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Dalit Ideas: The Politics of Knowledge in North India

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Dalit Ideas: The Politics of Knowledge in North India

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Hungry man, reach for the book: it is a weapon.
—Bertolt Brecht, “In Praise of Learning”

All men are intellectuals, but not all men have in society the
function of intellectuals.
—Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*

I work in a premier research institute at a central university in India where we have one of the biggest social science libraries in the country. We also have data centers that collect information on various issues pertaining to development and social change. When I joined this institute in the 1990s, it was the time of the emergence of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), a political party working to enable Dalit and other marginal communities in India to raise their voices.¹ I was interested in understanding the trajectory of political assertion made by these communities, how they themselves explained and defined that assertion using their own domains of expression, both oral and written. Many identity-based movements, such as the Hindutva movement, the Dalit movement, and gender-based movements, were emerging in a strong manner in many parts of India in the 1990s, and we social scientists wanted to understand them. The books available in the library, literature on these movements based on quantitative data, ethnographic accounts, and archives helped us to understand the context, but they could not help us understand people’s desires, their rising aspirations, and their own arguments.

I had been trained as a social scientist at a leading Indian university, the

¹ The term “Dalit” is used to refer to the lowest castes in India, previously referred to as “untouchable.” The caste system is a closed stratification of classes that initially emerged out of the Hindu and occupation-based *varna* theory. The Bahujan Samaj Party was founded by Kanshi Ram, a Dalit leader, in 1984. “Bahujan” refers to “the people in the majority” and represents the approximately 6,000 different lower and backward castes that comprise 85 percent of the population. The party represents the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Religious Minorities as delineated in the Indian Constitution. In 2001 Kanshi Ram made Mayawati his successor, and she has presided over the party until the present.

University of Allahabad, but my training did not help me to fully document and analyze this huge growth of popular politics in India, which had brought the BSP, a Dalit-led political party, to power in Uttar Pradesh (UP), the country's most populous state. So, I and others formed a group of young researchers and started doing fieldwork to document narratives, both oral and in print, that have evolved among and been narrated by people from marginal communities. During our fieldwork we came across chapbooks that were written, published, and sold by people from Dalit communities at *melas* (fairs), at political rallies in Dalit-Bahujan communities, and on the pavements wherever social programs were organized by Dalit and other marginal communities in India. We collected these booklets and oral narratives and brought them back to our institute. When we started reading the booklets, we found a vast number of valuable materials that helped us understand political articulation and gave us critical knowledge about communities, the Indian social system, and politics.

We faced various problems when we dealt with these materials. First, the writers of these chapbooks use popular literary forms, but also analytical prose, reference quotes from other texts, proverbs, poems, and stories in order to substantiate and put forth their arguments. In other words, the social knowledge, arguments, and debates included in these chapbooks are rooted in everyday knowledge forms. From them, we understood that people don't speak or assert themselves in knowledge binaries such as the social sciences *or* the humanities. Rather, they express their knowledge using their everyday idioms.

The social science methodology that we have learned thus far doesn't provide a way to analyze the forms of knowledge in which Indian people, who are mostly rural or semirural, express themselves. Since I am also a poet and a folklorist, I gathered my data from these community knowledge endeavors, which helped me understand these "popular" texts. In this way, we gradually developed an archive and a resource center that is constantly engaged in collecting, documenting, and analyzing these popular-knowledge materials. When we started working on these chapbooks as a means to understand Dalit politics, they were not even considered a valid primary source. But after twenty years of effort, this archive, the Dalit Resource Centre, housed at the G. B. Pant Social Science Institute, in Allahabad, attracts researchers, academics, and journalists from around the world. Today these chapbooks are being used without hesitation by eminent social scientists.

Dalit discourse in North India has evolved through the knowledge created by the community in three ways: first, through experienced knowledge; second, through learned knowledge; and third, through perceived knowledge.

This discourse has emerged, moreover, in response to those dominant forms of knowledge that exclude and/or marginalize Dalits. “Experienced knowledge” emerges through living in the caste-based hierarchical society of UP. “Learned knowledge” comes from reading books and listening to others reading aloud from books. And “perceived knowledge” is acquired by producing knowledge, specifically, knowledge to counter the Brahmanical dominant discourse.

While the sociopolitical category “Dalit” is of recent provenance, the concept of “Dalitness” itself is old. The word *dalit* is derived from the Sanskrit root verb *dal*, which means “to split, break, or crack.” When used as an adjective, it means “to be amputated, stepped on, split, broken, burst, destroyed, or crushed.” The name “Dalit” thus carries a political meaning and is used to refer to “those who have been broken, ground down by those above them in a deliberate and active way.” The word “Dalit” itself is “an inherent denial of pollution, karma, and justified caste hierarchy.”² In common parlance, the term “Dalit” is understood as referring to groups previously called *achhut* (untouchable). It signifies a particular social category of people and is reflective of their social identity. The term is now used by all “untouchable” groups, irrespective of traditional and parochial distinctions of caste.³ However, to the Dalits the term also symbolizes change and revolution.⁴ Dalit communities in India include mostly Scheduled Caste (SC) communities, which constitute around 15 percent of the Indian population and are divided into various castes and social groups. However, the term “Dalit” is a broad one and includes groups listed as Scheduled Tribes (STs) and as Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes (DNTs).⁵

² Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1996), 267.

³ Badri Narayan, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India: Culture, Identity, and Politics* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006), 34.

⁴ Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit*.

⁵ The terms “Scheduled Caste” and “Scheduled Tribe” were first coined by the colonial state. Following the first caste-based census, conducted in 1931, the Government of India Act of 1935 introduced “reservation,” or separate electoral representation on the basis of tribal and caste (rather than religious) identity. In 1936 the massive and intricate process of listing or “scheduling” caste-based constituencies began in order to “identify and list every so-called depressed ‘community’ in each province where the 1935 Act applied.” In the first such schedule drawn up, “nearly 400 ‘untouchable’ populations were listed, together with scores of so-called ‘tribal’ communities.” Postindependence, the Constitution of India abolished the practice of untouchability but continued to use (and update) these “schedules” as part of a reformist commitment toward the caste system as a whole and the protection of the weakest sections, namely, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, in particular. See Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 262–63, 269. The colonial state had also “notified” certain social groups, especially unsettled and nomadic ones, as “criminal” tribes, with whom the state shared a far less benevolent relationship. The so-called Criminal Tribes Act was repeated in 1947, and the groups thus “denotified” are now referred to as DNTs.

This essay is based on more than thirty years of fieldwork conducted to understand Dalit politics, culture, and identity assertion in North India. I focus on the state of UP, which, with a population of more than two hundred million, is the country's most populous state. Approximately 21 percent of the state's population is made up of various Dalit caste groups.⁶ The largest group among these is the Chamar caste, making up almost 55 percent of UP's Dalit population.⁷ The Pasis are the next largest, having a population of nearly 3.5 million.⁸

Producing Their Own Intellectuals

Dalit communities in India have produced writers and community intellectuals over the more than seventy years of India's independence. Dalit intellectuals recorded knowledge in the form of popular chapbooks and booklets. Priced anywhere between one and twenty-five rupees because they are specifically targeted at the poorer sections of the Dalit population, these booklets are printed on cheap newsprint, and their quality and appearance are therefore poor. They are not printed on glossy paper like the books established Hindi publishing houses publish. They come in various forms and sizes that are small and handy and are mostly sold not through bookstores but at pavement shops in Dalit public gatherings, in addition to being distributed through Dalit missionary shops known as "chetna mandaps" (lit. consciousness stalls), which I discuss in more detail later in the essay. The distinctive features of this popular literature are, therefore, simplicity, accessibility, and acceptability.

