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# *A Roundtable on Rupa Viswanath's* The Pariah Problem: Caste, Religion, and the Social in Modern India *and the Study of Caste*

**Abstract**

In this roundtable discussion, five scholars of modern India with diverse methodological training examine aspects of Rupa Viswanath's 2014 book, *The Pariah Problem: Caste, Religion, and the Social in Modern India*, and assess its arguments and contributions. This book has made strong challenges to the scholarly consensus on the nature of caste in India, arguing that, in the Madras presidency under the British, caste functioned as a form of labour control of the lowest orders and, in this roundtable, she calls colonial Madras a 'slave society'. The scholars included here examine that contention and the major subsidiary arguments on which it is based. Uday Chandra identifies *The Pariah Problem* with a new social history of caste and Dalitness. Brian K. Pennington links the 'religionization' of caste that Viswanath identifies to the contemporary Hindu right's concerns for religious sentiment and authenticity. Lucinda Ramberg takes up Viswanath's account of the constitution of a public that excluded the Dalit to inquire further about the gendered nature of that public and the private realm it simultaneously generated. Zoe Sherinian calls attention to Viswanath's characterization of missionary opposition to social equality for Dalits and examines missionary and Dalit discourses that stand apart from those that Viswanath studied. Joel Lee extends some of Viswanath's claims about the Madras presidency by showing strong parallels to social practices in colonial North India. Finally, Viswanath's own response addresses the assessments of her colleagues.

## *Introduction*

BRIAN K. PENNINGTON

*Elon University*
*Email: bpennington4@elon.edu*

Perhaps no element of South Asian culture has been subjected to as varied a range of scholarly approaches or theories as caste. Rupa Viswanath's *The*

*Pariah Problem: Caste, Religion, and the Social in Modern India* (Columbia University Press, 2014) marked a turning point in the historiography of caste by training our attention to one of its understudied aspects and laying out the documentary history that demonstrates the centrality of unfree Dalit labour to the shape of caste and Hinduism itself. The five articles gathered here assess Viswanath's analysis and its ramifications for the scholarly understanding of caste. A response from Viswanath follows.

As these articles will make clear, Viswanath regards caste as a form of labour control and the subjugation of Dalit castes as a species of slavery. Her analysis stands in sharp contrast to the manner in which caste was described by some Western scholars in the twentieth century. As is well known, Louis Dumont regarded caste as a system of social hierarchy based on religious categories and structured by the opposition between pure and impure. His *Homo hierarchicus: Essai sur le système des castes* (1966) would become a staple of graduate education and a foil for anthropological considerations of caste that came after. In subsequent decades, McKim Marriott argued that caste hierarchies were founded on the principles of exchange and a belief in the flow of potentially polluting substances across porous personal and communal boundaries. Whereas these scholars identified an essential and pervasive logic on which caste operated, Dumont's Indian contemporary, M. N. Srinivas, argued for the fluidity of caste and its amenability to modern projects such as electoral politics. At the turn of the twentieth century, Nicholas Dirks charted the history of interpretations of caste by scholars and the state to demonstrate the pivotal role of colonial knowledge production in fixing caste as the pan-Indian system of social organization that the modern period has known.

Although a critique of earlier models is not central to Viswanath's book, *The Pariah Problem* situates itself in these debates on the basis of her archival study of the deliberations undertaken in the Madras presidency between 1890 and 1920 about how to address the condition of landless labourers called at various times and by various parties names such as Paraiyar, Pariah, Panchama, untouchable, Harijan, and Dalit. Marshalling sources produced by groups with sometimes overlapping and sometimes conflicting interests—Christian missionaries, colonial officials, and landed elite—Viswanath aims to demonstrate that, during this critical 30-year period, caste was determined to be fundamentally religious in character—a move that protected high-caste rights to Dalit labour. The amelioration of the wretched condition of Dalits was thereby left up to gradual social reform, since, as religion, caste was shielded from interference by the state. In arguing for the collusion of British and

Indian interests in defining caste as a religious matter with primarily spiritual consequences for Dalits, she undermines many of Dumont's assertions, aligning herself more with the constructivist understanding of caste advanced by Srinivas and Dirks. Viswanath goes further, however, arguing that colonial interventions in caste operated primarily to naturalize the hiatus between caste and Dalit as *the* fundamental caste difference. As the basis for that claim, she documents a 'caste–state nexus' that erased the relationship between high-caste prerogative and the control of agrestic labour while simultaneously deflecting the vigorous efforts by Dalits to resist their enslavement, including through strategic conversion to Christianity.

Viswanath's case that unwritten rules concealed the cooperation between British officials and landed elites to preserve caste command over the Pariah's body and unrestricted rights to his labour is painstakingly assembled from two sets of archival collections—missionary and official. The former she reads for the evidence that India's 'most patient documentary observers of nineteenth-century labouring lives' preserved about labour practices and land tenure that only those with the linguistic skills and long-term village relationships that missionaries cultivated could access (11). The official archive, by contrast, which she characterizes as contradictory, inconsistent, and incomplete, gives testimony through its silences, read against missionary records to identify when and how the state sided with the caste elite in violation of official policy. Methodologically, then, *The Pariah Problem* is classic archival sleuthing. What lends it the power to upend the scholarly consensus on the relationship between caste and religion is Viswanath's ability to play her disparate sources off against one another and show how their mutual corrections yield a new narrative. In Viswanath's reconstruction, Dalits proactively and strategically invited conversion as a means of redressing their circumstances but were largely foiled in these and other acts of resistance by a quiet understanding that local officials would ignore state policy and work hand in hand with the landed elite to preserve the status quo.

Viswanath's central argument is that the trope of 'gentle slavery', so prominent in official British discourse, had obscured a forced-labour regime until it gave way under Protestant missionary criticism of untouchability and as Dalit labourers themselves flocked to mission compounds to seek conversion as a means of escaping their conditions. While these developments pushed the 'Pariah problem' to the fore and made Dalit improvement an urgent question, the poverty and landlessness of the untouchable classes were reframed as essentially

spiritual in nature. Untouchability was declared a religious issue in which the Crown Raj's policy of neutrality forbade intervention. As religious practice, casteism became a matter for gradual social amelioration rather than a target of law. The 'national social' is the name Viswanath gives to this extra-legal zone to which untouchability was relegated. The book dwells at length on the character of missionary engagement with caste issues, practices of landholding in Tamil Nadu, the state's active refusal to address caste subjugation in any direct way, and the cultivation of religious sentiment as a high-caste weapon of resistance against changes to the labour status quo. She concludes her book with the sobering observation that 'the story of the "Pariah Problem" is thus the story of its containment' (240–41).

Although Viswanath does not dwell at length on the reverberations felt over the course of the next century as a result of the decisions that were made during the decades that her research covers, in her conclusion, she signals their twentieth-century outcomes and other readers, including several of those writing for this roundtable, saw quickly the book's contemporary relevance. Anti-Dalit violence remains a powerful means of social and political control in India. The issue of reservations in education and government employment continues to spark sharp, sometimes violent, political confrontation. Efforts by the Hindu right to 'reconvert' Dalit Christians and Muslims back to a Hinduism presumed to be their national hereditary birthright through *ghar vapsi* campaigns further underscore how Dalits and Dalit issues are regularly reconfigured to suit the political ends of dominant groups. For the last quarter-century, no question in India has had more consequential social and legal ramifications than the question of the relationship between Hindu and Indian identities. *The Pariah Problem* reveals the deeply casteist origins of that question.

In the articles that follow, five scholars of modern India with diverse methodological training examine aspects of Viswanath's book and their implications. Uday Chandra identifies *The Pariah Problem* with a new social history of caste and Dalitness. Brian Pennington links the 'religionization' of caste to the contemporary Hindu right's concerns for religious sentiment and authenticity. Lucinda Ramberg takes up Viswanath's account of the constitution of a public that excluded the Dalit to inquire further about the gendered nature of that public and the private realm it simultaneously generated. Zoe Sherinian calls attention to Viswanath's characterization of missionary opposition to social equality for Dalits and examines missionary and Dalit discourses that stand apart from those that Viswanath studied. Joel Lee extends

some of Viswanath's claims about the Madras presidency by showing strong parallels to social practices in North India. Finally, Viswanath's own response addresses the assessments of her colleagues. We hope that this roundtable on this important book will contribute to a robust discussion of the interpretation of caste, colonialism's legacies, and the trajectory of the postcolonial state.

# *Towards New Social Histories of Caste Subordination in Modern India*

UDAY CHANDRA

*Georgetown University, Qatar*
*Email: uc17@georgetown.edu*

*The Pariah Problem* is a contemporary classic. It displays rare skill in reading colonial state and missionary archives, combining a healthy scepticism towards the sources and their authors with a deep sympathy for the Dalit subjects at the heart of the study. It is also a book that bridges older and newer scholarship on Dalits in modern India: even as it acknowledges the contributions of earlier scholarship to the study of agrarian caste relations in colonial India, the book paves the way for writing 'new social histories' of Dalits and other subordinated groups in modern India. If the former dwelt primarily on the structural transformations wrought by colonialism on rural India, the latter promises to zoom in on the struggles and aspirations of those at the bottom of rural social hierarchies across the subcontinent.

Viswanath's (2014) distinctive contribution lies in excavating the constellation of social forces that produced the 'Pariah' or unfree agrarian labourer as an object of social commentary and reform in the Madras presidency in the late nineteenth century (Chapter 1). She carefully sifts through the polyphony of voices in the colonial archive—paternalistic colonial officials, missionaries, *mirasidars*, the early nationalists—that identify the Pariah from their respective vantage points. These voices, however disparate, located the 'Pariah problem' in the realm of religion, caste being understood as a vice peculiar to Hinduism (Chapters 2 and 5). Accordingly, these disparate voices and interests stressed the need for 'spiritual' reform in order to cleanse religion of caste (Chapter 6). In doing so, even the best of intentions ended up undermining 'secular' struggles by so-called 'Pariahs',

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'untouchables', or Dalits for civic rights and dignity (Chapters 3, 4, and 7). Indeed, the spiritual/secular split may itself be regarded as a key legacy of Protestant modernism in South Asia and elsewhere in the Global South (Keane 2007). For Dalits, by contrast, there was a deep, constitutive connection between their low ritual status and their unfreedom in socio-economic terms. This is why 'everyday warfare' over rural caste/class relations made sense to Dalit labourers themselves (Chapters 8 and 9). Thus, we may trace, in Viswanath's analysis, the roots of two radically divergent strands of politics in modern India over the past century or so: a centripetal politics that is forever committed to socio-religious reform as a slow, ongoing process and a centrifugal politics that asserts a politics of difference within a caste society.

