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Joel Lee
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I

Untouchability and Alterity, Now and Then

1 Introduction

Signs, the Census, and the Sanitation Labor Castes

The census of India is a vast undertaking. Once a decade, every person residing in India—roughly one-sixth of humanity—is to be counted, named, and known. In 2011, I found myself in the midst of this monumental endeavor.

The scene was Lucknow, famed for its kabobs and culture of *politesse* yet also the capital of the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (or "UP," as it is called), known for its rancorous caste and communal politics. I had not anticipated being present for the decennial census—its fifteenth iteration since the inaugural British attempt in 1871–72—but I arrived in Lucknow, by chance, on the second day of its implementation. Though observing such a state exercise had not figured in my research design, the potential value it held for an ethnographic study was undeniable, and within a few days I began accompanying census workers on their rounds.

My companions were surveying a Dalit neighborhood along a railway track when I began to sense that foundational premises about caste and religious belonging were misplaced. The words with which the enumerators filled their forms told one story, but the silences and circumlocutions of the enumerated seemed to hint at something else.

I wanted to understand Dalit religion. I sought, that is, to learn from those who suffer the structural violence of untouchability how their experience of stigma shapes their sense of religious belonging. My interests lay particularly with the caste cluster that supplies virtually all of South Asia's sanitation workers. Today the sanitation labor castes are widely regarded as simply and self-evidently Hindu. In swaths of north India, indeed, they have a reputation for displays of Hindu zealotry and support for Hindu majoritarianism. Yet little more than a century ago none of this was the case. The sanitation labor castes were known then for defying, in more ways and to a greater extent than other groups, categorization under the religious taxonomy of the colonial state. Far from appearing as straightforwardly Hindu, they featured in the reports of the decennial censuses as a secretive, "chameleon-like" community

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whose company Hindus abhorred, a community whose syncretic religious observances generated "a great deal of confusion," making them "the chief disturbing element" in the mapping of India's religions (Rose 1902: 113).

Here, then, was a riddle: how had a community whose social abjection and religious proclivities made it the paradigmatic confounder of order in colonial times come to be regarded in the postcolonial period as commonsense constituents of an unquestioned majority? How had despised outsiders to the house of Hinduism come to be seen as bricks in its very foundation? However this had transpired, the contours of the change seemed to suggest a more fundamental historical relation between the politics of untouchability and the rise of religious majoritarianism—phenomena ordinarily treated as separate or only glancingly related—than is generally admitted. Perhaps observing the census, where caste and religion appear arm in arm as categories through which the state offers its citizens a kind of recognition, might offer some clues.

I was therefore grateful when the census director of UP generously granted me permission to accompany enumerators on their rounds. The census, in one major line of argument, bears responsibility for the reification or calcification of caste and religion as categories of social difference in colonial modernity (Appadurai 1993; Cohn 1987; Dirks 2001; Gottschalk 2013; Kaviraj 1992). Bringing ethnography to bear on this largely historical contention might build upon its insights or reveal its limits. Whereas most accounts of the census consider only the remote guise of the state, as a distant power that determines the categorical schema according to which recognition and other political goods will be distributed, firsthand observation would reveal the state in its proximate guise, as a neighborhood schoolteacher or city employee called in for census duty, bringing local relations of power into play in the generation of official knowledge. It was an opportunity to witness how people talk about caste and religion in those brief, tense conversations between enumerator and enumerated that cumulatively produce such seemingly transparent demographic facts as India's 79.8 percent Hindu majority.

Thus I found myself on a grey February morning going door to door with a pair of census workers, participating in a once-in-ten-years irruption of state officialdom into the weekday routines of a working-class, largely Dalit neighborhood or *bastī* squeezed between the bungalows and bougainvillea of a posh housing colony and the rubbish-strewn tracks of one of Lucknow's

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secondary rail lines. Shankar,[1] a municipal clerk, was the enumerator officially responsible for the *bastī*, but on account of his failing eyesight he had brought along his son Narayan, a mass communications student, who carried the clipboard and forms and conducted most of the interviews. In a lane of small brick apartments, a middle-aged woman fielded Narayan's questions from her doorway, giving her family's surname as Gautam. When she disappeared inside to find out her mother-in-law's date of birth, Narayan turned to his father.

"What does Gautam come under?"

"Chamar!" Shankar replied in a loud, somewhat theatrical whisper. "SC!"

Narayan wrote "SC" in the appropriate box, identifying the woman and her family as Scheduled Caste, the governmental designation for Dalit or "untouchable" communities.