According to Marxist literary theories, the term "popular" implies a type of writing that is easily comprehended and assimilated by the masses and that reflects the worldview and aspirations of the people. It is representative, moreover, of the more progressive groups among the masses, groups that are capable of providing leadership to society.⁹ The writers and publishers of these chapbooks are Dalit political activists and intellectuals, and they write with a very

⁶ These groups include the following: Chamar, Pasi, Dhobi, Khatik, Dusadh, Basor, Dhauk, Balmiki, Kori, Dom, Gond, Koi, Dharikar, Kharwar, Musahar, Beldar, Kanjar, Nat, Bhuaiar, Ghasi, Habuda, Hari, Kalabaz, Kapadia, Karbal, Khairaha, Agariya, Badhik, Vadi, Baiswar, Bajaria, Bajagi, Balahar, Bangali, Bansphor, Barwar, Bedia, Bhandu, Bauriya, Korwa, Lalbegi, Mazhabi, Parika, Paradiya, Patri, Saharia, Sansiya, Behelia, Balai, Bawaria, and a few others.

⁷ Chamars make up the largest Dalit community in India and are treated as untouchables. According to Hindu tradition, they are the caste engaged with tanning and leather works.

⁸ Dhobi, Kori, Balmiki, Shilpkar, Khatik, and Dhanuk are the other numerically important Dalit castes in the state. M. Prasad, *Uttar Pradesh ki Dalit jatiyon ka dastavej* [A document of Uttar Pradesh's Dalit communities] (New Delhi: Kitab Ghar, 1995), 20.

⁹ Manager Pandey, *Sahitya ke samajshastra ki bhumiika* (Role of Sociology of Literature) (Chandigarh: Haryana Sahitya Akademy, 1980), 130.

specific objective in mind, namely, to sensitize Dalit readers about their own culture, history, and caste heroes and to create awareness among them about how the upper castes of Indian society have been oppressed and suppressed for centuries. Most of these booklets are based on the lives, ideas, and thoughts that originated from Buddha, B. R. Ambedkar, Ravidas, Kabir, Jyoti Balankar Phule, and Periyar.¹⁰ Many of them deal with the histories of different Dalit castes, social criticism, Dalit politics, and the political struggles of Dalit *sahibs* (intellectuals), social reformers, and leaders such as Swami Achhutanand, Phule, Ambedkar, Kanshi Ram, and Mayawati.¹¹

Sometimes, educated middle-class Dalits also get involved in this kind of popular writing with the intention of giving back to the community and spreading the notion of Dalit empowerment at the grassroots level. Most such popular writers are professionals working in very different sectors of the economy. For instance, Suresh Chandra Kushwaha, author of the popular booklet *Arakshan ke hatyare* (Murderers of reservation), is an advocate in the Allahabad High Court. Buddha Sharan Hans, the author of *Kash hum Hindu na hote* (If only we were not Hindus), is a Provincial Civil Service (PCS) officer. G. P. Prashant, the author of *Bhim pachasa* (Fifty verses for Bheem), a poetic biography of Ambedkar, is a teacher by profession. Mata Prasad, who has written the drama *Achhut virangana*

¹⁰ Ambedkar was an Indian social reformer, jurist, politician, and economist who inspired the movement for Buddhism among Dalits and campaigned to end discrimination against them. After 1947 he was India's first minister of law and justice and is referred to as the father of the Indian Constitution. Ravidas, also known as Raidas, was a fifteenth-century poet-saint who belonged to the leather-working Chamar caste. He has numerous devotees and is portrayed as a symbol of religious protest, especially against caste discrimination. Kabir was also a fifteenth-century Indian poet-saint who belonged to a lower caste. He is most known for his *dohas* (couplets), in which he questioned the meaningless rites performed in different religions. The members of his sect are known as Kabir Panthis. Phule was a social reformer and anticaste activist. His major contributions were in the field of education of people from the exploited castes, especially women. Erode Venkatappa Ramasamy ("Periyar") was an activist and politician from South India. He is known as the father of the Dravidian movement and campaigned against existing Brahmanical traditions and for the uplift of marginal and disadvantaged groups.

¹¹ Badri Narayan, *The Making of the Dalit Public in North India: Uttar Pradesh, 1950–Present* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 72. Achyutananda was a sixteenth-century Vaishnava saint from Odisha, India. His major literary contribution was that he translated Sanskrit works into the Odia language so that they could be understood by the common people from every caste and class and not remain limited only to Brahmins. Kanshi Ram (1934–2006) was an Indian Bahujan leader who fought for the mobilization of the Bahujan, that is, the backward and lower castes, including Dalit groups. He was also the founder of the Bahujan Samaj Party in UP. Mayawati succeeded Kanshi Ram as the leader of the BSP. She was the first lower-caste woman chief minister of UP and of India. Due to her consistent attempts to improve the lives of the backward castes, she is a Dalit icon in India.

(Untouchable heroine), is an Ayurvedic doctor.¹²

These booklets help literate, semiliterate, and even illiterate Dalits subvert the dominant logic of Hinduism and Brahminism by helping them understand not just Brahmanical society and culture but also Dalit history, politics, and interests in both the state and the larger political systems. By reading these booklets, the literate and semiliterate Dalits in the villages—even in remote villages—understand that the causes of their deprivation are structurally embedded in society, culture, history, and politics. To raise the awareness levels of illiterate Dalits, in several villages Dalit activists read out loud from these booklets in busy public spaces such as village *chaupals* (centers). These reading sessions are attended by large numbers of Dalits, both illiterate and semiliterate. Armed with the subversive logic contained in these booklets, they no longer remain silent; in

Enabled by these booklets, Dalits' collective voices give rise to a Dalit politics that is capable of deconstructing entrenched anti-Dalit values, thoughts, and politics.

fact, they speak with confidence. Enabled by these booklets, Dalits' collective voices give rise to a Dalit politics that is capable of deconstructing entrenched anti-Dalit values, thoughts, and politics. This political awareness, in other words,

not only determines voting patterns during elections but also constructs a broader Dalit sociocultural and political awareness.

A. R. Akela is both one of the best-known writers of popular Dalit booklets and a singer and songwriter. He not only writes Dalit popular booklets but also publishes and sells them himself at public meetings and rallies. Even though he makes a small profit by publishing and selling these booklets, for him it is the mission that is important. In fact, the history of Akela's association with this mission is both interesting and inspiring. Akela was born on September 30, 1960, to a Dalit family in Paharipur village of Aligarh district, UP. His grandfather, the late Dharmopal Bohare, was a well-to-do farmer, and his father, Talwar Bohare, owned forty acres of land. However, Talwar Bohare was caught in a debt trap and eventually lost all his land to moneylenders. Akela's elementary education took place in his own village, and he passed his junior high school examinations in Datawali, a village nearby. Around this time, his father died, and in order to earn a living, Akela set up a general merchant store in his

¹² Badri Narayan, "Heroes, Histories and Booklets," *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 13–19, 2001, 3924.

village. He also started writing booklets based on Dalit issues, as he was greatly concerned about the plight of Dalits. In 1980 he wrote his first book, *Shambuk rishi ki barahmasi* (The evergreen song of Sage Shambuk), which depicts the lived reality of the common Dalit. Annoyed by its popularity, the Brahmin village chief conspired to have Akela arrested for violating *nashabandi* (prohibition of alcohol). When Akela was released on bail, he started composing songs attacking the Brahmanical system.