Reading *The Pariah Problem* pushes me to pose four broad problems or questions that we ought to consider. Firstly, we must rethink the nature of the colonial state and its relationship to historically subordinated groups in India. It is increasingly apparent that we can no longer cling onto the conceit that the Raj mischievously created or abetted 'identities' that have sprung up only in the past century and a half. As Viswanath argues, the existence of slave castes in the Madras presidency certainly predated the onset of colonial rule in the subcontinent (Viswanath 2014, 24), though it is true that colonial agrarian relations, which privileged the *mirasidars*, worked necessarily to the detriment of those who worked their fields (25–32). The Raj, despite its emancipatory rhetoric, did not set out to free slaves in the Indian countryside any more than it sought to create a bourgeois society across colonial South Asia (Ibid., 32–39). Yet, we are forced to acknowledge a combination of historical accidents and unintended consequences through which the 'Pariah problem' emerges in colonial and missionary records by the late nineteenth century. More generally, the problem of 'Dalitness' emerges across India under various guises and names in this period. There was, in other words, a growing acceptance across Victorian India of what we may call the 'touchability line' dividing Dalits from caste society (Ibid., 31). Such an acceptance was only partly the handiwork of sympathetic officials and missionaries, as Viswanath explains in the context of the Madras presidency, because the petitions and appeals of ordinary Dalits lay at the heart of the new politics of recognition (Ibid., 144–48, 157–58, 191–96). If the colonial state was a clearing house of claims—hardly a neutral one, of course—then the claims of Dalit activists could not simply be wished away (Viswanath 2014, Chapter 4). Indeed, to the extent that 'the Raj was part of the same social field as its Indian subjects' (Washbrook 1981, 713), Viswanath shows that it was as

vulnerable to Dalit claims from below as it favoured a conservative status quo. By the time the Raj had adopted a principle of dyarchy, it is clear that the colonial state had emerged as the principal object of Dalit claim-making (Viswanath 2014, Chapter 9) and representation for Dalits moved the likes of M. C. Rajah, Mangoo Ram, and ultimately B. R. Ambedkar to negotiate rights for Dalits separately from the activities of the Gandhian Congress. Under the circumstances, how might we, as scholars, grapple today with the paradoxical new opportunities and spaces for Dalit politics that opened up vis-à-vis the colonial state from the later nineteenth century onwards?

Secondly, we must rethink the relationship between Christianity and society in modern South Asia. Viswanath rightly chides an earlier generation of church historians for uncritically taking missionary writings at face value (2014, 12). Their sometimes uncritical readings of the mission archives led these historians to simply assume that Christianity stood for equality and missionaries were necessarily inclined to take up Dalit causes (Ibid., 88–90). Reality seems rather more complex, whether in Viswanath's region of study or elsewhere in the subcontinent. As we learn from *The Pariah Problem*, Dalits came to missionaries of different denominations in large numbers and compelled at least a few of them, sometimes against their initial inclinations, to consider their dire economic and political circumstances in caste terms (Ibid., 40–44). Dalit conversion, says Viswanath, is best seen as a political act of forging alliances with influential non-state actors endowed with 'race capital'. In my own work in the Chotanagpur region of the Bengal presidency (today, Jharkhand), I have found similar dynamics at work (Chandra 2016) and recent work by Sanal Mohan (2015) and Shailaja Paik (2014) present comparable findings from Kerala and Maharashtra, respectively. Once we move away from an obsession with motivations, whether of the converts or of the missionaries, we may speak justifiably of a set of fruitful alliances that bring English-language education and bourgeois values to subaltern groups. Some of the fruits of these alliances were, of course, wholly unexpected to all participants: they either emerged decades later or suddenly over the course of missiological work. Sometimes, new sects such as the *Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha* (PRDS) in Kerala or the Birsa *dharm* in Chotanagpur emerged from the interstices of mission Christianity and took on new afterlives in late-colonial and postcolonial times. Against the background of recent scholarship, therefore, what can we say today about the unintended consequences of missionary

interventions in nineteenth-century India on the articulation of Dalit and Adivasi politics in particular regions and at an all-India level?

Thirdly, we must rethink the variegated nature of what we now call Dalit politics. Viswanath's explication of the 'Pariah problem' as it came into existence between *circa* 1870 and 1920 in colonial Madras raises the question of whether her findings resonate with those from other regions. Of course, it is unreasonable to use social-scientific notions of 'generalizability' here but, since Viswanath explicitly compares her work with that of, say, Gyan Prakash's (1990) work on south Bihar (31, 245), a focus on the comparative method is warranted here. Are we comparing apples and oranges, as some might argue, or can Viswanath's arguments be reasonably extended to Bihar or Maharashtra? Such comparative discussions are unavoidable, perhaps even essential. At stake is how a historian such as Prakash reads and interprets his archives, which leads, for instance, to a blurring of the distinction between bonded labour and small peasants. These categories are fundamentally economic ones but, when read as merely discursive categories, they wish away the economic realities of rural life. At the same time, Prakash's blurred categories index both class and caste, and imply that the touchability line was permeable in rural south Bihar. If this is an accurate reading of the colonial archive, some comparative explanation is warranted in light of *The Pariah Problem*. Similarly, Prakash's claim about the refusal of bonded labour to participate in colonial discourses of reform and emancipation seems questionable, in retrospect, in light of the evidence presented by Viswanath. It would be immensely productive to know how exactly agrarian social relations were different in, say, colonial Madras and Bihar, and why the 'Dalit question' emerged in the former rather than the latter. To make the case for comparison does not, after all, deny that there may be vital differences in caste hierarchies across the subcontinent. For both Viswanath and her readers, it may be worth probing further on where the similarities and differences might lie.

On a methodological note, Viswanath's book raises a vital question: How should we study Dalit histories and politics today in a comparative frame of reference? An earlier generation of historians associated with subaltern studies believed fervently that recovering subaltern mentalities lay at the heart of writing 'social history from below'. This is, as she puts it, not Viswanath's project (2014, 9). Indeed, her focus is largely on the politics of the Raj, missionaries, and caste elites in framing the 'Pariah problem' in particular ways over the period of her study. The usual statements about the psychological effects (stigma, humiliation,

and so on) of caste as a form of structural violence are conspicuously absent in the book. When Dalit politics do appear in Chapters 3, 4, 6, and 9 of the book, we learn about it indirectly via petitions, alliances with missionaries, and, eventually, legislative politics. By 'indirectly' I mean that the evidence for Dalit political action lies at the margins of the colonial and missionary archives or that it may need to be read 'against the grain'. But neither method permits us as readers to ventriloquize Dalit voices and subjectivities, which we cannot, after all, access directly in the archives. This is a methodological approach that takes seriously critiques by the likes of Gayatri Spivak (1988a; 1988b) and Rosalind O'Hanlon (1988) that radical scholarship much too often tends to impute their own thoughts into the mouths of dead subalterns. This is arguably how someone as well intentioned as Gyan Prakash (1990) may have projected a critique of bourgeois conceptions of freedom onto the realm of Dalit politics in rural Bihar. By avoiding such projections and imputations, Viswanath shows that a new approach to writing social history is possible. Instead of acting as ventriloquists for subaltern voices, scholars are better off grappling with the layered social fabric in which caste domination exists and takes on new forms, and the pragmatic alliances and actions of Dalits to undo caste domination in disparate contexts (Viswanath 2014, 257–58). Not only does an approach of this kind facilitate comparison, but it also permits scholars to write Dalit histories without charges that they are 'appropriating' the voices of their research subjects. Ethnographers, too, are not outside the scope of this methodological discussion, though they claim a more direct access to their research subjects. It is no longer possible, after all, to cling onto the conceit that fieldnotes are simply faithful reproductions of everything that ethnographers hear and see during fieldwork (Sanjek 1990). The same avant-gardism that marks historical scholarship may, moreover, plague anthropology too when subaltern populations are the subjects of research (Chandra 2017).

In sum, as we think anew about the relationships between Dalit politics and colonial modernity, mission Christianity, and our own scholarly proclivities, *The Pariah Problem* sheds critical light on each of them. It stands at the forefront of new social histories of caste that bring fresh evidence to light and raise new questions that shake up a long-standing consensus in the historiography of caste in modern South Asia. It remains to be seen where this new turn in history-writing takes us in the years to come.

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# *The Haunt of Authenticity: Viswanath,* The Pariah Problem, *and the production of modern Hinduism*

BRIAN K. PENNINGTON

*Elon University*
*Email: bpennington4@elon.edu*

A straightforward reading of *The Pariah Problem* yields a history of the manner in which the demands by Dalits in the Madras presidency for an amelioration to their systematic oppression was addressed by both the Crown Raj and caste elite from the 1890s through to the 1920s. In addition, however, this book adds depth and texture to our understanding of pressing political issues in contemporary India: religious identity, conversion, and the civil rights of its underclasses.

Here, I will address a third conversation that this book makes possible through its important interventions in the standard scholarly histories of how our most foundational categories—religion, the social, and Hinduism—came into their present forms.

What Viswanath calls the 'Pariah problem' is the recognition first articulated by the British Collector of Chingleput, J. H. A. Tremenheere, when he argued in his 1892 'Notes on the Pariahs of Chingleput' that the Dalits in his district suffered from extreme economic vulnerability because of the illegal methods ('chicanery' was his word) employed by caste landowners for obstructing Dalit land acquisition. In spite of the serious implications that his use of the term would entail, he did not shrink from calling the prevailing system of Dalit servitude and British collusion to preserve it 'slavery'. Viswanath identifies the Pariah problem as the emerging, uncomfortable acknowledgement that Dalit castes were a 'particularly abject' class in British India and the subsequent determination that they were 'a group whose improvement was the responsibility of others' (2). Specifically whose problem they were and how Pariah poverty and powerlessness should be addressed were the substance of the ensuing, three-decades-long debate that Viswanath details.

To many readers, it might seem obvious that the authors of this roundtable, who variously specialize in the study of religious traditions of South Asia, are an appropriate group to consider a book on modern discourses around those who came to call themselves 'Dalit'. The role of religion in fostering and sanctioning a social hierarchy that effectively condemns a class of people to permanent inassimilability is a largely unquestioned assumption in the field, as is the role of religion in resisting the cruelties of untouchability. Ambedkar, Dalit Christianities, and Gandhi are among the historical actors often associated with religious opposition to at least some caste practice, while the Purushasukta, *Manavadharmashastra*, and Dumont have reassured us that caste is a social force grounded in religion. Concepts and associations all have their histories, however, and critical history is often their undoing. In this case, Viswanath's rigorous pursuit of archival testimony demonstrates what I will refer to as a progressive *religionization* of central elements of the forced-labour regimes of colonial Madras that in turn, on my reading of her book, became identifying features of modern Hinduism.

Viswanath argues at length that Pariahness underwent a spiritualization in the late nineteenth century. The condition of the unlanded labourer forcibly bonded to caste landholders confronted the Protestant Christian missionary, who took pity on his plight. Viswanath describes the

spiritual nature of the Pariah's debased condition as doubly determined in missionary analysis: the Pariah's low status was the product of Hindu religious doctrine, while the moral and material deprivation it commanded rendered him wretched. Missionaries proposed solution to this condition was a benevolent spiritual pedagogy. One important turn in this religionization of caste was the way in which Protestant missionaries came to frame the recrimination that Dalit converts to Christianity suffered at the hands of landed high-caste elites. By depicting 'everyday acts of domination as religious persecution, missionaries severed them from their agrarian context' and rendered that subjugation 'irrational prejudice rather than … the control of labour' (Viswanath 2014, 81). The missionary's emphasis on the Pariah's ritual untouchability entailed the occlusion of what Viswanath implies was his essential condition: unfree labour subject to the control of the landed-caste elite. A second critical turn in the religionization of caste occurred when the same caste elite borrowed a page from the missionary playbook and embraced the novel theory that the Pariah's state was a product of a distinctively religious family of feelings: high-caste disgust at his presence and offence at proposed British reforms to landholding practices. When the state and the missionary banded together to confront the Pariah problem through a scheme to assign Dalits village lands, local landholders invoked 'time-honoured custom' under attack and an emotional state that could brook neither proximity to the Dalit nor an intervention in local arrangements of power and land ownership that maintained the Pariah in perpetual poverty and subservience.