When the woman returned, Narayan skipped columns seven and eight; that is, he asked her about neither caste nor religion, but proceeded to literacy status, disabilities and so on before completing the interview and moving to the next home. Though puzzled, I said nothing at the time. Later in the day, in the privacy of the home of a friend and caste fellow of Shankar's, the enumerators filled in the blank columns, marking everyone in the Gautam family thus:

Caste: SC (Chamar)
Religion: Hindu

As the father and son explained to me, when Shankar *knew* (*jānte*) a person's caste, there was no need to ask the caste question, and when the caste fell within the Scheduled Castes, there was no need to ask about religion. This method contravened rules in the government's instruction manual for census workers, rules that underscore that the enumerator is "bound to record faithfully whatever religion is returned by the respondent for herself/himself and for other members in the household" and that warn specifically against assuming a correlation between caste names and religion (Chandramouli 2011: 44–45).

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[1] Here and throughout the book names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of my interlocutors. Exceptions are public figures (members of parliament and the UP legislative assembly like Kanhaiyya Lal Balmiki, Narain Din, and Achhe Lal Balmiki in chapter 5, Lucknow's mayor in the afterword), and two individuals, now deceased, who insisted in their interviews with me that their real names be retained: Govind Prasad and Lalta Prasad (chapter 5).

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In practice, though, Narayan and Shankar's policy of inferring the caste and religion of Dalit interviewees was the norm—not only for this pair, but for teams of census enumerators I accompanied on their rounds elsewhere in Lucknow as well as in Benares and Mirzapur. The fact that great numbers of Chamars in UP have converted to Buddhism and that the surname Gautam—a name of the Buddha—is preferred by many Dalits precisely on account of its Buddhist resonances was not a consideration for the enumerators. Each Gautam they encountered was recorded as Hindu, without the question having been asked.

So it went at the next home, and the next, and several more after that: each family bore a recognizably Dalit surname, rendering the caste and religion questions, from Shankar and Narayan's point of view, superfluous. A burst of cold rain sent us running for shelter under the blue tarpaulin awning of a chai stall. When it cleared, we made our way to another cluster of brick apartments, where we found a group of women and men watching children play in the puddles while geese noisily snapped up water nearby. As we approached, one of the elderly women in the group, observing us, called out, 'Panditji has come [*Panditjī ā gaye*]!' Not certain I had heard her correctly—and unaware of Shankar and Narayan's caste—I discreetly asked Shankar what the woman had said.

Continuing to walk toward the group, he replied loudly, "She said, 'Pandit ji has come!' Because we are brahmins."

"Brahmins," his son confirmed.

"Brahmins by caste," Shankar added, this time in English.

We were now standing before the elderly woman. Shankar's words seemed to hang suspended in the air during the long, uneasy silence that ensued, until finally one of the men in the group brought over some red plastic chairs, gestured for us to sit, and began to answer Narayan's questions.

"Surname?"

"Balmiki."

Hearing this, Narayan marked dashes under the columns for caste and religion—he would fill them in later as "SC" and "Hindu"—and proceeded to other questions. After finishing with this man's family, Narayan turned to the next-door neighbor, Rajesh, who had just emerged from a bath and answered questions standing in a towel and tee-shirt. After his family's form was complete—again with everyone marked "Hindu" though the question had not been posed—another neighbor stepped forward to be interviewed, while Rajesh lingered to observe.

Narayan asked the neighbor, “And what work do you do in the municipality?”

The man did not reply.

“Sanitation worker [*Safāī karamchārī*],” said Shankar, speaking for the man and gesturing at his son to fill in the space accordingly.

“Wait,” said Rajesh, still standing in his towel and watching the enumerators. “You all never asked me what work *I* do.”

“I put you down as ‘worker’ [*karamchārī*],” said Narayan.

Rajesh explained that he worked as a network technician for a telecommunications company. “It’s not as though all of us are sanitation workers,” he continued. “We also have big positions. We have officers.”

“Only in a few houses,” Narayan retorted.

“But this is discrimination [*Yeh to bhed-bhāv hai*]. I’m not a sanitation worker.”

“I wrote ‘worker.’ ‘Worker’ is alright.”

“‘Worker’ is totally misleading. Even big officers are ‘workers.’ Also,” here Rajesh pointed at the column where Narayan had written surnames, “that should be *V*almiki, not *B*almiki.”

“Yes, yes, I’ll fix it,” Narayan replied with unconcealed irritation. But he changed nothing—neither the spelling of the caste title nor the designation of type of labor.

Behind this row of brick apartments ran a dirt lane along which stood a line of *jhoṁpṛī*s: improvised dwellings of brick, mud, thatch, tin, and plastic. Beyond the *jhoṁpṛī*s lay the railway tracks. In a home on this lane we were met at the door by a woman in a *salwār-qamīz* who looked the three of us over and asked, “What’s this about? What’s this for?”