During Ambedkar Jayanti celebrations Akela sang his *barahmasi* (songs for all seasons) compositions in nearby villages.¹³ He also published his songs and compositions in the form of small booklets, selling them for less than a penny each. His growing popularity among Dalits and his songs against untouchability and in celebration of Ambedkar Jayanti angered the upper castes, who forced him to flee his village in 1985. Akela then moved to Aligarh's army cantonment area, where he set up a publishing house, Anand Sahitya Sadan, and started publishing his own work.¹⁴ Besides publishing books for the empowerment of Dalits, Akela also organized events such as Geeton bhari shaam, tathagat ke naam (An evening filled with songs in the name of the Buddha) that were dedicated to the political awakening of the oppressed classes.

Another writer of booklets who is involved in promoting political awareness among the Dalits is Ratnakar Bandhu Trisharan. A native of Basti district in UP, Trisharan joined the State Public Works Department in Sisai village, Gonda district, as a clerk. To spend his spare time usefully, he purchased books on social and religious themes from Bahujan Kalyan Prakashan (Bahujan Welfare Press) in Lucknow, which publishes books about the Dalit-Bahujan community. These books about the sacrifices of Buddha and Ambedkar captured Trisharan's imagination and conscience. They inspired him to reevaluate his life's purpose, and he decided to disseminate the thoughts of these eminent personalities among the downtrodden in the form of folk songs and poems in simple language published

¹³ Ambedkar Jayanti is an annual festival observed on April 14 to commemorate the memory of Ambedkar.

¹⁴ Akela published a number of chapbooks in this manner, such as *Bheem gyan geetanjali* (Songs on Ambedkar's knowledge), *Buddha geetanjali* (Songs for the Buddha), *Angulimal katil kyon bana* (Why did Angulimal become a murderer), *Baspa (BSP) ke Bol* (Words/lyrics of the BSP), *Mere missionary geet* (My missionary songs), *Mayawati aur media* (Mayawati and the media), *Manyavar Kanshiram sahab ke saakshatkaar* (Interviews of Manyavar Kanshiram), *Baba Saheb ne kaha tha* (Baba Saheb had said), *Veerangana Jhalkari Bai* (Heroic Jhalkari Bai), *Ambedkar banam Gandhi* (Ambedkar versus Gandhi), *Swatantrata ki or* (Toward independence), and *Mool Bharatwasi* (Original Indians).

as cheap and easily affordable booklets.¹⁵

Buddha Sharan Hans is another Dalit author and activist. For over forty years he has been writing, publishing, and promoting among the masses his own works and those of other Dalit writers. Born on April 8, 1942, in Tilori village, Gaya district, Bihar, Hans, who was a member of the Bihar Administrative Service, is endearingly called Dalit Paswan for his long association with the publication of the magazines *Ambedkar Vichar Manch* (established in 1980) and *Ambedkar Mission Patrika* (established in 1989).¹⁶ After his retirement, he plunged into more activism promoting the Dalit cause.

Dalit writers are found all over UP, and they are striving to spread the message of Dalit consciousness through their books. K. Nath, who is based in Kanpur, UP, has written several chapbooks on Dalit struggles against feudal dominance. He also fought for the distribution of *gairmajarua* (nonpermanent) land among Dalits.¹⁷ Guru Prasad Madan, a well-known Dalit opinion maker and chapbook writer, resides in Allahabad. He is an advocate by profession and helps people of Dalit communities in various legal battles against social oppression and caste crimes in the region. These knowledge producers may be considered the “organic intellectuals” of the Dalit community who write to create awareness among Dalits about their condition, as well as to fight for their rights on their behalf.¹⁸ The knowledge they produce about Dalit communities possesses a certain social sensitivity and the required emotion. In other words, this knowledge is not anchored in positivist scientific descriptions of society but is composed and arranged in accordance with the feelings of the communities themselves. In so doing, these writers are able to give a voice to the untold and hidden desires of the Dalit people.

These “organic intellectuals” from North India’s Dalit communities are not part of a university system, yet they still produce valuable and critical knowledge about Indian society and the caste system, just as professional academics do. They undertake surveys, do fieldwork, and even undertake linguistic analyses

¹⁵ Some of his most popular booklets include *Bheem sandesh* (Ambedkar’s message), *Baba saheb ki amar vaniya* (Babasaheb’s immortal words), *Dr. Ambedkar Natak* (Dr. Ambedkar, a play), *Hamara sudhar kaise hoga* (How will our improvement take place), *Sharabi ka jeevan* (The life of an alcoholic), and *Apna desh* (Our country), among others.

¹⁶ Besides these magazines, he has also authored several small booklets, such as *Teen mahaprani* (Three great people), *Shoshiton ki samasya aur samadhan* (Problems and solutions of the exploited), *Daliton ki durdarsha* (The plight of Dalits), and *Brahmanvaad se bacho* (Save yourself from Brahminism).

¹⁷ Gairmajarua land was a type of state-owned land distributed to the weaker sections of society. Often, however, because of the intrusion of locally dominant castes, marginalized groups are unable to exercise their rights over this land. Dalits have had to fight for this land and sometimes even forcibly capture it.

¹⁸ Antonio Gramsci, *Selection from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

of the names of places to explore their historical contribution and significance in the making of the Indian nation. Rajkumar “Itihaskar” (historian), author of more than a dozen chapbooks on the history of the Pasis, undertook the archaeological investigation of various mounds in the villages to research and explore traces of the unrecorded histories of the marginal communities of India.¹⁹

Acquiring the Capacity to Write about the Dalit Community

Due to the influence of various sociocultural and political factors in both colonial and postcolonial times, there has been a remarkable increase in the spread of education among Dalits.²⁰ The emergence of organic Dalit intellectuals and popular Dalit writers is linked to this increase in education.

Around 1818 education became the state’s responsibility for the first time.²¹ This development led to an increase in the entry of Dalits into the education system. Christian missionaries, too, allowed Dalits to study in the schools they ran,²² and a few Muslim organizations in UP opened their schools to Dalit students. These schools enabled many Dalits to acquire knowledge and wisdom.

The Arya Samaj, a reformist organization founded by Swami Dayanand Saraswati in 1875, contributed much to educating Dalits, as it opened its schools’ doors to the downtrodden.²³ Known for its rejection of idol worship and its belief in monotheism and the authority of the Vedas, the Arya Samaj sought to give the lower castes the right to read the Vedas.²⁴ Both the Samaj and the Dalits had to face a strong backlash from the mostly upper-caste *sanatana dharma* Hindus for this flouting of orthodox Hindu norms. Even though the Arya Samaj had

¹⁹ R. K. Pasi, *Pasi samaj ka swatantrata sangram mein yogdan* [The Pasi community’s contribution to the freedom struggle] (Gorakhpur: Moti Paper Converters, 1998).

²⁰ Narayan, *The Making of the Dalit Public*, 76.

²¹ The system of state-sponsored education began with the Charter Act of 1813, which initiated a system of educational grants. Before this, the East India Company provided occasional financial aid indirectly through missionaries, but then the company directly entered the field of educational administration and management. Education in India made a claim on public revenue, and access to education was provided universally. This educational partnership between official and nonofficial enterprises continues to this day.

²² Sheoraj Singh Bechain, *Hindi ki dalit patrakarita par patrakar Ambedkar ka prabhav* [Journalist Ambedkar’s influence on Hindi journalism] (New Delhi: Samta Prakashan, 1997), 177.

