

## Deceptive Majority

How did it come to be common sense that the vast swath of the population of South Asia once known as ‘untouchable’ are and always have been Hindu?

Grounded in detailed archival and ethnographic research, *Deceptive Majority* unearths evidence that well before the emergence of twentieth century movements for Dalit liberation, the subset of ‘untouchable’ castes engaged in sanitation labor in colonial India conceived of themselves as constituting a religious community (*qaum*) separate from both Hindus and Muslims—a community with its own prophet, shrines, rites, legends, and liturgical songs. This book tracks the career of this tradition alongside the effort to encompass it within a newly imagined Hindu body politic—a majoritarian project advanced in complex, distinct, yet convergent ways by colonial administrators, Hindu nationalists, the Congress Party, and Mohandas Gandhi. A sensitive account of contemporary religious life in the north Indian city of Lucknow illuminates both the embrace and the contestation of Hinduization within a Dalit community. A weaving together of the history and ethnography of religion, *Deceptive Majority* reveals the cunning both of the architects of Hindu majoritarianism and of those who quietly undermine it.

**Joel Lee** is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Williams College, Massachusetts.

## SOUTH ASIA IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

South Asia has become a laboratory for devising new institutions and practices of modern social life. Forms of capitalist enterprise, providing welfare and social services, the public role of religion, the management of ethnic conflict, popular culture and mass democracy in the countries of the region have shown a marked divergence from known patterns in other parts of the world. South Asia is now being studied for its relevance to the general theoretical understanding of modernity itself.

*South Asia in the Social Sciences* will feature books that offer innovative research on contemporary South Asia. It will focus on the place of the region in the various global disciplines of the social sciences and highlight research that uses unconventional sources of information and novel research methods. While recognising that most current research is focused on the larger countries, the series will attempt to showcase research on the smaller countries of the region.

General Editor  
Partha Chatterjee  
*Columbia University*

Editorial Board  
Pranab Bardhan  
*University of California at Berkeley*

Stuart Corbridge  
*Durham University*

Satish Deshpande  
*University of Delhi*

Christophe Jaffrelot  
*Centre d'études et de recherches internationales, Paris*

Nivedita Menon  
*Jawaharlal Nehru University*

Other books in the series:

*Government as Practice: Democratic Left in a Transforming India*  
Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya

*Courting the People: Public Interest Litigation in Post-Emergency India*  
Anuj Bhuwania

*Development after Statism: Industrial Firms and the Political Economy of South Asia*  
Adnan Naseemullah

*Politics of the Poor: Negotiating Democracy in Contemporary India*  
Indrajit Roy

*South Asian Governmentalities: Michel Foucault and the Question of Postcolonial Orderings*  
Stephen Legg and Deana Heath (eds.)

*Nationalism, Development and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka*  
Rajesh Venugopal

*Adivasis and the State: Subalternity and Citizenship in India's Bhil Heartland*  
Alf Gunvald Nilsen

*Maoist People's War and the Revolution of Everyday Life in Nepal*  
Ina Zharkevich

*New Perspectives on Pakistan's Political Economy: State, Class and Social Change*  
Matthew McCartney and S. Akbar Zaidi (eds.)

*Crafty Oligarchs, Savvy Voters: Democracy under Inequality in Rural Pakistan*  
Shandana Khan Mohmand

*Dynamics of Caste and Law: Dalits, Oppression and Constitutional Democracy in India*  
Dag-Erik Berg

*Simultaneous Identities: Language, Education and the Nepali Nation*  
Uma Pradhan

# Deceptive Majority

Dalits, Hinduism, and  
Underground Religion

Joel Lee



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-108-84382-9 — Deceptive Majority  
Joel Lee  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

## CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom  
One Liberty Plaza, 20<sup>th</sup> Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
314–321, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India  
79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781108843829](http://www.cambridge.org/9781108843829)

© Joel Lee 2021

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2021

Printed in India

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Lee, Joel G., author.

Title: Deceptive majority: Dalits, Hinduism, and underground religion / Joel Lee.