Ignoring her, Narayan said, “Head of household?” The woman eyed him coolly and disappeared inside. A silver-bearded man emerged wearing a pink tee-shirt and a *lungi* perforated here and there by cigarette burns. From his threshold he fielded the enumerators’ questions. He worked as a sweeper in a private hospital; his children took up whatever work they could find, in sanitation or anything else.

“Caste?”

After a substantial pause, he said, “Balmiki.”

Narayan came to the religion column, and this time he chose to ask. “You’re Hindu, aren’t you [*Āp Hindu haiṅ, na*]?”

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A long silence ensued. The hospital sweeper idly observed children playing in the lane while Narayan looked to his father and Shankar began to fidget. Finally the man said, “Yes, Hindu.”

Shankar, visibly perturbed by the man’s hesitation, pursued the matter. “You’re not, for instance, Lal Begi, are you? Because, you know, there are Lal Begis who are Muslim.”

“You mean the Dilliwals,” the man replied. He then delivered a roundabout discourse on the essential interchangeability of the terms Lal Begi, Balmiki, Dilliwal, Panch Sau Tirasi (the number 583), and other names by which his caste is known locally. He neither affirmed nor repudiated the allegation of Muslim-ness.

Shankar reiterated his contention that some Lal Begis are Muslim, and again probed whether the man was Lal Begi. His interlocutor said nothing but watched Shankar and Narayan impassively. Eventually, Narayan wrote “Hindu” in the religion column of the form and wrapped up the interview.

A few doors down we came to a one-room brick structure before which plastic tarps had been stretched to shelter an open cooking area. Stooped beneath this was a woman in a green sweater, stirring a pot of boiling lentils. She stood up, greeted us, and asked, “What will we get out of this?”

“This is the census,” said Narayan.

“You people are the future of India!” Shankar added.

When Narayan came to the caste question she answered, “Balmiki.” Narayan proceeded to column seven, religion, and again decided to ask. “Your religion is Hindu [*Dharm Hindu hī hai*]?”

“No.” She spoke quietly but distinctly. I was startled by her response but tried not to indicate it. Narayan and Shankar gave no apparent reaction. Nobody spoke. The pot of lentils steamed and bubbled.

After an interval, Narayan repeated the question with slightly different wording, “You’re Hindu [*Hindu haiṅ*]?”

“Yes.”

Shankar turned to me as though to explain the necessity of the question, “Some people do convert [*Kuchh log dharmparivartan karte haiṅ*].”

What was going on here? The woman offered no explanation for her *volte-face*, delivered in the same steady tone as her initial reply. Equally flummoxing was Narayan’s bald disregard of her initial response, as though such words could not be countenanced. If his father sought to assure me—or himself?—of the normativity of Dalit Hindu-ness by pointing to the rare event of formal conversion to another religion (*dharmparivartan*) as its only exception, this effort seemed undercut by his own repeated insinuation that the family at the previous house might be crypto-Muslim Lal Begis. And what to make of the man whose reticence and elliptical speech elicited this charge? Caste titles and religious labels mingled and converged in his periphrastic response to Shankar's queries, suggesting a mode of belonging at variance with prevailing regimes of distinction, indecipherable in the language of the state. Why was the enumerator so vexed by this man's studied ambiguity? If his silences were to speak, what would they say?

The Story Line in Brief

The book that lies ahead attempts to answer this question. Without giving the plot away entirely, let me sketch its trajectory, indicating in brief some of its key historical and ethnographic arguments. This is a study of the disparate yet deeply entwined histories of religion among the sanitation labor castes and Hindu majoritarianism. One cannot be told without the other: no account of Dalit religion in modernity can afford to ignore the past century of interventions in that domain by Hindu nationalists and the state, as those interventions have produced the very terms in which discussion is now legible. Hindu majoritarianism, for its part, has been driven by the fear of Dalit religious autonomy—a fear partly in response to collective practices of the sanitation labor castes in the colonial period—from its very inception. If the interreligious antagonism known in India as communalism has long been animated by the politics of caste (Basu 1996; Hansen 1999; Menon 2010), some of the most foundational sociological assumptions about caste have been manufactured, largely undetected, by communalism.

This book is an effort to make sense of that February morning with the enumerators in Lucknow: why the woman stirring lentils first told Narayan that she was not Hindu, and then, when asked again, that she was. Or why the man in the pink tee-shirt replied so obliquely to the question of religion, or, equally, why his long pauses incited the enumerator to say, "You're not, for instance, Lal Begi are you?" Attentiveness to contradiction and circumlocution, as well as to non-verbal signs like silence and gesture, may guide us toward insights altogether at odds with the "final word" of authorized discourse. It is one of my arguments that a semiotic approach to the study of caste and religious belonging—an approach attentive to signifying practices, the composition and interpretation of signs by which identitarian affiliations are

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sustained—makes possible the apprehension of social phenomena that have remained opaque to other analytical traditions. These phenomena challenge established paradigms in the study of religion in South Asia and trouble some of the ethical presuppositions that modernity urges on us regarding secrecy, subterfuge, and self-identification.