²³ R. K. Kshīrasāgara, *Dalit Movement and Its Leaders 1857–1956* (New Delhi: M. D. Publishers, 1994), 128.

²⁴ The Vedas are the oldest and most important of the Hindu scriptures. They are Sanskrit texts upon which the idea of Sanatana Dharma (eternal law) is based. There are four Vedas: the Rig Veda includes hymns dedicated to various deities, the Yajur Veda contains knowledge of sacrificial formulas, the Sama Veda contains knowledge of music or melodies, and the Atharva Veda contains knowledge of spells or magical formulas.

its own reasons for educating the Dalits, by doing so it gave them access to Brahmanical knowledge systems and, in the process, revised Brahminism from being birth-based to ability-based. While this revised version of Brahminism helped expand the sphere of influence of Brahmanical values, the Dalits gained access to knowledge and education as a by-product.²⁵ The critical consciousness that subsequently emerged among a section of Dalits meant that they then started to distance themselves from the Arya Samaj and began searching for new paths toward Dalit liberation. Swami Achhutananda, who made an immense contribution to the welfare and education of Dalits and had himself attained sociopolitical consciousness through the Arya Samaj, left the organization once he understood the inner contradictions of the organization.

The success of these various avenues to an education is seen in the fact that in 1917 forty-six thousand untouchables succeeded in obtaining an education in the United Provinces (the earlier name of UP). However, acquiring education and trying to integrate into the mainstream were not simple matters for the Dalits. Violent protests erupted against the iconoclastic educational system, as G. W. Briggs, an Anglican clergyman, observed in 1920.²⁶ Public schools were virtually closed to the Chamars, who occupy one of the lowest rungs among the Dalits because of their involvement in the caste-based profession of skinning and tanning dead cattle and because Chamar women acted as midwives. Teachers and students belonging to the upper castes made it difficult for the lower castes to sit inside the classroom.

The condition of Dalits in the Indian state of Maharashtra, in particular, vastly improved during the British period. Most Dalits there were literate, and many had also acquired higher education. The spread of education was not confined merely to men; education had also reached women. Some untouchable women were so learned that they could explain the meaning of the Puranas and other complicated texts in crowded gatherings.²⁷

During the colonial period, caste associations had undertaken the mission of promoting education and reform within their communities, which also inspired the Dalits to further commit themselves to acquiring an education. In this regard, North Indian organizations such as the Bharat Sant Samaj, Bhartiya Dusadh

²⁵ Narayan, "Heroes, Histories and Booklets."

²⁶ Briggs, *The Chamars*. G. W. Briggs, *The Chamars* (1920; repr., Delhi: Low Price Publication, 1990), 237–38.

²⁷ The credit for gender parity goes to the colonial army, which, until 1857, had made education free and compulsory for all children of those who served in the armed forces. If the guardians did not send their children to school, they were penalized. This military educational system was discontinued after the 1857 Revolt. Bechain, *Hindi ki dalit patrakarita*, 177.

Samaj, Bihar Rajak Sangh, Jatavbir Mahasabha, Jaat-Paat Todak Mandal, and the Musahar Sewak Sangh, among others, were of great importance.²⁸

In the 1920s, Swami Achhutananda's Adi Hindu movement catalyzed the movement to bring Dalits into the fold of education by setting up Adi Hindu hostels and Adi Hindu schools in UP.²⁹ Members of the movement encouraged Dalits living in remote rural areas to set aside a handful of cereal every day in order to save for their children's education. They also inspired the Dalits to send their demands to the British government using postcards and paintings. Through his writings, Swami Achhutananda inspired the Dalit community to develop a dissenting culture, and in order to enable them to express that dissent, he set up printing presses in various parts of UP that published topical newspapers and small booklets. This also allowed the dissemination of Dalit dissenting voices and protests. His inspiration and that of other reformers such as Phule and Ambedkar to "obtain education and struggle" (Ambedkar's popular slogan) prompted Dalits to commit themselves to education and knowledge generation.

After Mahatma Gandhi launched the campaign for uplifting untouchables through the Harijan Sevashrams in 1932, many Dalit workers received an education through them and aligned themselves with the Gandhian concept of nationalism.³⁰ At the same time, Hindu nationalists such as Madan Mohan Malviya also helped in educating the Dalits in their own ways.³¹

In the late 1930s, Dalits, under the influence of Ambedkarite ideas – a mix of Western liberal notions and a gradually emerging Indian Dalit consciousness – started converting education and knowledge production into instruments for

²⁸ Bharat Sant Samaj is a society for saints and people who believe in the ideologies of Saint Ravidas and other religious preachers. Bhartiya Dusadh Samaj is a society built for the development of the Dusadh or Paswan community of Dalits, found mainly in eastern India. Bihar Rajak Sangh in the state of Bihar in India works for the rise of the Dhobi (washerman) community. Jatavbir Mahasabha was formed in 1917 by Rao Sahib Manik Chand Jatav and Swami Achhutanand. It aims to promote Chamars into Kshatriya varna and thus uplift their social category. Jaat-Paat Todak Mandal is an anticaste wing of Arya Samaj, which was founded in 1922 in Lahore. It focuses mainly on the issue of intercaste marriage. Musahar Sewak Sangh develops the livelihood and the status of the Musahar (rat-killer) community. See P. Choudhary and Shrikant, *Swarg par dhawa: Bihar mein Dalit andolan (1912–2000)* [An assault on heaven: The Dalit movement in Bihar, 1912–2005] (New Delhi: Vani Prakashan, 2005).

²⁹ The Adi Hindu movement is a predominantly urban reform movement in North India that is made up of Dalits, especially the Chamar community. Active during the 1920s and 1930s, they saw themselves as the aboriginal, in fact pre-Aryan, inhabitants of the country and practiced a form of Bhakti that eschewed caste discrimination, following saints such as Kabir and Ravidas.

³⁰ Harijan Sevashrams were based on Harijan Svak Sangh, established by Mahatma Gandhi in 1932. They try to dismantle societal caste-class barriers and to create mutual trust among all members of society.

³¹ Narayan, *The Making of the Dalit Public*.

Dalit liberation. Ambedkar played an extremely important role in developing both modern ideas and a critical and subversive consciousness among Dalits. For him, the solution to all Dalit problems lay in education; by positioning education as an important agenda in social reform, he proposed that knowledge be used as a tool for Dalit liberation and emerged as a powerful force in the campaign to gain access to it. Before independence, many Dalit communities had started moving ahead in life by acquiring an education through the numerous Ambedkar libraries and trusts that had been set up in Dalit colonies across India, such as the Ambedkar Library in Allahabad, which was established in 1935–36.³² In 1942 Ambedkar founded the All-India Scheduled Caste Federation. Ambedkar believed that those who educate others in order to spread their religion are better than those who prevent people from acquiring education, even though the former, too, do not allow the development of independent thinking. Education with the purpose of spreading religious ideas at least helps the deprived acquire an education.³³

In 1934, with the aim of alleviating the continued oppression of the lower castes, the colonial Indian government prepared a list of “backward” and oppressed castes, and then in 1935 it passed the second English Education Act, which provided special benefits to untouchable castes and tribal communities such as reservations not only in jobs but also in politics.³⁴ After independence, some Dalits benefited from additional welfare programs and anti-discrimination policies introduced by the state. They acquired not just an education but also government jobs in the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), Provincial Civil Service (PCS), and other Class III and Class IV civil service jobs. Many of them also became doctors and engineers. These civil-servant Dalits in turn provided their family members with an education, and thus a large section of the Dalit public acquired the capacity to speak and write for themselves. The key task, of course, was not simply acquiring an education but also evolving the Dalits into a politically aware intellectual community. Education was not just a means to find employment; it was also an instrument for the development of their self-esteem, self-awareness, and critical consciousness. These capacities, in turn, would help Dalits create their own repository of knowledge that would be a part of the mission to liberate themselves.