Description: Cambridge; New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2021. |

Series: South Asia in the social sciences | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020049864 (print) | LCCN 2020049865 (ebook) | ISBN

9781108843829 (hardback) | ISBN 9781108826662 (paperback) |

ISBN 9781108920193 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Hinduism and politics--India--Lucknow. | Dalits--India--Lucknow--Religion. |

Dalits--Political activity--India--Lucknow. | Caste--Religious aspects--Hinduism. |

Caste--Political aspects--India--Lucknow. | Social integration--Religious aspects--Hinduism. |

Political sociology--India--Lucknow. | Lucknow (India)--Politics and government. |

Lucknow (India)--Religion.

Classification: LCC BL1215.P65 L44 2021 (print) | LCC BL1215.P65 (ebook) |

DDC 305.5/68809542--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020049864>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020049865>

ISBN 978-1-108-84382-9 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-108-82666-2 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

In memory of Sakun



Shakuntala Devi (1953–2013)  
Portrait by Sanya Darapuri

[A]rtifice was necessary, he had found, for stemming the cold and  
inhumane blast of the world's contempt.

Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*

## Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xv
I. UNTOUCHABILITY AND ALTERITY, NOW AND THEN	
1. Introduction: Signs, the Census, and the Sanitation Labor Castes	3
2. The <i>Ummat</i> of Lal Beg: Dalit Religion before Enumerative Politics	31
II. MAKING “UNTOUCHABLES” HINDU, OR THE GREAT INTERPELLATION	
3. Missionary Majoritarianism: The Arya Samaj and the Struggle with Disgust	77
4. Trustee Majoritarianism: Gandhi and the Harijan Sevak Sangh	121
5. Hinduization and Its Discontents: Valmiki Comes to Lucknow	163
III. SEMIOTICS OF THE OPPRESSED	
6. Victory to Valmiki: Declamatory Religion and the Wages of Inclusion	213
7. Lal Beg Underground: <i>Taqiyya</i> , Ethical Secrecy, and the Pleasure of Dissimulation	252
<i>Epilogue</i>	291
<i>References</i>	307
<i>Index</i>	327



## Figures

1.1	Awadh, with traditional area of settlement of the 583 and neighboring <i>qabile</i> (clans)	22
2.1	Lal Beg shrine (western style)	60
2.2	Lal Beg shrine (eastern style)	61
3.1	“Football of the Untouchables”	97
4.1	“Left-Handed Compliment”	143
4.2	“Sweet Mercy”	146
5.1	<i>Deg</i>	196
5.2	<i>Bhagaunā</i>	197
7.1	Sohan Lal (who goes by another name in this book)	252

## Acknowledgments

A thousand acts of generosity and forbearing have made this book possible. Let me start in Lucknow by thanking Ganesh Kumar Adivamshi, Sneha Lata, and their son Shubh Ambedkar, whose friendship, hospitality, humor, and belief in the value of this project are the bedrock on which this book rests. My gratitude goes likewise to Ganesh's siblings Nisha, Mukesh, Amit, Vinay, and their spouses. Their mother Shakuntala Devi, known by friends as Sakun, taught us all so much by word and deed, and left us all bereft when she died so early. I think she would have liked this book, and I dedicate it to her.

Another friend lost too soon was Sohan Lal "Gupta," who shared my fascination with history and without whose guidance in the mysteries of Lal Beg this book would not have been possible. He and Shanti and their children welcomed me and my family as their own, as did Pushpalata and Jagdish Atal, Mehphul and Shyama and their sisters, Sant Kumar and Ali Hussein. I thank Sanjeed, Lallan, Rajan, Dilkash Warsi, Kunwar Ranjit Singh, Anup Kalyani, Shyam Lal Vaid, Shyam Lal Pujari, Shyam Lal son of Bhaggan, Change Lal, Khannaji, Sant Kishore, Jagdish Prasad, Devi Prasad, Vinod Valmiki, Mosna, Chunni Lal, and all of their families. I am grateful to Nandini Vaid, Rimpi Gauri, Mayank Khanna, Abhishek Diwan and the whole 2011–12 Spoken English cohort at the Fast Computer Training Institute for being such inspiring students, inviting me into their lives, and keeping in touch.