Contemporary politics in South Asia is predicated on the figure of the primordially Hindu untouchable—a figure that conceptually confines Dalits within the framework of Hinduism, securing for Hindus a demographic majority in the present and a claim to religious and cultural hegemony in the past. In this book I argue that the idea of the transhistorically Hindu untouchable emerged scarcely a century ago, and that it ran athwart the collective self-perception of the sanitation labor castes. Drawing on a range of sources from the 1870s to the 1920s, I contend that the sanitation labor castes of north India during that period widely understood themselves as neither Hindu nor Muslim but as members of a *qaum* or *ummat*—a cohesive, autonomous socioreligious community—centered on Lal Beg, an antinomian prophet (*paighambar*) who moved in a largely Islamicate narrative world. Hindus and Muslims, moreover, acknowledged the religious alterity of the Lal Begis, as they were called. Thus Hindu census enumerators in the colonial period often refused to record the sanitation labor castes as their co-religionists. The colonial administrative decision to classify untouchables as Hindus by default contradicted prevailing sociological common sense. In chapter 2, I analyze evidence from the liturgical songs and other oral traditions of the Lal Begis that speak to Dalit perceptions of self and other in that period.

All of this began to change as techniques of colonial governance stimulated a politics of numbers in which castes and religious groups, increasingly assuming the politicized character of "enumerated communities" (Kaviraj 1992), vied to constitute majorities in local, provincial, and pan-Indian representative bodies in the early decades of the twentieth century. These conditions gave rise among some Hindus to the "fear of small numbers" that Arjun Appadurai (2006: 52) names as a signal feature in the emergence of majoritarianism globally. It was in the context of a Hindu fear of small numbers—of being a "dying race" demographically and politically threatened by growing Muslim and Christian numbers—that the Arya Samaj, a Hindu reformist organization, systematically took up efforts at *achhutodhhār* or "untouchable uplift," and to persuade Hindus and Dalits to reimagine one another as co-religionists. I will show that the idea that the sanitation labor castes and other Dalits are and always have

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been Hindu—an idea that struck some contemporary observers as offensive and others as absurd—was mooted for the first time in the 1910s and 1920s by the Arya Samaj as a strategy of what we may call *majoritarian inclusion*, an effort to secure a majority against a potential rival by incorporating a heretofore despised outgroup. In chapter 3, I describe this effort and the skepticism with which it was often met through a reading of key Arya Samaj materials, unearthing in the process the degree to which Arya Samajists wrestled with their own *ghṛṇā*—a north Indian emotion-concept similar to disgust—as they began working with Dalits, and the ways in which Arya Samaj authors encouraged fellow Hindus to suspend the *ghṛṇā* they felt toward Dalits and to redirect it, instead, at Muslims. It is in these Arya Samaj texts, as well, that the sanitation labor castes were first provided a Hindu pedigree in the form of a genealogical connection to Rishi Valmiki, author of the Sanskrit epic the Ramayana.

It was not until the 1930s, though, that the newly conceived figure of the primordially Hindu untouchable came to appear credible to a larger public. Though the colonial state and the Arya Samaj had laid the groundwork, the political maneuvers and representational interventions that were decisive in giving majoritarian inclusion the mass traction it ultimately achieved were those of Gandhi, the Harijan Sevak Sangh ("Servants of Untouchables Society"), the Indian National Congress, and literary figures inspired by Gandhi such as Rabindranath Tagore and Mulk Raj Anand. Their contributions to the discursive and political confinement of Dalits within Hinduism are the subject of chapter 4. "I know infinitely more than you do what Harijans *are*," Gandhi (1934d) said to his "untouchable" critics in 1934, referring to their caste fellows with his preferred nomenclature of Harijan or "people of Hari"—Hari being a Vaishnava Hindu name for god—"[I know] where they live, what their number is and to what condition they have been reduced." The mahatma's welding together of an enumerative, panoptic, governmental imagination with a decidedly brahminical social ontology set his approach apart; his monological manner of speaking *for* largely overrode the Arya Samaj's dialogical effort to speak *to* and to *persuade*. Thus the missionary majoritarianism of the 1910s and 1920s yielded to the trustee majoritarianism of the 1930s and 1940s, culminating in the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order of 1950, which declared that "no person who professes a religion different from the Hindu religion shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Caste," and in doing so, elevated the Gandhian representational strategy to the law of the land, securing postcolonial India's Hindu majority by fiat.