³² Narayan, *The Making of the Dalit Public*, 78.

³³ B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, vol. 3 (Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1990).

³⁴ Bechain, *Hindi ki dalit patrakarita*. Reservations are a form of protective discrimination for specific historically disadvantaged groups in India.

A Dalit Counterdiscourse

The hierarchical caste-based culture of India has produced its own values and norms, which in turn have become a sort of common sense. Because of the social, cultural, and political pressures exerted upon them by society's dominant castes and classes, Dalits themselves have accepted and internalized the norms and values that accorded them a low social status and perpetuated a culture of oppression and exclusion toward them for centuries. In order to contend with this situation and to create a Dalit counterculture, Dalit organic intellectuals have sought to produce and disseminate different kinds of narratives via print, and they have produced vast amounts of popular literature in the form of cheap and popular chapbooks. Their narratives have contributed to the creation of a set of specifically Dalit norms and values, a Dalit counter-common sense, and to the development of greater social consciousness among Dalits. These new forms of Dalit consciousness relentlessly contested the prevalent caste-based common sense and gradually evolved into a Dalit movement that not only subverted the former but also helped the Dalits to acquire self-respect, a sense of identity, and an equal opportunity to lead a respectable life in Indian society. The main aim of this new movement has been to produce and sharpen the Dalit critical consciousness about the prevalent, caste-based, and hierarchical social structure and to enable Dalit communities to analyze, interpret, contest, and subvert the dominant, upper-caste set of values.

Dalit literature sought to guide the search for sociocultural and political identity so that, no longer dependent on others for their self-definition, Dalit communities would be their own source of experience and means of self-realization. By giving voice to what was a historic struggle against dominant Brahmanical literary and knowledge forms, this Dalit counterliterature also sought the negation of Brahmanical literature. Hitherto, a small section of society mainly made up of the upper castes and other affluent social groups had dominated the production of literature, a process from which Bahujan and Dalit communities had been actively excluded. That traditional variety of literature featured miracles performed by gods and goddesses and the luxurious life led by kings (and told with erotic interludes), as eulogized by the *pandas* and *pujaris* (priests). In these texts the role of society's feudal elites in the making of the nation was glorified, while the contributions of the common people were callously ignored. In fact, the characters depicted in the traditional literature had nothing to do with the mundane world. Yet despite having been erased by these literary forms and practices, the common people had been compelled to accept them as literature.

Dalit community leaders, writers, and intellectuals understood that this state of affairs would continue for as long as Dalit and Bahujan communities were not educated and enlightened about their own self-interest. They realized that the Dalit *shoshit samaj* (exploited society) was ignorant of its rich cultural heritage and culture, which had welded Dalits together and made them capable of creating civilizations such as Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro centuries ago. The Dalit intellectuals understood that it was not possible for oppressed Dalit communities to scale new heights without acquiring greater cultural consciousness. Therefore, a Bahujan-Dalit literature had to be created to bring about not only social change in the Bahujan Samaj but also a cultural renaissance and enlightened consciousness among Dalit readers.

A Bahujan-Dalit literature had to be created to bring about not only social change . . . but also a cultural renaissance and enlightened consciousness among Dalit readers.

Dalit popular booklets explored different types of non-Brahmanical cultures, including Buddhist and subaltern folk cultures, in order to successfully counter the Brahmanical values that had hitherto prevented Dalit communities from attaining social confidence. These booklets documented the histories of the Dalit

community and asserted their role in the making of society and the nation, which mainstream history writing did not acknowledge. They invented and proposed heroes for the marginalized and subaltern communities and regarded them as being equal in stature to the heroes and icons of the dominant castes and communities. The aim was to subvert society's dominant or master narratives, culturally and historically. There was also sharp criticism of the practice of denying Dalits the opportunity to live respectable lives by denying them equal rights and the opportunity to work, to pursue their occupations, and to participate in religious activities.

Many of these booklets were social criticism based on Dalit experiences of everyday life. The chapbooks hardly ever use the kinds of data and analyses that are used by mainstream academics, nor do they refer to the work of Dalit scholars teaching and researching in universities. Instead, they primarily make use of the facts and information that have been collected and developed by Dalit public intellectuals, social activists, and political leaders such as Ambedkar,

Phule, Swami Achhutanand, and Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu.³⁵ Many of these Dalit thinkers and intellectuals write in regional languages, and none of them are part of the academic fraternity. The booklet writers prefer the work of those scholars whose writings have been informed by real-life experiences and oral histories, in addition to archaeological and archival research. They also refer to colonial sources such as the census, gazetteers, and published diaries and memoirs written by colonial officers, but they read and reinterpret them in a manner that is consistent with their own aims in order to gather facts that prove their contribution to the freedom movement and to the making of the Indian nation. They also undertake subversive readings of traditional works such as the Vedas, the Puranas, and the Samhitas, and they do so for two reasons: first, to prove the historical deprivation and inhumane treatment suffered by Dalit communities in caste-based Indian society, and second, to develop a counter-discourse about untouchables and the lower castes that contrasts with traditional religious literature.³⁶

The political consciousness that has developed among Dalits in the recent past has played a critical role in the development of this corpus of counter-knowledge, and this growing political consciousness may also explain the popularity of these booklets.

From 2007 to 2012 most of the booklets mentioned here sold 50,000 copies. Some booklets have even seen six or seven editions. Heterogeneous and dialogic in character, this literature can be understood, following Mikhail Bakhtin, as constituting an “unofficial culture” that resists the ruling classes and political

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³⁵ Chandrika Prasad “Jigyasu” (1885–1927) was a Hindi intellectual who laid the foundations for a Bahujan ideology in the Hindi belt through his writings. He was a writer of a politically revolutionary stream who devoted his entire life to the awakening of the Dalits and other backward groups and to opposing the hierarchical stratification of the *varna* system.

³⁶ The Puranas are an expansive genre of Indian literature composed mostly in Sanskrit and Tamil but also in other languages. Known for their complex symbolism and encyclopedic coverage, they address various topics including cosmology, genealogy (of gods, goddesses, kings, heroes, sages, and demigods), philosophy, theology, folktales, and more. Though influential in Hindu culture, these texts are not considered to be religious scriptures. The Samhitas consist of the oldest layers of the Vedic text, comprising mantras, hymns, prayers, litanies, and benedictions in Sanskrit.

oppression.”³⁷ These booklets are consciously created not as commodities meeting the demands of a market. Therefore, it is not easy to integrate them into a dominant metanarrative.

That these small booklets are among the chief means of creating social and political awareness among Dalits is visible at multiple levels. They are widely read not just by Dalits at the grassroots level but also by the intelligentsia, at think tanks, and among Dalit political leaders. Some writers have been actively involved in the political mobilization of Dalits. These popular booklets played an important role in shaping the Dalit consciousness of Kanshiram and Mayawati, two Dalit leaders who went on to play major roles in Dalit politics in UP. When Kanshiram’s political consciousness was being formed, D. K. Karpade, an activist of the Dalit movement in Maharashtra, used to give him similar booklets to read, which shaped his political ideology and contributed to the subsequent formation of the BSP in 1984.³⁸ They equipped Dalit leaders with the knowledge and logic they needed to deconstruct and destroy the ideologies of the dominant groups and parties while constructing and developing a Dalit political counterideology.