The book begins with observations from the 2011 census in a Dalit neighborhood of Lucknow; I am grateful to Nina Sharma, Superintendent of Census Operations for Uttar Pradesh, for kindly granting me permission to participate in this eye-opening exercise. Chapter 5 relies in part on the writings, photographs, and personal correspondence of the first generation of Balmiki political leaders in Awadh; for sharing their family collections I warmly thank Sarojini Balmiki, Prithviraj Chauhan, Raj Kumar Singh, Ashok Kumar, Chandra Kumari, and P. Chandra—children and grandchildren of Kanhaiya Lal Balmiki (Member of Legislative Assembly) and Narain Din Balmiki (Member of Parliament). My gratitude goes as well to Harsh Singh, grand-nephew of Govind Prasad of the reformist triumvirate, who kindly read my entire dissertation

*Acknowledgments* xvi

and gave me pages of detailed feedback. In Lucknow I also want to thank Sara Khan, Ahtesham Khan, and the late, much-missed Ram Advani. Conversations with Masood Alam Falahi and C.M. Naim at the latter's ancestral home in Bara Banki decisively shaped my thinking during fieldwork and beyond, as did many discussions over *biryani* with Nishat and Nadeem Hasnain in Lucknow. I thank Pushpa Balmiki, her husband Ramesh and their children, who, along with Dev Kumar in Kanpur, included me in their emancipatory projects and encouraged me to pursue the history of Lal Beg and Valmiki.

In Delhi, Amritsar, Panipat, Benares and elsewhere the fieldwork for this book took me, I gained tremendously from conversations with and support from Paul Divakar and Annie Namala, Bezwada Wilson, Vimal Thorat, Sukhdeo Thorat, S. Anand, Chandra Puhali, Murtaza Alam, Ali Hussein Ustad, Darshan Ratan Ravan, Jayshree Mangubhai, S. D. J. M. Prasad, Aloysius Irudayam, Shashi Chauhan, Amuda Prakash, Ashok Pandey, J. P. Singh, Priyadarshini Vijaisri, Prem Singh, Praveen Kumar, and Imtiaz Ahmad. This study builds upon foundations laid by scholar-activist Bhagwan Das (1927–2010). An associate of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar and participant in and theorist of sanitation labor caste struggles for justice and equality, Bhagwan Das was working in his final years on a monograph on the history of his community. This project was left unfinished; I hope, though, that my book, guided as it is by intuitions found in some of Bhagwan Das's Hindi and Urdu essays and by an interview I had with him in his last months, might in some small way carry forward his legacy. I thank his daughter, historian Shura Darapuri, and her father-in-law, S. R. Darapuri, and their whole family, for their encouragement of this project.

Stepping further back, it was Jebaroja Singh and Prince Singh who first set me on the path of critical caste research; I am always grateful for the life they model and the push they gave. Around the same time Eleanor Zelliot introduced me to Dalit literature and to the life and work of Ambedkar. Royal Rhodes, Wendy Singer, and Miriam Dean-Otting sowed seeds of inspiration. In linguistic training, I benefitted from studying with outstanding pedagogues, especially Aftab Ahmad, Fauzia Farooqui, and Frances Pritchett in Urdu and Andy Rotman, Vidhu Shekhar Chaturvedi, and Premalata Pinki Vaishnav in Hindi.

The research on which this book is based was supported by the Social Science Research Council and Fulbright-Hays. Shorter subsequent research stints were enabled by the Max Planck Institute for Human Development and Williams College, and final touches were completed while starting a new project supported by Fulbright-Nehru, the American Institute of Indian Studies, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. I thank the staff at each of these institutions.

xvii *Acknowledgments*

I also thank Karola Rockmann at Max Planck and the librarians, archivists, and other staff at the Uttar Pradesh State Archives, Lucknow; Nehru Memorial Library, Delhi; Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary, New York; and the Islamic Studies Library at McGill University, Montreal (especially Anaïs Salamon). It has been a privilege as well to be affiliated with the Anthropology Department of Lucknow University and, in Delhi, the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies and the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies while conducting research for this book.