Viswanath also demonstrates, however, that, as part of the same processes, caste, Dalit abjection, and high-caste prerogative underwent a refashioning, emerging by the early twentieth century as social realities fixed under the regimes of spiritual discourse and practice. By virtue of that supposed fact, they lay beyond the reach of a secular state bound to maintain religious neutrality. In this moment, the Dalit became Hindu, embraced as coreligionists by the landed elites who, in the same move, asserted their 'time-honoured' right to unfree Hindu/Pariah labour that the state could not abrogate without inflaming high-caste passion, incited by the state's intervention in relationships determined by ancient text and tradition.

One of the more troubling revelations of *The Pariah Problem* is its delineation of the imperial state's systematic and entirely self-aware deepening of this hiatus between caste and Dalit and its deliberate religionization of caste and the Pariah. This collusion of dominant

landed castes and the British bureaucrats appointed to facilitate taxation of agricultural production is part of what Viswanath means by the 'caste–state nexus'. I am pointing, however, to a related historical fact that seems to be quite clear from her own data but which I will make more of than she does. When we read Tremenheere in 1892 pleading to his superiors that, via British policy and the colonial state's cosy relationship with landed village elites, 'we have permitted ancient privileges to survive until they have become anachronisms, and we have created new privileges' (Viswanath 2014, 100) for landed castes, we are made eye-witnesses to the production of caste modernity. When, moreover, we then see these same superiors' stubborn and relentless refusal to accept this report and when we survey other mounting evidence of the implausibility of landholders' appeal to their religious rights and feelings, we find ourselves staring straight into the wholesale and guilty manufacture of Hinduism. When we listen, thanks to Viswanath's deft assembly of archival testimony, to British officials at administratively high levels consistently rejecting the analysis of their local subordinates that the Pariah's condition was a matter of enslavement and their insistence, to the contrary, that caste prejudice emerged merely from ritual disgust and therefore lay beyond the reach of the state's sphere of proper intervention, we are observing the gestation of the authentic as sentiment. In this respect, Viswanath underscores the creation of the national social as a zone of ongoing exploitation and debasement protected by the fragile religious feelings of caste elites. I am directing us to see the production of those sentiments themselves as the unimpeachable and privileged substance of a specific form of modern Hindu subjectivity.

What Viswanath gives us, then, is something far more consequential than a new iteration of the argument about the constructed character of Hinduism. Although her work is related to—and in some cases explicitly builds on—earlier scholarship claiming that Hinduism is a product of a certain kind of national historiography, that its reification took place in the realms of colonial law and anticolonial activism, that political actors produced a Semiticized and syndicated Hinduism for political ends, that missionaries systematized diverse social practices to produce a Hinduism ripe for attack, and that European and Indian actors with wildly divergent interests had a hand in framing a shared concept of Hinduism (Chatterjee 1992; Frykenberg 1997; Thapar 1997; Oddie 2006; Pennington 2005, respectively), she echoes those themes but, by levelling her critique at practices of labour control and the manufactured sentiments that came to protect them, Viswanath

restructures those arguments in wholesale fashion to position not just caste, but Dalitness itself as the fulcrum on which modern Hinduism was precariously balanced. If other scholars of the colonial period had highlighted the dominance of high-caste, especially Brahmanical, ideals in the formation of nationalist Hinduisms, Viswanath shows how those ideals are inconceivable apart from the material conditions of Dalit lives, Dalit resistance, and European collusion with the caste elite to employ religious affect as a primary tool of Dalit suppression. She directs us to observe not the formation of categories such as Hinduism, but the enslavement that those categories both preserved and concealed by means of affront.

As a result of these historical processes—processes that did not merely unfold, but were massaged and coaxed along—justice was knowingly sacrificed at the altar of domestic and revenue stability. Thus, at the waning of the nineteenth century, 'hurt sentiments could now trump all other forms of law and right' (Viswanath 2014, 131). These fragile religious feelings did not emerge out of a preconscious response to transgression of a fully internalized taboo, but were forged as a potent mode of modern governmentality. They were lifted up and ratified as an infallible indicator of the authentically Hindu. Viswanath argues that the abstraction of high-caste Hindu sentiment from the political economy that governed the lives of Dalits rendered them political weapons while concealing their political essence (see also Viswanath 2016). Moreover, those sentiments were constructed as primal, epiphenomenal to neither social nor political setting: 'thus it was that the sensitivity of Hindu feelings became axiomatic' (Ibid., 131). I am not challenging Viswanath's argument that sentiments became equated with rights, such as the right of caste Hindus to deny Dalits access to public resources such as water and roadways on the basis of their supposed offence (Ibid., 220–21). I am proposing, however, that they also came to assume a more consequential role, at least from the point of view of the critical study of Hinduism, as a litmus for the authentic: what is truly Hindu and therefore unassailable is that which can be made vulnerable to offence at transgression or insult.

The 'abstraction of Hindu sentiment from political economy' was nothing less than the generation of an essentialized Hinduism that could serve a multitude of future purposes, exonerated, as it was, from the taint of impure motive or political stratagem. We know well that the British framed their Indian subjects as peculiarly inclined to offence, prone to riot and violent outburst if their religious sensibilities were provoked. Recent research has uncovered how long-standing anxiety

about even the appearance of interference in religion was heightened by the Vellore 'mutiny' of 1807 and the pamphlet wars that led to the Charter of 1813 (for example, Carson 2012, 70–100). In the wake of the 1857 rebellion, the Indian Penal Code, drafted decades earlier by Thomas Babington Macaulay, was revised and finally enacted in 1862, enshrining the protection of religious feelings against offence as a means of preserving social stability (Ahmed 2009, 177–82). Those statutes would be augmented and further strengthened in 1927 to stem aggressive proselytizing by the Arya Samaj (Adcock 2016, 340). *The Pariah Problem* sheds light on how a Hindu elite seized on that framework of hurt religious sentiments and fashioned a certain set of feelings and attitudes on the part of caste Hindus as indelible to Hindu subjectivity. These sentiments were naturalized, located beyond the realm of the rational, and identified as essentially religious. 'Untouchability therefore became a state-protected right' (Viswanath 2014, 143), while Dalits who entered the political process after the turn of the century discovered that the disabilities suffered by Pariah classes were not amenable to their invocation of the rights of citizenship, for they had been granted protective custody in the extra-legal zone from where they were said to have arisen: the merely unenlightened minds of their caste superiors. In the case of those Pariah Christians who had sought conversion to escape the recently Hinduized caste regime, their rights and welfare would be subordinated to their newly minted religious identity that the caste–state nexus declared exempt from systematic subjugation (Ibid., 253–54).

Viswanath's study points to the convolutions that the maintenance of the prevailing narrative about caste, conversion, and motive in the postcolonial Indian state have required. She exposes the corruption on which the notion of the authentic was founded. Her work makes it impossible to entertain the question of anyone's motive for converting to Christianity, for she makes it abundantly clear how no motive is unmixed. As I have argued elsewhere (Pennington 2000), these historical transformations would occasion an alteration to the very nature of the formerly intransitive use of the verb 'to convert', which will emerge from India's tryst with destiny in the transitive to signify not an internal shift in disposition or a voluntary transfer of loyalty, but the violent intervention in another's religious subjectivity. As Viswanath points out, contemporary India's anti-conversion laws deny agency to any individual, Dalit or otherwise, who abandons the Hindu fold by framing conversion as possible only by virtue of external influence (2014, 249). One does not convert to a new faith; one is always

converted by another, and then only under questionable circumstances. The violence that inheres in this conception of conversion is amply demonstrated by Hindutva rhetoric today, as, for example, when the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath, vowed to retaliate against Muslim men who marry and convert Hindu women, threatening that 'we will convert 100 girls of their religion if they convert one Hindu girl' (quoted in Gupta 2016, 305). The contours of this linguistic practice render virtually every possible conversion as one occasioned, as the phrasing of anti-conversion statutes often goes, by force, fraud, or inducement.

The discourses of authenticity generated in the struggle over Pariah labour travelled along at least two vectors: genuine Pariah subjectivity could be identified by a contentment with subordination and exploitation. Any resistance—whether by conversion or by the embrace of landholding reforms—was attributable to improper influence by the outsider. Authentic Hindu subjectivity (here read 'caste elite subjectivity'), on the other hand, was inseparable from a system of overt exploitation of the same Pariah and subject to offence when that exploitation was challenged. Before a government pledged to religious neutrality and non-intervention, that caste elite could protest, as they did in 1894, that a plan to indirectly distribute uncultivated land to the Pariah through the missionary in truth aimed 'to deprive the high-caste people of their privileges and lower their status and rank' (Viswanath 2014, 162). Elsewhere, in 1903, they warned that this scheme would be 'disastrous to the ancient religion of this country' (Ibid., 164).

*The Pariah Problem* can be productively read alongside a very different kind of book, but one that I think helps highlight some of the dynamics on which it reflects. Robert Yelle's *Language of Disenchantment: Protestant Literalism and Colonial Discourse in British India* (2014) aims to dismantle some common presumptions about the production of secularity in colonial India. Yelle's thesis is that colonial modernity in India pursued the reform of Indian law and language through a purification of their ritualistic elements and excesses to mirror the austere and rationalized Protestant cosmology that suffused colonial attitudes about India. Yelle's study demonstrates the production of a Protestantized, disenchanted spiritual economy devoid of ritual (aka 'the secular') in social, political, and linguistic registers, but what strikes me about this pattern of reform in relation to *The Pariah Problem* is his analysis of the creation of Anglo-Hindu law. In order to produce a catalogue of shastric injunction and guidance that was 'sufficiently law-like and useful to the colonial state', the colonial government's Sanskrit College in Calcutta reformed

the legal curriculum by radically reducing the portion of the digested shastra that was part of standard instruction at the time. Yelle calculates that fully 95 per cent of the Dharmashastra that had previously been taught was discarded shortly after 1850, radically abridging the tradition that would inform a Hindu legal code for use in British courts (Yelle 2013, 142). The great majority of those passages that the British architects of the law left on the cutting-room floor dealt specifically with ritual or other matters that we would readily identify as religious. This disestablishment of Hindu ritual in the sphere of law, Yelle argues, 'reinforces the nature of colonial modernity as a repudiation of ritual' and it enacted 'a replacement of past [Hindu] traditions in which colonial modernity modelled Christianity's replacement of Judaism and paganism' (Ibid., 160). The result was an Anglo-Hindu law code that corresponded to British ideas of positive, civil law.

Whereas Yelle is occupied principally with the disenchantment of Hindu India as the elevation of a modern secular rationality grounded in Protestant principles and concepts—a regime he argues is as fully mythical as any other—Viswanath helps us see the residue of those processes: the still-very-much-enchanted remainder that could be gathered up and stowed safely in the protective zones of private interior knowledge, personal and collective sentiment, or an imagined precolonial, pre-Muslim age scrutable only to rationality untainted by non-Hindu consciousness. Read against J. Barton Scott's revelations about 'how the scattered pieces of the precolonial past, strewn across the nineteenth century, could be seized upon as vital things' (Scott 2016, 23), Viswanath makes a significant contribution to an archaeology of the zones of Hindu authenticity—an authenticity whose legitimacy is secured by the affect it evokes. The manufacture of that authenticity Viswanath's book suggests is the work of those who saw through the stratagems of colonial governmentality and turned them to their own dark purposes.