How Dalit Ideas Travel

The remarkable popularity of these booklets raises several questions: Who buys these booklets? Who are their main consumers? What are their primary markets? It is not the cosmopolitan cities of India that are the primary market for these books. The large book fairs may have maybe one stall for Dalit literature, but most books are in English. In the big cities, large bookstores do not carry these booklets. Budh Sharan Hans, a Dalit IAS officer and reformist, explains: “Publishers and distributors are overpowered by the Hindu mentality. They publish and distribute books guided by Hindu-dominant interests. There are no Dalit books influenced by dominant Hindu ideology that the publishers and distributors would like to publish and distribute.”³⁹

Some readers of the booklets come from the newly emerged middle class among Dalits; they are educated and employed in government or nongovern-

³⁷ According to Bakhtin’s theory, life is a shared event participating in dialogue; hence, the meaning of life can be understood through dialogue. Mikhail Bakhtin, Caryl Emerson, Trans., M. Holquist, ed. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981).

³⁸ K. Y. Yad, *Rajnaitik satta* [Political power] (Lucknow: Bahujan Sahitya Sansthan, 2005), 11.

³⁹ Budh Sharan Hans, personal interview, December 2006. Hans is perhaps best known for his act of burning religious texts; he felt these texts were the main reason behind the social discrimination of Dalits.

ment salaried jobs. They are committed readers of these booklets because most of them are associated with the Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti (DSSS/DS4), the BSP, and the All India Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF).⁴⁰ The only precondition for reading this literature is a commitment to the party and to the Indian political culture, as is evident among the BSP's activists.

These booklets are also purchased by lower-caste readers mainly for their engaging narratives.⁴¹ The booklets sell in impressive numbers because they use simple language to tell their stories. The authors tend to use simple Hindi with a mixture of folk and vernacular words that reflect the *bol chal ki Hindi* (Hindi used for everyday conversation). In addition, the content is often expressed through folk tales. *Mool vansh katha* (Story of original inhabitants) outlines "ancient history" from a Dalit perspective and is narrated in the style of the *Satya narain vrat katha*, a religious text that is chanted by upper-caste Hindus.⁴² Thus, rather interestingly, an anti-Brahmanical narrative has come to be told in the style of Brahmanical narrative. The Mahabharata *katha* form is also used. Consider, for example, the following lines: "O Gentlemen! This most ancient city of the Satyuga era was full of beautiful mansions, shops, roads, guest houses, gardens, decorated by different types of arts and architectures. People living in this city were leading a happy and prosperous life." Does this narrative not revive the narrative form of the Mahabharata? Similarly, Mata Prasad's *Achhut virangana* is about an untouchable heroine of a lower caste who struggled against the Brahmanical system in order to be able to enter a temple and marry the man of her choice, and without the assistance of any priest. This story is written in the form of a *nautanki*, or dance drama and narrates the tale of a heroine who, according to the writer, defied the dominant Hindu religion. Other folk forms such

⁴⁰ The Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti (Dalit [and Other] Exploited Groups Struggle Committee) was founded in 1981 by Kanshi Ram to work for the interests of the oppressed classes in the country. Its slogan was "Brahmin, Thakur, Bania chor, baaki sab hain DS-4," meaning that Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (administrators and soldiers), and Vaishyas (tradesmen) are thieves, and all other castes are DS4. BAMCEF is an anti-Brahmanical, Ambedkarite organization in India. It was officially launched on December 6, 1978, on the anniversary of the death of B. R. Ambedkar by Indian politicians Kanshi Ram, D. K. Khaparde, and Dinabhai.

⁴¹ Narayan, "Heroes, Histories and Booklets."

⁴² *Mool Vansh Katha* is a Hindi-language book written by Gaya Prasad Prashant and published by Jai Bhim Store (1994). The book narrates the history of Dalits and argues that they are the primary residents of the country. *Satya narayan vrat katha* is narrated as part of the *Satyanarayana puja* (worship) and is found in the *Skanda purana* (the largest of the Mahapuranas, a subcategory of the Sanskrit *puranas*). *Vrat* refers to a ritual fast, and *katha* means story. Thus, as per this custom of worshiping Narayana or Lord Vishnu, people keep a fast for the duration of the entire ritual. After completing all the religious vows, the story of Vishnu is heard.

as *qawwali*, *doha*, *chaubola*, *daud*, and *lavni* have also been used in this story.⁴³ Shiv Prasad Dohre, another writer of Dalit booklets, uses *dohas*, *vilaps*, *alhas*, *sawaiyas*, and *liladhar* folk rhymes to convey messages from the BSP.⁴⁴ He has re-created the story of Shambuk (a character from the Mahabharat) in the form of a *nautanki* called *Shambuk leela*.⁴⁵ In Dalit literary and cultural discourse, folk traditions have priority over other forms of expression. Their literary creations include major figures such as Ambedkar, Phule, Buddha, and Periyar. Later, folk heroes such as Raidas, Kabir, Valmiki, Jhalkaribai, Avanti Bai, Shambuk, and Eklavya were also included.⁴⁶ The final reason for the popularity of these booklets among Dalit communities is that they provide Dalit readers with the arguments they need to counter the dominant communities and their mainstream narratives, which help keep the Dalits marginalized, especially in the domain of knowledge production. These chapbooks provide Dalits with intel-

⁴³ *Nautanki* is a traditional form of dance-drama popular in the North Indian states of UP and Bihar. *Qawwali* is the form of Islamic devotional music that emerged via Sufi traditions and is mainly popular in Punjab and Hyderabad in India and in Pakistan. *Dohas* are a type of Hindustani-language poetry comprised of rhyming couplets of two lines that contain twenty-four *matras* (instants) in each line. Some of the famous *doha* composers were Bhakti poets such as Kabir, Surdas, and Mirabai, as well as the poets Tulsidas and Abdur Rahim. *Chaubolas* are a traditional form of Hindustani poetry in the quatrain meter, often used in folk songs, and are popular in North India and Pakistan. *Daud* is a form of traditional folklore in India. *Lavni* is a genre of folk music and dance popular in the state of Maharashtra.

⁴⁴ *Vilaps* are a poetic form of lamentation intended to express grief and agony. *Alhas* are a type of folk song whose beginnings lie in the Bundelkhand region of North-Central India. They are used to inspire someone with compliments or cheering, *Sawaiyas*, like *alhas*, are also poetic verses used to praise someone. They were mainly used to praise gods and deities in Hinduism and the first five gurus (teachers) in Sikhism. *Liladhar* is a type of traditional dance-drama based on the life of Krishna, a Hindu deity.

⁴⁵ Shambuk is a character from the epic Ramayana. He is important because he is described in the epic as a Shudra who killed a Brahmin's son, and as a means of penance for the violation of the Dharma ethical code, he was killed by Lord Rama. He is a much-debated character for the Dalits, who feel that his character represents the injustice committed toward the lower caste and the superiority ascribed to the higher castes.

