims and Parsees have figured prominently through political and professional ties, but significantly not through familial ties.
- 7 I remember the embarrassed laugh with which an affinal relative asked me how, being a brahmin woman, I could even think of writing in a newspaper that barring menstruating women from entering the temple is a form of untouchability.
- 8 The wisdom of Babasaheb Ambedkar's argument that the habit of endogamy must be broken through intermarriage as a first step to the annihilation of caste can never be understated. This must be accompanied, he argues, by a notional change with respect to hierarchies based on caste. What I have found is the possibility of the first with the complete absence of the second;

- 9 or the possibility of the second located within the context of endogamy. And both of these possibilities cannot/have not led to an annihilation of caste. The convergence between his different resolutions is a necessary condition.
- 9 At the end of each chapter she wrote, “bye Kantha, bye Boga Chintamani, bye Ganavathi”. See *Muvalur Ramamirthammal's 'Web of Deceit': Devadasi Abolition in Colonial India*, translated, edited and with an introduction by Kalpana Kannabiran and Vasanth Kannabiran, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003.
- 10 “Gorre thinte nemi, barre thinte nemi.” An explicit reference to beef. Similarly also with the non-brahmin practice of observing meatless days. Once meat enters the brahmin diet, the notion of a meatless day is redundant. There is of course also the caricaturing of meat-eating brahmins by non-brahmin friends who have told me that they attribute the rising cost of meat to the fact that brahmins eat so much (the stereotypical brahmin preoccupation with food) that it is always in short supply.
- 11 Narrated to me by Venkat who was present on one such occasion. This statement stands out because it is a negation of the brahmin identity. Iyengar is the brahmin caste name. Translated in a slightly different way, this statement would read: “This brahmin is not a Brahmin”.
- 12 Mahasweta Devi, *Breast Stories*.
- 13 A good friend of the family, commenting that my daughters were exceptionally bright, added, “they are brahmin girls after all. Where will all those brains go, I say.” Whereupon I replied that they were not brahmin children and explained the fact of mixed parentage. She exclaimed, “Oh! Pratiloma! That makes them chandala children”. But that discovery did not in any way displace the initial assumption.

- 14 When I married therefore, my great grandfather, on learning that the “boy” is not brahmin (“is he from our people?”), asked, “Is he at least fair?”
- 15 Mother goddess.
- 16 This section draws on responses to the modules on caste only. As part of this project, I invited Kantha Ilaiah to deliver a guest lecture to students who had read his work as part of the sociology course. Towards the end of his lecture, he is reported to have said that I was completely dalitised in my outlook.
- 17 For reasons of confidentiality, I cannot provide details of the link to this blog, nor a full extract. The assumption of privacy on blogs was brought home to me by the fact that the comment was taken off no sooner students realised I had accessed it – a full year and a half after it had been on the net for peer viewing.
- 18 This was especially true of students who opted for my seminar course on Social Exclusion and Law.

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