We now know too well where all of this will lead: Love Jihad, banned books, human bodies lacerated for the protection of bovine ones, *Ghar Wapsi*. Each of these campaigns of the modern Hindu right turns on a discourse of authenticity and outrage at its violation. They speak, perhaps, to the unsustainability of secular postmodernity but, thanks to the rewriting of colonial history by Viswanath, Yelle, Scott, and others, they point also to the cynical taxonomy and its social products that the Raj has bequeathed us.

Ultimately, *The Pariah Problem* reveals the impossibly narrow corner into which we have painted ourselves. The contours of the category

'Hinduism' and all that it entails politically, socially, and ritually have forced us to ask and answer our historical questions only on the basis of a prior accession to the logic of authenticity. *The Pariah Problem* is a haunting book, not only because it uncovers the calculation and collusion that produced modern forms of Dalit subjugation, but also because Viswanath reveals in her own oblique way what really haunts us: the dawning realization that critical history alone cannot shatter the colonial episteme.

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# *Caste and the Configuration of Gender: A response to Rupa Viswanath's* The Pariah Problem: Caste, Religion, and the Social in Modern India

LUCINDA RAMBERG

*Cornell University*
*Email: ler35@cornell.edu*

Is caste best understood as a precipitate of religion, the social manifestation of a Brahmanical system of classificatory rank inscribed in texts taken to be the basis of Hinduism? A psychic essence foundational to Hindu sensibilities and Indian personhood? Is it perhaps better diagnosed as an effect of modern technologies of governance—a form of Indian biopolitics produced through census taking, population management, and reservations that travels across communities irrespective of religion? Or is it rather a question of economy, property, and social distinction only peripherally attached to matters of religion? In these ways and others, scholars have puzzled over the question of how to best account for the built architecture of caste—its ways of articulating economic, religious, social, and symbolic relations that distribute social life and death.

With *The Pariah Problem*, Viswanath has given us a whole new way to think about what Christian projects of conversion accomplished in South India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and therefore how to understand the relationship between religion and caste. She reads missionary archives against the grain, not for histories of religion, but for histories of labour relations. Alongside these archives, she reads colonial-era civil records as a means of uncovering the debates among and convergences between missionaries and civil officials. In this field-changing book, Viswanath tracks the discursive shifts produced through missionary projects and the kind of controversies they kicked up. She demonstrates persuasively that the condition of those designated 'Pariah' was first and foremost a question of labour conditions and land relations. These conditions and relations

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were obscured by noisy talk about distance pollution and Hindu sentiment. Further, they were set outside the purview of both Church and state as 'spiritual' rather than 'material' matters that belonged to the domain of what she calls the 'national social' and not the political territory of rights. This parsing of material conditions from spiritual matters on the one hand and concerns of the Church and the state from caste as a distinctly Indian social relation and religious disability on the other had many effects. Among the most devastating in Viswanath's account was the continuation of slavery in South India long after it was officially abolished in British India in 1843.

Departing from dominant historiographical representations of Christian missionaries as champions of those designated outcaste, Viswanath points out that, while missionaries abhorred the superstitious and customary aspects of caste and worked to mitigate the cruellest forms of subjugation, they were on the whole sympathetic to class hierarchy and labour expropriation as natural forms of social distinction. Her lucid exposition brings the key binaries that configured the discourse produced through 'the Pariah problem' into focus: spiritual versus material; caste public versus Pariah outsider; and national social versus legal political. In this discursive field, the practice of distance pollution and ritual enactments of caste Hindus emerged together as domains of sentiment and custom protected from state regulations under the doctrine of religious neutrality. As a result, society took shape as an organic, self-regulating, consensual-if-hierarchical division of people and secular politics came forward as the public space of caste Hindu self-assertion.

As a consequence, the public became a space inadmissible to Pariahs. In the 1880s, famine drew the attention of the Government of India to questions of land relations formulated as 'The pariah problem'. Administrative documentation of the condition of Dalits as landless, barred from property holding, and forbidden access to *purambuke* (communal) lands provoked debates over their condition and the government's responsibilities to and for them. As Viswanath argues, while disputes were settled in a variety of ways, a general equation nonetheless emerged between landed villagers and 'the public'. The government refrained from enforcing Pariah's access to *purambuke*, citing their obligation to uphold the doctrine of religious non-interference and reluctance to offend the sensibilities of caste Hindus. Viswanath concludes: 'Untouchability therefore became a state protected right—not by proclamation or statute … but through the steady accrual of cases [in which] … religion emerged as the favoured language of

contestation, and at the same time, the public was construed as being exclusive of Dalits' (Viswanath 2014, 143). Officials of the British government repeatedly situated themselves as in sympathy with the plight of Dalits and appalled by the caste system, but bound to restrain themselves from intervening in matters of religion or private property. They framed Dalits as worthy of sympathy, uplift, and private philanthropy, but inadmissible as an object of public concern and outside of the purview of government.

Even as their condition was spiritualized as a matter of religious disability and relegated to the domain of the social within missionary and civil discourse, Dalits made claims on the Church and the state. Viswanath details a copious archive of Dalit assertion. From soliciting missionary intervention to arguing for access to courts and public buses, they sought aid and claimed rights. In 1919, M. C. Rajah, a Dalit member of the provincial legislative council, submitted a proposal that prompted the first official debate about Dalit rights to space in which Dalits themselves participated. He wrote:

> We believe that we have the right as citizens of British India to use all … [things] constructed and maintained out of public funds to which the depressed classes contribute to as ratepayers. … Is the Christian Government that abolished Sati and made the Brahmin subject to … criminal law equally with the [Depressed Classes] going to countenance the doctrine of touch pollution which prevents citizens of the British Empire [from enjoying] the common benefits of citizenship? (Viswanath 2014, 22)

In the debate that followed, 12 of 13 members of the council expressed their sympathy with and support for the aim of Rajah's proposal, but agreed that 'these matters are beyond legislative interference' (Ibid., 222), in the words of M. C. Muttaya Chettiyar. The consensus was that Rajah's proposal spoke to a disability that could not be removed by an act of government. Four years later, in a meeting with representatives of the Depressed Classes, including Rajah, the Viceroy Lord Reading summed up this logic: 'The disabilities from which you suffer are … not fundamentally political. They partake more of a social nature' (Ibid., 223). In making this distinction, the viceroy was drawing on Sir Henry Maine's conception of society as self-regulating —an organism whose evolution cannot be hastened without harm. Then commonly held, this notion has been so often held out to Dalits as an alibi for political inaction that B. R. Ambedkar was moved to write: 'Society itself is a tyranny' (Ambedkar 1982, 2, 446; in Viswanath 2014, 256). The incarceration of Dalits within the domain of the social configured public spaces and resources around caste Hindu sentiment as protected religion.

Viswanath's arguments about this history of 'the public' has far-reaching implications for how we might think about Indian publics as well as what several scholars have referred to as Dalit counter-publics (Rawat and Satyanarayana 2016). Furthermore, her arguments open up avenues for thinking about 'the pariah problem' as a predicament of gender as well as of caste. In what follows, I put the lines of inquiry that Viswanath inaugurates in conversation with feminist scholarship on the formation of publics and privates. My aim here is not to render a critique of the 'limitations' of what is clearly an immensely important book that accomplishes a great deal. Rather, I am outlining these conversations in an effort to mark the future in feminist critical caste scholarship that Viswanath's book makes possible.

Questions about the constitution of publics and their relationship to the limits and possibilities of modern forms of governance return us to Habermas's framing of the public sphere as that space of deliberation outside the state that constitutes political participation. For Habermas, the liberal public sphere is a body of 'private persons' assembled to discuss matters of 'public concern' and 'common interest' (Fraser 1990, 58). However, as many critics have pointed out, notably Nancy Fraser, the public sphere has always been a contested space occupied by multiple stratified publics and configured by exclusions as much as inclusions. Gender was a constitutive exclusion of bourgeois publics, Fraser reminds us. Citing Joan Landes's research in France (Landes 1988), she notes that the Jacobin public sphere was constructed as distinct from the 'woman friendly' salon culture 'stigmatized as effeminate, aristocratic, and artificial' and public speech was styled as 'rational, virtuous, and manly' (Fraser 1990, 59–60). The idea that gendered constructs were built into the configuration of 'the public sphere' was extended in Germany and England by Geoff Eley and in India by Partha Chatterjee and Mrinalini Sinha (Eley 1994; Chatterjee 1993; Sinha 2006). As Viswanath notes, Chatterjee describes the productive effects of the consignment of the 'Woman Question' to the domestic for a masculine nationalist elite and Sinha further elucidates how women's move to claim rights bearing status for themselves was 'effectively contained … within the holding chamber of society' by nationalists and sympathetic state actors (Viswanath 2014, 252). Taken together, these accounts situate Dalit men and Dalit and non-Dalit women outside the public sphere, sequestered within the social and beyond the reach of rights. But, as Viswanath's arguments suggest, these actors are consigned to different positions, even as they have all been excluded from the public. How might the differences among their

relative placements help us to think about the particularity of the position of Dalit women? How might they help us to articulate the precarity of Dalit masculinity?

Marginality to the public sphere produces the necessity and possibility of what Fraser framed as 'subaltern counterpublics' gathering to cultivate critique and sustenance (Fraser 1990, 67). Following Fraser, scholars of dissident publics such as Michael Warner (2002) and Houston Baker (2013) have elaborated the ways in which exclusion from dominant liberal public spheres produces possibilities of activism, consciousness, and culture whose ground is stigma and subordination. Building upon these arguments, the concept of Dalit counter-publics has emerged within efforts to characterize the new kinds of claims upon and transgressions of the liberal public sphere in India that histories of untouchable exile and Dalit assertion have produced. In his work on recent Dalit publics, K. Satyanarayana (2016) situates literary associations and institutions such as the Andhra Pradesh Revolutionary Literary Writer's association as key to the formation of a subaltern public that challenged the boundaries of literature and exclusion of caste identity and struggle from the Telegana public sphere. Ram Rawat has coined the phrase 'parallel public' in order to characterize that mass mobilization of Dalits in 1922 upon the occasion of the arrival of the Prince of Wales (Ram Rawat, 'The Language of Liberalism: Dalit Public Sphere in Modern India', forthcoming). The Dalit public was of a similar size and force to the Congress Party it gathered alongside before the prince, but it brought different demands. As I imagine this gathering, I recall Michael Warner's (2009) work on itinerant preaching in the United States of America and how critical it was to the early formation of secular American politics. I am interested here in the idea that a particular mode of address hails a particular kind of audience and public, and I am thinking about the question of religion in the formation of Dalit (counter) publics that Viswanath's book brings us to. Her affecting accounts of Pariahs in Tamil Nadu calling upon missionaries to address their condition suggests that Pariahs recognized a certain kind of audience in the missionaries—an audience for their particular grievances, an audience that Indian elites did not offer. What role did religion play, if any, in formulating that Dalit public that gathered itself before the prince? What constructions of gender did these counter-publics assemble and distribute? Viswanath's text invites us to extend conversations in Dalit studies through the concept of counter-publics into questions of gender and religion as territories of political assertion that liberal historiography fails to recognize as such.