⁴⁶ Rishi Valmiki is sage-poet who is believed to have originally composed the Ramayana, the main epic of Hinduism. *Jhalkaribai* was a woman soldier who played a very important role in the women's army of Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi in the Indian Rebellion of 1857. A prominent advisor to the queen, during the battle in 1857 between the British army and the troops of Jhansi she enabled the queen to escape to safety by disguising herself as the queen and fighting on her behalf. Avanti Bai is remembered today as a freedom fighter and Dalit icon. Avantibai Lodhi (d. 1858) was the queen of Ramgarh (in present-day Madhya Pradesh), who also fought against the British during the Rebellion of 1857. In the Mahabharata epic, Eklavya, an excellent archer who belonged to the tribal community Nishadas, was refused discipleship by Dronacharya, the Brahmin teacher of the royal princes, because of his low social standing. Instead, frightened by his skills in archery, Dronacharya asked Eklavya to cut off his right thumb and offer it to him as *gurudakshnia*, an honorarium acknowledgment of what he had surreptitiously learned from the Brahmin teacher by hiding in the jungle. See Narayan, "Heroes, Histories and Booklets."

lectual resources, the kinds of arguments about identity assertion they need to make claims and counter-claims in order to get a proper share of state-sponsored welfare policies and schemes.

These arguments thus evolve from being interpretations of the past to claims staked in the present and for the future. And these claims have emerged from knowledge resources that showed, for instance, that Dalits made many sacrifices and contributed a great deal to the *gadar* (rebellion) of 1857, also known as India's First War of Independence. They have played an important role in the making of the Indian nation since then, contributing much more than any other Indian community. In acknowledgment of Dalits' sacrifices, they should enjoy a representative share of democratic processes, schemes, policies, powers, and politics.⁴⁷ Dalits have been excluded because of the caste hierarchy prevalent in Hinduism for centuries. The booklets provide moral arguments in favor of reservation and other government "protect discrimination" policies made possible by the Indian democratic system and the constitution.⁴⁸ Some of the booklets reinvent Dalit history to develop narratives about Dalit icons from ancient times so as to create identity resources for the community today. These identity resources provide to community members the social and political confidence they need to assert themselves and to participate in Indian electoral democracy. These booklets also narrate histories that show that many Dalit castes had been ruling communities in the past and had produced many noble kings and rulers but lost power and became marginalized due to the conspiracy of the dominant Brahmanical system and Muslim regimes. Thus, through these knowledge-based arguments, these booklets push the idea that Dalits have the skill and knowledge they need to acquire power in the modern democratic state.⁴⁹ Some of these knowledge-based arguments provide a means for Dalits to counter the Gandhian renaming of untouchables as *harijan* (people of God), which has been opposed in recent times by some of the Dalit intelligentsia.

The Dalit reading public aspires to empowerment, to an identity, and to a fair share of political power. To claim these, they need strong arguments, and the chapbooks work as a valuable knowledge resource for Dalit activists, leaders, opinion makers, and other vocal sections of Dalit communities. During my fieldwork in different parts of UP, I observed many BSP leaders, the party cadre,

⁴⁷ K. Nath, *Arya anarya vansh katha* [The story of Aryan and non-Aryan lineages] (Kanpur: Boddha Upasak Sangh Sahitya Prakashan, 2007).

⁴⁸ R. P. Saroj, *Aarakshan ka sach evam lok sewaye* [The truth about reservation and public services] (Lucknow: Unique D. T. P. Centre, 2001).

⁴⁹ Rajkumar Pasi, *Bijali Pasi ki aitihasikata* [The historicity of Bijli Pasi] (Lucknow: Pasi Shodh Kendra, 2005).

and regional coordinators using these booklets while delivering public speeches. Young people, students, and the reading public in villages also read these booklets, which provide them with the knowledge frame they need to construct their identity for themselves and for others.⁵⁰

How these booklets and the ideas in them circulate among the people is a further important question. The booklets are published mostly by publication houses run by Dalit activists and authors and Bahujan missionaries and activists in various parts of UP. A. R. Akela, for instance, the Dalit author, singer, and activist we discussed above, runs a publishing house in Aligarh called Anand Sahitya Sadan. Another publishing house, Bahujan Kalyan Prakashan, was established by eminent Ambedkarite intellectuals of UP. Lakshya Sandhan Prakashan, located in Bahraich, was established by Rameshwar Pawan. Ashok Pustakalaya is a library that was established by eminent Ambedkarite socialist Periyar Lalayi Singh. His publishing house, called Sasta Press, has published many popular chapbooks. Publishers sell the booklets directly at pavement shops or on *thelas* (cycle-carts) at various Dalit social gatherings, political rallies, and cultural functions. The publishers also maintain a network of ties with each other and buy and sell each other's publications.

Buddha Saran Hans, who runs a Dalit publication forum called Ambedkar Mission Prakashan in Patna (Bihar), once said in one of his interviews that he sold booklets even at cremation grounds located on the banks of the Ganga, where Dalits would gather for the funerals of their relatives and friends. Many booksellers take the booklets from these publishers and set up their own pavement shops on occasions such as the Ravidas *mela* (fair) and at the Kabir *sangams* (meetings), as well as at BSP rallies and other Dalit-Bahujan gatherings.⁵¹ Individual chapbook sellers, called *kitabwalas* (booksellers) and *cyclewalas* (booksellers on a cycle) by the villagers, also play an important role in the dissemination of these booklets and the ideas and knowledge resources contained in them. Traveling from village to village with bundles of booklets to sell, most of these *kitabwalas* and *cyclewalas* are Dalit missionary activists who spend their own money to buy and sell these Dalit chapbooks.

In some parts of UP such as Gonda, Bahraich, and Saharanpur, a network of chetna mandaps have emerged. These small shops carry items such as booklets, statues, and posters of the Buddha and Ambedkar with the goal of creating self-awareness among Dalits. These shops play an important role in the dissem-

⁵⁰ Narayan, "Heroes, Histories and Booklets," 71.

⁵¹ Ravidas *melas* are held in the states of UP, Punjab, Haryana, and Himachal Pradesh to mark the birthday of Guru Ravidas. Kabir *sangams* are gatherings intended to remember Saint Kabir during which his *doha* poems are recited and sung by various cultural groups.

ination of Dalit chapbooks. Because Dalit activists run the chetna mandaps out of their homes, interested people have to seek them out if they want to buy the booklets. The owners of chetna mandaps also organize seminars and discussions at various public places in towns and cities where the booklets are also displayed. Dalit participants in such gatherings help to increase awareness among the less politically aware people. The discussions help generate interest among the people, who then buy some booklets in order to learn more about the issues that they just heard being discussed. Through such *charchas*, or serious conversations and discussions on various issues related to Dalit empowerment, these chetna mandaps have both helped make listeners more aware about issues and evolved a Dalit public sphere.

Similarly, vibrant Dalit public spaces have emerged around socioreligious *panths* (sects) such as the Ravidas *panth*, the Kabir *panth*, and the Shiv Narayan *panth*, among others.⁵² Each of these sects emerged centuries ago during the so-called Bhakti period, and they remain popular among the Dalit castes of North India. There are Buddhist religious and sociocultural organizations as well. These sects periodically organize religious and sociocultural gatherings that are attended by large numbers of the Dalit population. These Dalit religious public spaces were another place where the Dalit popular chapbooks could be sold and disseminated.

The production of these booklets gained momentum after the emergence of the BSP in 1984. The party appealed to writers to write booklets highlighting the problems of the SCs, STs, and OBCs (Other Backward Classes), social groups that formed the party's electoral base. The writers were instructed that the literature they create had to be concerned with building a society based on equality, justice, freedom, and fraternity. It should instill courage and self-respect among the readers by exploring, for instance, the history of various Dalit communities and by popularizing the biographies of all those saints and heroes who had played an important role in the Dalit struggle for liberation. The writers' basic agenda was to negate the influence of Brahmanical literature and to develop a Dalit-Bahujan counterliterature. The party believed that such a counterliterature was needed to create a cultural renaissance among Dalits and bring about change in the larger Bahujan Samaj (society).⁵³ In 1990 the central

⁵² Ravidas was a Bhakti saint born in a Chamar family in the fifteenth century. Kabir was a popular poet who preached communal harmony. The Shiv Narayan *panth* was established by Swami Shiv Narayan. Though a Kshatriya himself, he fought for the upliftment of the Dalits. The Shiv Narayan *panth* had its followers among the untouchable castes of Khatiks (vegetable vendors), Dhusiya (cobblers), and Jaisvaras (who work in the textile industry).