In developing this work I have benefitted immensely from discussions with friends and fellow travelers in graduate school and beyond, especially Anand Taneja, Carla Bellamy, Nicolas Jaoul, Gajendran Ayyathurai, Tabinda Khan, Divya Cherian, Tyler Williams, Joel Bordeaux, Patton Burchett, Jon Keune, Harmeet Kaur, Jayson Beaster-Jones, Ajeet Singh Matharu, Pasha M. Khan, Prashant Keshavmurthy, Laura Brueck, Beatrice Jauregui, and Katyayani Dalmia. At Chicago, Muzaffar Alam, Dipesh Chakrabarty, McKim Marriott, and again C. M. Naim generously shared their time and ideas on the project; Naim Sahib also drew my attention to one of the Urdu texts that would prove crucial to the historical narrative. Owen Lynch modeled intellectual generosity and ethical commitment; he also persuaded me to be an anthropologist. Manpreet Kaur expertly guided me through passages of idiosyncratically transliterated Punjabi sociolect from the colonial archive, as did Gurinder Singh Mann on another occasion. Charu Gupta kindly shared the “untouchable football” image (chapter 3) from her archival discoveries. I warmly thank all of my mentors at Columbia, especially Anupama Rao, Sudipta Kaviraj, Rachel McDermott, Brian Larkin, Katherine Pratt Ewing, Nicholas Dirks, and Frances Pritchett. Conversations with Gopal Guru, Shahid Amin, and Christophe Jaffrelot during their sojourns at Columbia were formative. This book has been immeasurably enriched by the wit and rigor of my dissertation committee: Elizabeth Povinelli, Partha Chatterjee, Brinkley Messick, John Stratton Hawley, and my PhD advisor E. Valentine Daniel.

In the metamorphosis of this project into its present form, I have had the good fortune to share my findings with discerning audiences in too many places to name. For their probing and insightful questions I am particularly grateful to: Eric Lott, Irvin Hunt and Karl Jacoby at the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race at Columbia University; Kanthi Swaroop Gunti and the Ambedkarite Students Collective at Indian Institute of Technology Bombay; and Demetrius Eudell, Ramnarayan Rawat, Linda Hess, Meena Khandelwal, Philip Lutgendorf, Margrit Pernau, Ute Frevert, Razak Khan, Lisa Mitchell, Kedar Kulkarni, Nandini Gooptu, Martin Fuchs, Sanal Mohan, Julien Levesque, Saswathi Natta, Urvashi Butalia,

*Acknowledgments* xviii

Suraj Yengde, Surinder Jodhka, and Suryakant Waghmore at conferences from Madison to Milan. I am grateful to all of my colleagues at Williams College for their sustained interest in and encouragement of this project; my writing has been shaped especially in dialogue with Peter Just, Olga Shevchenko, David Edwards, Saadia Yacoob, Aparna Kapadia, Jeffrey Israel, and with my comrades in the ethnography of religion writing group: Meredith Coleman-Tobias, James Manigault-Bryant, and Zaid Adhami. I thank my students, especially Thasin Alam, Grace Fan, Gabriel Silva Collins, Danielle Faulkner, and Eva Asplund, for being a wellspring of hope and reminding me what the scholarly endeavor is all about.

Among the peculiar joys of academic life is the informal gift economy of deep, scrupulous, critical readings of one another's work. I have benefitted more than I can convey from such engagements with this book. In particular I thank Thomas Blom Hansen for his comments on two chapters and Shailaja Paik, Les Beldo, Rupa Viswanath, Jack Hawley, and Nathaniel Roberts for their incisive, mirthful, and profoundly knowledgeable feedback on the entire manuscript. At Cambridge University Press I thank Qudsiya Ahmad, Anwasha Roy, Aniruddha De, series editor Partha Chatterjee, as well as the anonymous reviewers.

One of the greatest pleasures in bringing this book to completion has been collaborating with two young artists in Lucknow, Sanya Darapuri and Nikhil Mayur, whose exquisite pencil work appears periodically in the pages ahead. I thank Sanya and Nikhil for the dedication and care they put into these portraits and sketches.

I am grateful to Leo and Boaz for the amused skepticism with which they regard everything I do, this book included. My greatest debt is to Joanna, whose reminders always to tell a story are responsible for any sense of plot or pace in the book ahead. Without her steadfast support, companionship, patience, and good humor, none of this would have been conceivable.