Another route into the question about the particular position of Dalit women in between Dalit publics and domesticated womanhood opened up by Viswanath is through histories of the private domain. For Habermas, the private congealed as form of property and domestic/intimate/sexual life. The formulation of the public sphere has always taken place in relation to delineations of private or the domestic. This relationship of mutual configuration, as many feminist scholars have elaborated, entangles gender relations in politics in particular ways. There are two ideas here that I am interested in drawing into conversation with Viswanath's arguments: the exclusion from the public sphere as the ground for the formation of counter-publics as discussed above, and the mutual configuration of publics and privates. What consequence did the exclusion of Dalits from the public have for the history of the Dalit domestic sphere and privates? I am thinking about the riots occasioned by the so-called Breast Cloth Controversy of 1858, when missionary campaigns to uphold Dalit women's right to wear a breast cloth came up against a long-standing prohibition against Dalits' wearing cloth above the waist or below the knee (Kent 2004). I am asking a question about what missionary investments in the 'private' lives of Pariah's—the configuration of their conjugal arrangements, domestic space, and sartorial styles—teach us about the history of Dalit publics as well as privates.

This brings me to a set of questions for Viswanath about how gender matters: to the missionaries whose archives she reads; to her own arguments about the emergence of 'the national social' as an apolitical secular space to which the 'Pariah problem' was relegated and expected to resolve itself over time; and in relation to the delimitation of 'public' spaces and resources as properly subtended by tax revenues but inaccessible to 'Pariahs'. In what ways might this enclosure within 'the national social' and exclusion from 'the public' articulate with the question of gender? In what follows, I will pose three kinds of questions about gender. I offer these questions on the promising new grounds that the book establishes for us to think matters of caste and outcaste and in solidarity with its anti-caste commitments. They emerge out of my own efforts to think about caste, religion, and gender together, in particular in relation to how and why endogamy continues to be such a critical aspect of Dalit social reproduction, even after caste radicals from Ambedkar to Periyar situated endogamy as key to the reproduction of jati as a critical form of social distinction and exogamy as necessary to the decomposition of caste.

In Viswanath's discussion of the politics of conversion and reservations, she observes that, whereas conversion to Christianity or Islam disqualifies Dalits from reservations (per a logic that caste is essentially a matter of religion), in fact, caste was and is observed across religious communities. Caste, she writes, 'is defined most fundamentally by the practice of endogamy' (Viswanath 2014, 254). In another moment, she notes that, when Pariahs were subjected to Church discipline, it was typically occasioned by the continuation of what missionaries characterized as 'low or degrading practices, such as the consumption of carrion, as well as Pariahs' relatively informal practices of marriage and divorce, which were judged promiscuous by missionaries' (Ibid., 90). Her point is that, contrary to dominant historiographical celebrations of missionary interventions on behalf of Dalits, missionary opinion and practice naturalized and reproduced casteist forms of social distinction and hierarchy based in practices they saw as 'degrading'. What I am curious about is these judgements in relation to the configuration of the public Viswanath maps. My first set of questions are: Does the movement from 'promiscuous' to 'properly marital' proceed from public to private sexuality? Were these 'relatively informal practices' endogamous or not? How do reformulations of the domestic and private affect the contours of publics and the politics they can mobilize?

I am thinking here about Eliza Kent's (2004) work on missionary women and converts in South India in which she explores marriage practices, sartorial style, and household and domestic configuration as key sites of Christian missionary intervention and innovation. In her discussion of the debates over Indian Christian conjugality, she identifies two ideals at play: a Brahmanical model that figured female sexuality as powerful, potentially ruinous, and in need of containment; and a Western bourgeois model of companionate marriage, nuclear-family arrangement, and helpmate wives. Both emphasized monogamy. Kent's point is that discourses of Indian Christian marriage and female respectability drew on both ideals, situating themselves as 'contained'—and therefore at a distance from low-caste 'promiscuity' *and* companionate, and therefore more equalitarian and civilized than Hindu marital arrangements. The ideal of monogamy was shared and, in that sense, these projects of marital reform sedimented endogamy even as they spelled forms of social mobility. Hortense Spillers (1987) has taught us that histories of slavery delimit the possibilities of and for kin relations as socially or legally recognizable. The reformulation of the possibilities of public women in South Asia—women attached to temples, ritual, and performative arts—has been understood to be

necessary to the progress of their communities. This brings me to my second set of questions: How might their exile from temples, banishment from performance publics, and privatized endogamous sexual capacity help us to specify the history of Dalit publics and privates? Might the stubbornly held innovations in conjugal practice and distinct ideals of respectability be understood as counter-privates? How might any of this help us to think about the particular force that projects of religious conversion have had and continue to have within Dalit programmes for emancipation from casteism? Viswanath does not take up the conversation between her work and Kent's arguments but I find in between them fruitful ground for these questions about the formation of Dalit privates.

My questions here are also in conversation with Joan Scott's (2002) and Saba Mahmood's (2016) recent work about the constitutive relationship between sexual politics and secular governance. Scott has argued against the commonplace that secularism frees sexuality from religion and thereby contributes to the liberation of women. Instead, she notes that the history of secularization in France demonstrates that sexual difference, as a key antinomy of modernity, anchors secularism. That is to say, political secularism relies upon and reinstates sexual difference as a ground of its legitimacy. Scott has captured this relationship of mutual entanglement in a neologism—sexularism. Quoting Talal Asad, she notes that secularism is neither 'singular in origin nor stable in its historical identity, [but] it works through a series of particular oppositions': the political and the religious, the public and the private, reason and sex. (Asad 2003, 25, in Scott 2002, 3). In her work on religious minoritization in the Middle East, Saba Mahmood writes:

> one of the paradoxical consequences of the secularization of Middle Eastern societies is that just as religious authority become marginal to the conduct of civic and political affairs, it simultaneously acquires a privileged place in the regulation of family and sexual relations. This is a consequence of secularism's foundational public-private divide that regulates sexuality and religion to the latter while at the same time making both consequential to the former. The incorporation of pre-modern religious precepts into the legal structure of the modern state gives family law a primordial cast when in fact it represents a novel arrangement.
> (Mahmood 2016, 147)

Finally, if, following Asad, Mahmood, and Scott, we take sexual difference, the divide between public and private domains, secular and religious to be key antinomies of Indian modernity within which,

following the work of many feminist historians, women are constrained to and identified with the private and the domestic, and if, following Viswanath, Dalits are constrained by the social, barred from the political and set outside the public—what might we then say about the gendered configuration of Dalit publics and privates?

*The Pariah Problem* does not thematize gender or the organization of sexuality in the ways I have outlined here. At the same time, it lays critical new groundwork for the interrogation of what I might frame, building on Viswanath's brilliant formulation, as the caste–sexuality–state nexus as the mode of 'secular' politics that folds caste Hindu and caste masculinity together as the Indian public. Alongside the Dalit counter-publics on which Viswanath elaborates, Dalit counter-privates have worked to disrupt this nexus, making politics otherwise.

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# *Religious Encounters: A dialogue with Rupa Viswanath on historical perspectives of contemporary empowerment through Tamil Dalit music*

ZOE SHERINIAN

*University of Oklahoma*
*Email: zsherinian@ou.edu*

In *The Pariah Problem*, Rupa Viswanath asserts that the term Pariah 'attempted to stifle the historical imagination of those whom it names, who had alternative understandings of their identity' (2014, xi). How successful was this stifling? How did missionary encounters contribute to this alternative understanding, and what were the historical and contemporary results of this new identity? I wonder how the imaginations of Paraiyars, who regularly announced village ritual occasions using their 'polluted' *parai* frame drum, responded to missionary encounters. Rupa Viswanath and I agree that, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these encounters involved significant expressions of Dalit agency. Our distinctions, however, lie in the importance of considering differences in mission policies toward caste, recognizing missionary actions and their material effect on Dalit lives, exploring long-term Dalit/missionary relationships in this history, as well as the possibility of ritual action simultaneously having a spiritual and social-justice/labour impact. My intent is to show how a broadening of Viswanath's scholarly methods and her historical and relational scope can create a more complex picture of this history and why that matters. Specifically, I will show how including oral history rather than pursuing a singular focus on discourse from archival

evidence and drawing a more complex picture of mission/Dalit encounters allows internal disaggregation in mission studies and the identification of ritual action as a means to strengthen and support Dalit agency (Sherinian 2017).

In the monograph, *Tamil Folk Music as Dalit Liberation Theology* (2014) and two documentary films (Sherinian 2011; 2019), I explore aesthetics of dissent expressed by Dalit voices through not only contemporary ethnomusicological and anthropological methods, but also through oral history, archival evidence, songs, sung liturgies, and war cries for Dalit liberation. I show the historical roots of how the agentive subaltern, such as Dalit theologian Rev. Theophilus Appavoo (1940–2005), the strongest voice for liturgical and musical reform through Dalit theology within the Church of South India (CSI) from the 1980s, was able to speak (and sing) in the public sphere. I show how subalterns have sung and drummed their resistance in both the Indian Church and society since at least the mid-nineteenth century. Ultimately, my focus has been on the contemporary and historical formation of Dalit subjectivity (including elements of class and gender), in negotiation with missionaries, upper-caste Christians, the Church, and caste economy.

Through this dialogue with Viswanath, I consider what social, psychological, and spiritual factors may have helped Viswanath's Pariahs transform to become Dalit. What were the 'immediate effects' (Viswanath, 2014, 89) in the 1850s for the Pariah who cooked for the 'love feasts' of the American Madura Congregational and Reformed Churches when dozens of upper-caste members and catechists, so prized by the mission, were suspended for refusing to sit down at the feast with lower and outcaste Christians (Chandler 1912, 144)? I assume the Pariahs were encouraged when the missionaries stood by their refusal to allow upper-caste inclusion without their renunciation of caste. Were these Pariahs really 'unlikely to have perceived the missionary as a champion social equality' (2014, 89), as Viswanath claims, when they witnessed this ritual *and* material action by the missionaries? I assume that their confidence was boosted when the Americans met the Pariah demand to enrol their children in mission boarding schools and even to educate their girls at schools such as Mrs Echard's, in which 56 of 94 students were untouchables in 1836.[1]

[1] There were 56 girls from Paraiyar and Pallar castes in school in 1839, and their curriculum included reading and writing in English and Tamil. By 1842, 200 girls were enrolled (Chandler 1912, 56). Eliza Kent's work also indicates that daughters of very

I argue, as Viswanath would agree, that the encounter between Dalit agency and Congregational missionary policy and theology impacted Dalit lives. The difference in emphasis is that my oral history research with Dalit families shows that, while Dalit agency by village and clan leaders was central to Dalit development, relationships with 'a few extraordinarily sensitive missionaries who identified themselves with the Paraiyar' and who 'nurtured the progress' (Dayanandan 2002, 15–16) of these Dalits were core to their histories.[2] Missionaries supported Dalits materially through opportunities for education and jobs as well as through personal relationships of support that contributed to the creation, in some cases within one generation, of a body of middle-class Dalit Christians whose descendants have played a significant role in the Protestant churches as teachers, catechists, pastors, and bishops, and as leaders in the contemporary secular Dalit Liberation Movement. Furthermore, while the intention of these Dalits to convert or engage missionaries as a new sort of patron may have been primarily driven by the desire for education and economic opportunities, Paul Dayanandan beautifully articulates that many came to have a 'remarkable appreciation for the spiritual and emancipating power of their new-found faith' even if that was through their own, not the missionary's, interpretation of the emancipatory message of the biblical text. Finally, I and Dayanandan emphasize the importance of ritual, services, holidays, and singing in this history to provide scholars with 'both insight and appreciation of the life of Dalit Christians' (Ibid., 16).