⁵³ Narayan, "Heroes, Histories and Booklets," 3924.

government's decision to implement the findings of the Mandal Commission's report led to the production of more booklets in which Dalit writers tried to justify the need for measures of protective discrimination.⁵⁴

A glorious past has become even more important for the Dalits in their efforts to establish their present claims, and often when a certain myth, legend, or narrative is transformed into Dalit print culture, its dissenting character becomes sharpened.⁵⁵ Writers are more acutely aware of the issues faced by their readers, which they try to highlight in print. Some writers may try to extend the myths in such a manner that their dissent against the hegemony of the dominant castes is brought out forcefully, while other writers may try to subvert the existing meaning of the myths and reinterpret them as a reaction against prevalent Brahmanical norms. The dissenting nature of these myths then acquires the potential of being used as an instrument for raising the political awareness of the grassroots population.

These printed chapbooks have influenced the creation of knowledge related to Dalits in various ways. First, they provide a knowledge base for the politics of Dalit empowerment and democratic assertion. During our visit to various state and regional offices of the BSP, we found that these booklets were kept either on the desks of party officials or in display cases. We found that many young leaders of the BSP, the recently emerged Bhim Sena, as well as various activists associated with different Dalit civil society groups use these booklets as their intellectual resource base for developing arguments against dominant discourses.⁵⁶ In discussions, lectures, and campaigns, these arguments evolve into alternative discourses of democracy, caste, governance, religion, culture, and society. In 1994, when the BSP-supported Samajwadi Party (SP) government was in power in UP, Mayawati gave a statement against Mahatma Gandhi that created a big row in the state legislative assembly. Leaders from other parties, such as the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), started attacking BSP and its erstwhile leader, Mayawati. At that time, Mayawati's personal secretary visited Bahujan Kalyan Prakashan and purchased chapbooks that analyzed Mahatma Gandhi and his actions from an Ambedkarite perspective. In this

⁵⁴ The Mandal Commission was set up by Prime Minister Morarji Desai in 1979 to look into the issue of providing protective discrimination to marginalized castes. Although the report had been completed by 1983, it was the V. P. Singh government that declared its intent to implement the report in August 1990.

⁵⁵ Narayan, *Women Heroes*.

⁵⁶ Bhim Sena (Army of Bhim) is a social organization named after Bhimrao Ambedkar that was set up in 2015 by Satish Kumar, Vijay Ratan Singh, and Chandrashekhar Azad. It works for the rights of the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and religious minorities in India.

instant, the chapbooks assisted in giving voice to marginal communities in the politics of representation in North India.

Some of these chapbooks are also used, both formally and informally, in universities in Dalit studies departments and at the handful of Centres for the Study of Discrimination and Exclusion (CSDE) that were established by the University Grant Commission (UGC) in 2007.⁵⁷ The booklets help shed light not only on the condition of Dalits but also on the history of their identity assertion. Whenever teachers at these centers teach topics such as Dalit icons, political representation, Aadi Hindu (aboriginal Hindu) movements, Dalit caste histories, and the role of Dalits in the freedom movement, they use the chapbooks as a knowledge resource.⁵⁸ Much of the research being done on the role of Dalits in the freedom movement (especially in North India) by mainstream scholars working in universities and research centers is based on the primary sources that have been collected and compiled in these Dalit chapbooks. And most of the Dalit chapbook writers are not from the academic world; they are engaged in jobs and occupations not linked either to teaching or to research. In fact, the popular booklet knowledge doesn't even refer to the writings of Dalit scholars teaching in universities and research centers. Therefore, in one way, these chapbooks are forms of knowledge that, even though produced outside universities and research centers, greatly influence the teaching, research, and pedagogy that is conducted there.

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As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, we have established the Dalit Resource

Centre, an archive of such popular booklets at the G. B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad (Prayagraj). Research scholars, students, academics, and activists from all over India and abroad come to the center to make use of these Dalit chapbooks, mostly for the sake of their research and teaching. By analyzing the profiles of visitors to the center, we realized that scholars and academics from provincial universities, central universities, and universities abroad (such as Cambridge, SOAS University of London, the University of Chicago, and

⁵⁷ The UGC is a statutory body set up by the government of India that has been active since 1956 in the field of higher education. Its main goals are the coordination, determination, and maintenance of standards of teaching, examination, and research in university education.

⁵⁸ Based on interviews with CSDE faculty teaching in Lucknow and at the Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, and professors who hold the Dr. Ambedkar Chair in some North Indian universities.

others) visit and use these knowledge resources for their research work. These Dalit chapbooks, therefore, are now influencing academic research and teaching in two ways: first, they are filling gaps in our knowledge about Dalit lives, histories, and issues; and second, they serve as alternative knowledge resources for teaching about and researching Dalit lives. Using their own narrative idioms and forms, organic intellectuals from within the Dalit community are thus engaged in the production of critical knowledge about caste, social exclusion and inclusion, and the question of dignity. This network of chapbook writers in UP together form a crucial if informal pool of scholars who constitute a place without boundaries where community knowledge has emerged from the grassroots and flourished. It is a people-university without any walls and campuses.

Conclusion

The nearly eighty years of India's journey as a democracy have seen Dalit communities produce organic intellectuals from within the community who, having acquired the capacity to read and write, now produce knowledge about Dalit history, politics, identity, social criticism, cultural studies, and literature. These knowledge forms reflect an analysis of society, politics, culture, and identity from a Dalit point of view, which has developed into a counterdiscourse against dominant knowledge systems prevalent in India's hierarchically organized, caste-based society. The dominant or "mainstream" knowledge systems are not sensitive to the realities of Dalit life, and these systems either do not typically give space to Dalit discourses in the humanities and social sciences, or they keep them at the very margins. The Dalit chapbooks discussed here, in contrast, constitute a knowledge base that has helped to reshape the Dalit common sense, with respect especially to the various kinds of inequalities, sufferings, and forms of oppression experienced every day by the Dalit community.

Dalit chapbooks have their own distribution networks, which include pavement shops in fairs and rallies, itinerant *kitabwalas* and *cyclewalas*, and chetna mandaps. The publishers and sellers of these booklets disseminate this literature for two reasons: to earn an income, of course, but also because of their mission to develop and strengthen the Dalit counterdiscourse in India's caste-ridden hierarchical society. These counterdiscourses revolve around the role of Dalits and other marginalized communities in Indian history and their contribution to nation building. They narrate a glorious history of the Dalits, with glowing accounts of their heroes and saints, and how that past has been marginalized in mainstream history as written by the upper castes. This knowledge resource

functions in three ways. First, it fills the gaps in knowledge about the lives of Dalit and subaltern communities in extant humanities and social science literature. Second, it develops a counterdiscourse against the dominant, upper-caste discourse that has for so long marginalized Dalits and deprived them of a space in the arena of knowledge. Third, these chapbooks serve as an intellectual resource for Dalit-Bahujan leaders, social activists, and ordinary Dalits, providing them with a subversive discourse against a caste society that ingrains subordination and passivity among Dalits.

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