There appears to me to be a contradiction between Viswanath's broad construction of missionaries based on discourse and her own details, as well as mine, about their actions to support Dalits. Viswanath concludes that, while (all) missionaries preached equality before God, they preached expressly against social equality. She writes: 'their anti-caste statements were never intended as a call for social equality—this latter and importantly distinct idea was one they in fact actively opposed, often reminding Pariah converts of their duty to respect their "social superiors"' (2014, 44–45, 89). She argues further that 'on matters critical to the management of Pariah converts, these do not map on to denominational differences' (Ibid., 44). My historical analysis shows that American

low-caste families were the most attracted to schools that the Church Mission Society set up (2004, 141).

[2] Paul Dayanandan is also a scholar with whom Viswanath closely worked and praises for his inspiration.

Congregational missionaries (and others) did not lie within this construction (Harris 1999). Indeed, my work stands outside the (singular) historiography of missions that reproduces the trope of 'gentle' slavery and the vision of the authentic Dalit as 'a compliant farmhand unable to conceive of a better life for herself' (Viswanath, in her response to this Roundtable below).

I believe that the American Congregationalist's theological training in the abolitionist movement and social gospel ideology of 'equality in this world' at institutions like Oberlin College made a difference in the daily interactions and support of Pariahs by some missionaries. Indeed, broadening this narrative to include American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Religions (ABCFM) history may provide an alternative theological, social, and national model for understanding the missionary legacy in India compared to the British Anglican or 'anglophone' counterparts on whom Viswanath primarily focuses (2014, 44). These missionaries acted in the Pariah's material interest through *practising* a degree of equality within the church/mission. Furthermore, my intent is to recognize theoretically the possibility that these 'extraordinary' individuals helped to support outcaste Christians who aspired to and achieved a higher class in spite of mission limitations on their aspirations (Sherinian 1998, 302). I focus on the difference missionaries of particular societies made in their commitment to Pariah education through the opportunities they provided for agricultural slave labourers to leave the rural caste economy to become teachers, catechists, nurses, and preachers. I argue that mission culture provided a social foundation for Viswanath's Pariahs to express their agency and in turn advance the generation of Dalit Christian activists of the twentieth century. Thus, I attempt to address P. Dayanandan's question: 'What happened to the converts and their descendants, and what lasting contributions [did they make] to the Christian presence in India in general?' (Dayanandan 2002, 22).

In our engagement with the history of class and caste within the Indian Church, Rupa Viswanath and I begin from a similar stance: we both highlight Dalit agency in the face of oppression. I fully agree with her intent to use historical research to 'debunk the myth that untouchables regarded their own degraded position as natural, and only came to see themselves as equal under missionary tutelage' (Viswanath 2016, 1; 2014, 89). I do so primarily through the testimony given in folklore and music supported by oral history and archival evidence (Sherinian 2014, 34–61; 1998, 118). Our differences lie in the historical scope of our respective work and in divergent denominational policies about how caste and class were framed and engaged. In my work on the love feasts beginning in the

mid-nineteenth century, I conclude that 'the defining act of Christian identification became the sharing of food as equals' (Sherinian 2014, 119) and that the Congregational practices of inclusion and equality were distinct from that of the British Anglican as manifest in Congregational emphasis on vernacular language, local relevance, autonomy, and participation (Harris 1999; Sherinian 2014).

Viswanath asserts that most, if not all, missionaries supported rational forms of social hierarchy. While she shows that this is the official position in joint mission conferences, does this not contradict missionary's direct support for outcastes to attain non-agricultural jobs in the mission compound and to educate their children, contributing to class movement and Dalit activism? What is at stake is the historical recognition of distinct missionaries and mission societies, the impact of different theological and institutional mission policies, and the agency of Dalits in particular mission contexts that produced leading Dalit intellectuals, activists, and culture brokers (Sherinian 2014, 78–79). While Viswanath's work shows that there was clearly a hegemony of ideology in both the British colonial and mission enterprises (and their collusion), my work shows the cracks in that hegemony (Slobin 1993, 27) that made a difference, contributing to change.

My primary research subject, Dalit theologian Theophilus Appavoo (1940–2005), drew on symbols from American Congregational missionaries, who, by the 1850s, required upper- and lower-caste Christians to eat the same food together in love feasts. In the lyrics of his song 'Nalla Seydi' ('Good News'), Appavoo draws on the theological tenets of *oru olai* (communal eating) and 'universal family', which unify people rejecting caste difference, as well as a strategy of the reversal of power symbols (Sherinian 2014, 254–62). Appavoo's music shows how contemporary Dalit Christians have used instruments like the *parai* frame drum to engage symbolically and materially in culture wars within and outside the Church to claim Dalit arts as weapons of religious and social liberation,[3] turning a symbol of polluted hereditary caste duty into a sonic tool of liberation against caste oppression. This agency did not just spring out of a vacuum in the 1980s. As Viswanath states, she 'found Dalits rebelling against caste whenever the opportunity presented itself, without instigation from missionaries and

[3] See my film, *This Is a Music: Reclaiming an Untouchable Drum* (2011), for a labour analysis on the change in social status of the *parai* drum and drummers, including the *parai* labour union started by Fr. Jose.

often contrary to missionary wishes' (2014, 43). The changing status of this drum dialogues with Viswanath's theories of the enduring legacy of 'Pariah's gentle servitude'. It presents an alternative legacy of Dalit converts, their descendants, and the missionaries who supported them, who not only acted against social inequality, but also used indigenized Christianity that draws on Dalit folk culture to act against caste. Dalit Christians today act against caste as proponents of Dalit liberation theology, as activists in the secular Dalit, women's and labour movements, and through reclaiming their folk music in ways that have positive psychological and material consequences in Dalit people's lives. This activism that crosses and integrates religious and social contexts is part of Dalit Christian history and the history of liberation theology in India that begins from at least the mid-nineteenth century.

## Symbolic and material difference: love feasts

My archival work on the love feasts in the American Madura Congregational missions, oral history that I conducted with the families of Dalits who had become pastors and teachers by the 1930s, as well as my analysis of the differences between British and American mission attitudes towards cultural indigenization of Christianity (particularly music) challenge Viswanath's conclusions that Congregational missionaries did not uphold or support social equality for Dalits through their actions.[4] Indeed, Viswanath recognizes that there were 'exceptions' among both individual missionaries whom she calls 'exceptional individuals' and by 'whole [mission] societies', particularly the American Arcot and American Madura missions (2014, 50). To support this claim, she cites W. I. Chamberlain, who articulated American mission policy and practice throughout the late nineteenth century that required converts to be put through a test of caste renunciation, even at the risk of losing upper-caste members: 'the societies from America have been more insistent on the establishment of arbitrary tests and indisputable proofs of the entire renunciation of caste than the English societies' (Viswanath 2014, 50). Further, she concludes that these were 'exceptions' in missions that were overwhelmingly serving rural, almost entirely Paraiyar congregations—a distinction

[4] These American missions were in Central Western and Southern Tamil Nadu, not in the Madras area where Viswanath centres much of her analysis.

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whose impact I do not believe made a difference in Paraiyar development. Further, it is clear that the love-feast practices occurred in mixed-caste congregations of the early Madura mission.

Regardless of these 'exceptions', Viswanath's essential stance is a critique of missionaries' lack of understanding of caste not as the 'complex set of social practices that included agrarian domination, but as a set of ritual observances'. She interprets missionary love feasts as only 'an attack on caste's symbolic and irrational features, and not on social inequality per se' (Ibid., 54–55). Thus, she dismisses the possibility that love feasts had both symbolic *and* material impact on Dalits as labourers within the mission compound, first as cooks and students, then as teachers, catechists, and priests. Further, this conclusion implies that Congregational and Arcot missionaries had no understanding of caste more broadly as a system of social inequality that needed to be addressed through labour and educational development. While many missionaries may have understood caste as a set of ritual practices and class distinctions that simply had to be tolerated, I instead consider the love feasts not as irrational symbolism, not as charity, not as merely ritual practice, but as psychological and spiritual symbolism put into action that contributed to a new economic reality or an identity/class shift for Dalits.[5] I believe that, if this was an 'exception' to the hegemonic stance of maintaining local social hierarchies, it was a significant exception by exceptional missionaries that contributed at the least to the creation of exceptional Dalits and at the most to the education and labour development of many Dalits.

John Chandler's articulation of the American Madura mission's four-point resolution of 1847 emphasizes that no distinctions of caste were allowed and missionaries expressly stood against 'allowing caste Christians to continue to enact their social privilege' (1912, 141; Sherinian 2014, 91–92). This policy required that, before converts could receive the sacraments, they were required to give up caste distinctions and submit to a test to prove their renunciation by participating in inter-caste table fellowship and eating food cooked by Pariah cooks. Soon after this policy development, 17 catechists (likely upper castes) gave up their caste, while dozens were dismissed (Ibid., 141–42). With

[5] Other symbolic shifts in identity that contributed within the mission included the requirement that caste Christians drop their caste names from their title (Viswanath 2014, 46) and that they share communion among all castes. However, social differences of marriage, separate cemeteries, and order in communion distribution continued in some contexts.

the hire of Pariah cooks, they also decided to admit Pariah boys to the boarding school (Ibid., 144).

In a context in which converts come from a 'Hindu' milieu where practice is emphasized more than belief (such as Christ as saviour), the significance of putting into regular practice a ritual of equality was surely empowering to outcastes. Their humanity was brought to the centre of mission policy, action, and ritual. We may not be able to provide specific proof of this impact, especially through the words of any Paraiyar convert from the mid- to late nineteenth century, but it is a reasonable claim that it did make a difference.

## Education

Viswanath's third chapter, 'The Pariah-Missionary Alliance', does not consider what has been the lasting legacy of this economic/class shift after a generation of primary, boarding school, as well as teacher training and seminary education.[6] I offer the example from the oral family history of two Paraiyar shepherd boys who, when baptized in 1913, lived in the first mass-movement village near Karur: C. J. Daniel and his brother Nallamuthu. After their clan initiated their own conversion through contacting Wesleyan Methodist missionary H. Popley in Erode (1913), Rev. J. J. Ellis sent the boys in 1917 to the Dharapuram boarding school where the majority of students were lower castes.[7] They successfully completed their education at Findlay High School in Mannargudi (Sherinian 2014, 91). Their father, Chinnappan, meanwhile became an estate contractor. Daniel was then 'hand-picked' by Ellis to go to seminary at UTC Bangalore (C. J. Karunakaran, interview, Karur, 1993). Later, he worked as a teacher and a *munshi* for European missionaries, and ultimately became one of the most respected and loved pastors to Dalit Christians in the CSI Trichy Tanjore Diocese. His younger brother, C. J. Ponniah, whom I interviewed in 1993, became a headmaster in the Annamalai Hills and

[6] Particularly at institutions like Voorhees College in Vellore and the American College in Madurai.

[7] Ellis's support was perhaps possible because the Christian churches in the North Western Tamil Nadu was dominated by Paraiyar clans. There were very few to no upper-caste Christians, such as the land-owning Gounders, that they had to worry about threatening to leave the Church if the missionary acted in the Pariah's material interest.

was heavily involved in labour organizing (Sherinian 1998, 297–304). Daniel's children include one of the first Dalit Bishops, Bishop Srinivasan of the Trichy Tanjore Diocese. This case study contradicts Viswanath's construction of Dalits as limited to primary education, concluding that the Pariah's education 'should never be such as to make him unfit for life in the village: it would be disastrous to produce Pariah children who would not be content with rural labour' (2014, 67).[8]

While elite institutions like Madras Christian College prohibited Dalit education (2014, 290, n. 93), P. Dayanandan clarifies that many other missions 'freely admitted Dalit students, boys and girls, in their schools'. Many found jobs as teachers and catechists, and girls were employed as nurses (P. Dayanandan, Personal email, 17 January 2020). This evidence also begs the question: What percentage of the non-Dalit Christian population and general population went beyond a primary education between the 1890s and early twentieth century that Viswanath studies?

The American Madura mission supported a policy of commitment to 'Paraias' even as they lost upper castes from the late 1840s. Chandler reports that 25 per cent of the first 100 workers in the Madurai mission were 'Paraias', including the sons of drummers (1912, 98). Another 40 per cent were upper-caste Vellalas. Thus, among their workers, the missionaries clearly had to negotiate between the Christian castes; they were not just dealing with rural Pariah congregations, as Viswanath concludes. In 1847, with the introduction of low-caste boys and girls, many other castes defected (Chandler 1912, 54–55), some violently (Ibid.,143). Chandler reports that with the

> employ of Paraia cooks in the boarding schools and admission of Paraia boys to the school classes … all the stations suffered from the dismissal of catechists or teachers, and nearly all lost in the membership of their churches. Altogether 72 members were suspended on account of caste, of whom 38 were catechists …. The mission was not unanimous in some of the steps taken, nor did they find their sister missions of the same mind in all they did, but they believed they were in advance of all other missions in their action.
> (Chandler 1912, 144)

Chandler describes Dr R. Graul's observation of a clear distinction in denominational stances in opposition to caste between Lutherans and Congregationalists (Ibid., 147). Chandler concludes this historical survey by saying: 'In the end the Mission gained a true position in regard to

[8] Also see Sherinian 2014, Chapter 2 for a similar trajectory of the history of Rev. J. T. Appavoo's family (members of the American Reform and Anglican churches).

caste, and though some congregations and individuals were permanently lost, the Mission stood for the brotherhood of Christians, and has continued to stand for it ever since' (Ibid., 145). These were not symbolic attacks on the ritual dimensions of untouchability, but policies related to mission employment, and education, with material impact for Pariahs.

## Labour: jobs in the missions

My research shows that Paraiyar Christians aspired to a new labour identity, particularly to occupations that only the upper caste and Brahmin could previously claim: teacher and priest. However, for those within the mission complex who had not achieved these higher-class jobs (for example, working only as a sexton, clerk, or a 'lowly' cook for a love feast) and despite the evident glass ceiling and paternalism within the mission and Church (Cox 2002), such non-agricultural jobs brought hope and opportunities, if not material benefit, and produced Pariah children who clearly were not content with rural labour (Viswanath 2014, 67). If missionaries engaged with the Pariah problem 'wished … for Pariahs to follow their traditional occupations', (Ibid.), why did they offer them jobs as cooks and gardeners? Why did they educate their children in teacher training and eventually seminaries? Such opportunities changed the Pariahs' psychological and political sense of self, contributing to their 'self-respect' (Dayanandan 2002, 21) and eventual ascendency within the CSI to the ranks of priests and bishops as well as leaders in the Tamil Dalit Liberation Movement.

One of my Dalit research subjects, Rev. Jacqulin Jothi, is a prime example. She is the daughter of a Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam party (DMK) orator and panchayat school headmaster who trained her to give Tamil public speeches as a child in the 1970s. She attended Catholic boarding school in Trichy and experienced discrimination at a Brahmin college before rediscovering her voice through the liberation theology of Rev. Appavoo at the Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary. Rev. Jacqulin pastored in a Dalit village near Kanchipuram, where the congregation successfully practised Appavoo's *oru olai* (communal eating), bringing the entire village together. She also unionized the Christian construction workers, who had believed it anti-Christian to do so, providing them with access to government benefits, while preaching that it was not a sin to protest.

Contemporary and historical labour mobility through mission educational opportunities, jobs, and unionization challenges Pariah false consciousness contributing to Dalit class-consciousness. Christianization of the Pariah focused on social gospel or liberation theology praxis that drew on Tamil village values of sharing resources provided the space for psycho-spiritual self-empowerment and agency in dialogue with missionary patronage and nurturing relationships. Praxis grounded in education and new labour opportunities moves beyond ritual symbolism to highlight an integrated worldview of the agentive Pariah in which the 'divine is in the world' and conversion was 'social, psychological, as well as material and political' (Kooiman 1989, in Kent 2004, 18). Dalits not only preach against social inequality, but strategically use Christianity to act against caste and the 'Pariah problem' through ritual, the arts, education, and labour organizing. These actions not only result in positive material repercussions for Dalits, but continue to produce male and female Dalit leaders and activists. As Rev. Theophilus Appavoo argued, dialogical relationships established over shared food (love feasts) are central to such changes so that caste is not just being addressed through a change of heart or 'mutual good will' (Sherinian 2014, 241).

## Conclusion

In *The Pariah Problem*, Rupa Viswanath makes a momentous contribution to our historical understanding of modern, British colonial (both state and missionary), as well as upper-caste discourse on the development and impact of caste as constructed by elites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Her scope is limited: her primary sources are archival, and interpretation of some of this archival data comes from interviews with members of the contemporary Dalit Christian intelligentsia and middle class. Absent from this historical picture are the oral family histories of these same Dalit religious and cultural leaders as well as serious consideration of contradictory evidence from other or (in her own words) 'exceptions' and 'exceptional individuals' outside her geographic, missionary society and historical scope (2014, 50). Finally, we might consider whether Viswanath's perspective is circumscribed by an academic stance commonly seen outside of religious studies that is wary of conservative religious ideology, whether Christian or Hindu. Such stances can fail to recognize the impact of religious ritual or belief on the subjects

of our research themselves. Does Viswanath's work, which is so concerned to note and recover Pariah agency, fail to acknowledge it when it is manifestly religious in character? Further, does her work make room for the significance of the sociopolitical praxis of liberation theology that has had a social-justice impact on the material lives of the oppressed in India? Viswanath's dichotomization of ritual as spiritual symbolism from labour and education as rational materialism leads to her conclusion that the love feasts are simply 'a symbolic attack' on strictures against inter-caste dining. I have tried to show that such an argument is limited in its scope, for it overlooks explicit mission policy against caste practices as well as the historic reality for many Dalits. I assert that the significance of putting into regular practice a ritual of equality within the culture of the mission was surely empowering to outcastes. Their humanity was brought to the centre of mission policy, action, and ritual. We may not be able to provide specific proof of this impact, especially through the words of any Paraiyar convert from the mid- to late nineteenth century, but it is a reasonable claim that it did make a difference.

If we broadened and complicated this picture to recognize the exceptions to more general missionary practice or even disaggregation within missions, I believe it would tell us a great deal about the historical sources of the community development of middle- and upper-middle-class Dalit Christians, which took place both as a result of their own initiative as well as through dialogic relationships with missionaries and particular mission policies that opened alternative pathways for Dalit development. It would also tell us more about the relationship between the 'Pariah problem' as constructed by elites and Dalit perspectives on 'the injustices to be overcome', disclosing strategies that Dalits pursued to fight their limitations (Viswanath 2014, xii). I have attempted to present data and case studies that broaden this history methodologically, broaden the chronological time frame, and seriously consider a liberation theology/social gospel perspective. I believe it suggests a complete and more complicated history of the Dalit–missionary alliance that includes the consideration of religious-studies scholarship, the disaggregation of mission studies, and a confluence of material and religious perspectives of Dalit subjects themselves.

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# *Gandhi, Protestant Missionaries, and Dalit Labour: Northern parallels to* The Pariah Problem

JOEL LEE

*Williams College*
*Email: jl20@williams.edu*

In 1936, M. K. Gandhi wrote:

[O]ur woebegone Indian society has branded the Bhangi as a social pariah, set him down at the bottom of the scale, held him fit only to receive kicks and abuse, a creature who must subsist on the leavings of the caste people and dwell on the dung-heap …. This is shocking. It is perhaps useless to seek the why and wherefore of it.

Professing unawareness of the causes of the Bhangi's abject condition, Gandhi proceeded to articulate its remedy: recognition. 'If only we had given due recognition to the status of the Bhangi as equal to that of a Brahmin as in fact and justice he [i.e. the Bhangi] deserves … [Not until this distinction is removed] will our society enjoy health, prosperity and peace, and be happy' (Gandhi 1936, 336).

I begin my engagement with Rupa Viswanath's *The Pariah Problem* with this passage of Gandhi's, taken from his weekly *Harijan*, for several reasons. First, it is an illustration of one of Viswanath's key claims. By locating both the culpable agent of the Bhangi's degradation ('society') and the solution ('recognition') in the domain of the *social*, and by foreclosing (as 'useless') enquiry into other possible explanatory domains, Gandhi effects a discursive sequestration of untouchability from questions of land, labour, and the political dispensation. For Gandhi—as for many of the colonial officials and elite nationalists considered in Viswanath's book—this move enabled him to express sympathy with the plight of Dalits while firmly opposing Dalit efforts to address untouchability through political economic means, from labour strikes to separate electorates.

Another reason I begin here is that this passage connects, by way of a boomerang-like circuit in global concept history, the community of labourers at the heart of Viswanath's study with the community of labourers whose history and present are the subject of my research, and whose encounters with missionaries and nationalists will provide points of comparison with *The Pariah Problem* in this article. Note again the formulation: 'Indian society … has branded the Bhangi as a social pariah.' That is, Gandhi assimilates a Dalit caste of North India (the 'Bhangi') to a category of global sociological thought (the 'social pariah'), which is, in turn, an abstraction drawn from the conditions of existence of another Dalit caste: the South Indian 'Paraiyar'. Since one of the labours of Viswanath's book is to demonstrate how arguments and concepts abstracted from the concrete historical struggles between Paraiyars and others in the colonial period have found lodging in enduring strains of nationalist thought and practice, it seems fitting to begin with a nationalist pronouncement on the caste question that makes this process visible, and in the words of no less a figure than Gandhi—to whom we will return.

We are fortunate that Viswanath, unlike the Mahatma, does not find it useless 'to seek the why and wherefore of it'. *The Pariah Problem* throws light on caste and untouchability—and the quotidian spatiosocial and political operations by which they have been sustained and inscribed on landscapes and human bodies—in a way that few scholarly books ever have. It does

so, moreover, by marshalling a body of evidence drawn from multiple, internally polyphonic archives. By reading missionary accounts, documents of several departments at several levels of colonial administration, and the writings of the native elite alongside and against one another, Viswanath renders an analysis that is beholden to no single set of sources. What emerges is an altogether new understanding of the complex relations between missionaries, the colonial state, landholding Hindu elites, and landless 'untouchable' labourers that overturns long-cherished myths and unearths the roots of key features of today's political landscape (anti-conversion laws and 'hurt sentiments', among others) in historical efforts to maintain domination over Dalit labour.

While Viswanath is careful to formulate claims with precise regional and temporal delimitations—in most cases, the Madras presidency between the 1880s and the 1920s—many of her findings have strong parallels in the same period in Punjab and western United Provinces (UP), 1,000 miles to the north. This should surprise us. While it is relatively well known that the late nineteenth-century 'mass movements', in which some 'untouchable' communities embraced Christianity *en bloc*, overwhelmingly comprised Chuhras in the North and Paraiyars in the South, it might be expected that similarities would end there. Formidable structural differences—sociological, ecological, linguistic, and historical, as well as in forms of land tenure and caste 'interdependence' or 'bondage'—separate the regions. Agrarian slavery (*atimai*), as Viswanath demonstrates, meant that Paraiyars in the Madras presidency were, even after formal abolition in 1843, sold by landlords along with the land on which they laboured—a condition quite unlike that faced by Chuhras in the *jajmani* and *sapidari* systems that prevailed in Punjab and western UP. And, while Chuhras (also known as 'Bhangis') did perform agricultural labour for dominant caste landlords, they also, unlike Paraiyars, worked in 'scavenging' (cleaning non-flush latrines) and sanitation—forms of stigmatized labour that figured decisively in representations of Chuhra-ness and in the circular justificatory logics of untouchability ('Chuhras/Bhangis are despised because they clean toilets; they clean toilets because they are Chuhras/Bhangis').

Despite these and other differences, a reading of missionary and colonial administrative archives in North India in the same decades suggests that many of the developments that Viswanath tracks in the Madras presidency were not peculiar to that region, but in fact took place on several swaths of the subcontinent at once. Consider three of

the book's claims regarding the 'Pariah–missionary alliance'. First, missionaries sought to replace oppressive labour regimes not with socially and economically egalitarian arrangements, but rather with forms of *gentle* servitude—servitude figured as Christian rather than 'Oriental'—and their commitment to gentle servitude extended, at times, to quelling labour insubordination among new converts. Second, with important exceptions, missions found ways to accommodate the practices of hierarchical distinction and untouchability on which their privileged-caste converts insisted in their interactions with Christian Pariahs. Third, a careful reading of missionary documents reveals, clothed in the language of religious persecution, an archive of the tactics of labour domination from which the fabric of everyday life in agrarian caste society is woven. Each of these claims breaks new historiographic ground and each could also be made based on evidence in Punjab and western UP. Let me briefly illustrate each in turn.

A seminal insight of *The Pariah Problem*, and a corrective to earlier mission historiography, is that, while Protestant missionaries denounced caste volubly, the object of their critique was not social and economic hierarchy—which they understood as 'natural', a healthy requirement of any orderly society—but rather attitudes of 'caste pride' and practices of 'superstition'. Ultimately, what many sought to encourage was a transformation of 'heathenish' caste relations into 'rational' class hierarchy (Viswanath 2014, 43). Paraiyars saw things differently, however, and seized opportunities afforded by the presence and racial capital of the missionaries to undermine the economic and social foundations of their subordination to village elites, provoking suspicion of 'material motives' for their interest in Christianity. In response, '[m]issionaries frequently chastised Pariah converts who seemed in danger of straying outside the bounds of class decorum, and in the case of laborers, this actually meant enforcing their obedience to their masters' (Ibid., 55).

A highly similar situation occurred in Punjab and western UP between the 1880s and 1920s. When Chuhras approached Protestant missionaries in the North for baptism or religious instruction, their enquiries were conjoined (sometimes in frankly contractual terms) with requests for schools, teachers, legal aid, rent-free or reduced-rent land for cultivation, and employment—requests aimed at the foundations of their dependence on local, dominant caste *zamindar*s. Upon conversion, moreover, Chuhras in a great many cases refused to continue cleaning the latrines of the landlords, depriving the village elite of a powerfully corporeal sign of dominance and hollowing out the tautologous premise

of Chuhra degradation. Missionaries, though critical of *zamindar*s for their 'cruelty' toward Dalits, were at the same time frequently nonplussed at the rebelliousness of their new flock. An example from the *Gazetteer of Gurdaspur District*, Punjab, in 1892 is instructive. After noting the 'considerable hold' the Presbyterians had on the 'Chuhra clans' in the region, the report observes that, upon joining the Church, Chuhra

> converts were unwilling to continue to perform their customary village service [i.e. scavenging], and the villagers refused to give the customary due. This state of things threatened to produce awkward complications, but, thanks to the energetic action of the Missionaries of all sects, who at once pointed out the unreasonableness of their position to the converts, the danger was averted and no further complaints have occurred.
> (1892, 66)

That is, when Dalits, emboldened by their alliance with the new counterweight to landlord dominance, attempted to liberate themselves from a hated form of caste servitude, missionaries intervened, forestalling a confrontation with *zamindar*s by restoring the political economic status quo.

A second key finding in *The Pariah Problem* is that most missions, when faced with the objections of caste Christians (i.e. those who were not Dalit) to participation on an equal footing with Paraiyars in the life of the Church, found institutional means of accommodating the 'caste scruples' of the former. Viswanath notes exceptions—missionaries who insisted that native converts prove their transcendence of caste distinctions by, for instance, dining together and sharing the same cup—but finds that the preponderance of missionaries supported elite Christians in 'insisting that Pariahs take communion only after high-caste congregants had done so, refusing to allow Pariah Christian missionaries into their homes, demanding that Pariahs be buried in separate cemeteries from caste Christians, and so on' (Viswanath 2014, 48). In Punjab and western UP, elite Christian opposition to Chuhras as equal coreligionists appears to have been somewhat less pointed and less organized than in the Madras presidency—likely due to the northern congregations before the mass movements being smaller and composed of individuals or families of converts rather than whole sections of castes as in the South—but here, too, missionaries accommodated such concerns by developing institutional practices underwritten by caste. Typically, these were de-emphasized or omitted in missionaries' reports to their home churches and are found, rather, in critiques by dissidents and in other interstices of the missionary

archive. For instance, it was in a footnote to his letter in a mission journal that British missionary H. U. Weitbrecht observed that, in response to 'a little feeling on the part of some Native Christians in Amritsar against the admission of Chuhras into the Church', missionaries in the region convened a meeting from which emerged 'a general agreement that no considerations of caste ought to prevent admission to full Christian rights; but that… social distinctions should be duly maintained' (Weitbrecht 1886, 766). The missionaries' solution here turned on the capaciousness of the category of 'social distinctions' that were to be 'duly maintained': endogamy, caste deference norms, and practices of spatial segregation were all readily described as 'social'. But even access to 'full Christian rights' was not as secure for Chuhras as Weitbrecht's remark suggests. British and American missions in North India, unlike at home, innovated a practice whereby not all converts were allowed to participate in the Eucharist upon baptism; rather, some underwent a period of further testing before admission to that central rite of Christian commensality. 'As regards villagers belonging to the depressed classes,' wrote H. D. Griswold, an American Presbyterian critic of his own mission society, 'their admission after baptism to the communion is practically always deferred; and is deferred much too long, judging from the statistics' (Griswold n.d., 4). By the indefinite postponement of Chuhra access to communion, a sub-class of Christians deemed unfit for Christianity's core ritual—'semi-church-members' as another dissident missionary called them (R. E. Speer, cited in Griswold n.d., 5)—came into being. While different in form from the sequential timing of communion in South Indian churches (caste Christians first, then Dalit Christians), the perpetual deferral of Chuhra access to the Eucharist was similar in substance; it reproduced the caste/outcaste division in the very heart of Christian ritual.

A third claim of Viswanath's that I would like to take up relates to methodologies for the social history of the oppressed. The disciplinary division of labour in South Asian studies tends to send scholars of labour history toward one set of archives and scholars of religion toward others. Viswanath (2014, 71) points out, however, that, of all the colonial-era records available, it is missionary documents that are 'easily the single richest source on labour regimes in colonial south India'. To locate and make use of these data on labour, though, one must recognize that 'in missionary writings [there] is a tendency to interpret everyday forms of domination in the language of *religious persecution*' (Ibid., 79, emphasis in original). This is markedly the case in the North as well and to do a reading of the missionary archive in Punjab and

western UP informed by these methodological remarks is to shed light on regimes of labour domination there in ways that have heretofore eluded both agrarian historians and scholars of mission. Examples of practices of labour control that appear in the North Indian missionary archive as acts of religious persecution or 'bigotry' are legion; I will cite just one. Andrew Gordon, writing of the early days of the mass movements in rural northern Punjab where he worked as a missionary for three decades, identified two young Dalit men, Pī′po and Fakī′rā, as among the first who 'declared their willingness to forsake all for Christ' while their caste fellows initially hesitated to do so out of fear of the 'Muhammadan' landlords for whom they worked as scavengers and agricultural labourers:

> The Muhammadans of the village then began to persecute Pī′po and his party, forbidding them to draw water from the village wells or participate in any of the common privileges of their village. These intolerant Moslem landlords, regarding Fakī′rā and Pī′po as leaders in the Christian movement, violently assaulted them, beating Pī′po with such cruelty that he lay ill as a consequence of it for six months and for a time was considered beyond all hope of recovery. (Gordon 1886, 204)

A near-fatal beating, the denial of access to water, and an orchestrated social boycott are placed here into a narrative of religious intolerance and persecution—a framing that subsequent historiography has done little to question. Yet, while religion is undoubtedly relevant, an attentive reading of Gordon's account reveals that landlords began to oppose the conversion of local Dalits only when they learned that the latter 'would cease to work for them on the Sabbath in the event of their becoming Christians' (Ibid., 201). Here, as elsewhere, Dalit engagement with missionaries portended a disruption in the local labour regime, provoking landlords to deploy time-honoured techniques of restoring their control.

Thus far, I have argued that, despite wide divergences in the regional contexts of the mass movements of the late nineteenth century, the alliances with missionaries initiated by Paraiyars in the Madras presidency, on the one hand, and by Chuhras in Punjab and western UP, on the other, followed trajectories marked by striking parallels. What, then, are the ramifications of these parallels? The consequences for the study of caste and untouchability, for labour history, and for the history of missions and of Christianity in India and Pakistan are not inconsiderable, but they cannot be pursued here with the depth they require. Instead, in closing, I will follow Viswanath in considering how

the modes of thinking about, framing, and 'solving' the (Pariah/Chuhra) 'problem' that were developed in local conflicts between the 1880s and 1920s came, subsequently, to be replicated in mainstream nationalist discourse and practice.

We have seen that Dalit efforts to take control of their own labour outraged their landlord employers, worried colonial officials, and prompted more than a few missionaries to counsel gentle submission. Few things, it seems, brought these otherwise contentious parties together like the 'danger' (as the Gurdaspur district official put it) of Dalit insubordination. We have also seen that missionaries, in narrativizing caste exploitation as religious suffering and explaining Chuhras' partial exclusion from the Eucharist in terms of spiritual unpreparedness, discursively framed the conditions of Dalit abjection as spiritual in nature. These themes converge with another of Viswanath's key findings—that the ostensibly universal category of 'the public' (as well as 'the people' and 'Tamils') was routinely deployed by colonial administrators and native elites in ways that reveal its operational meaning to be 'everyone-except-Pariahs'—in the writings on caste of no less influential a nationalist than M. K. Gandhi.

For Gandhi, though, with his North Indian frame of reference, it was the Bhangi (again, another term for Chuhra), rather than the Paraiyar, that came to represent the paradigmatic untouchable, the conduit through which he would channel elements of a particular history of Dalit encounters with missionaries and Hindu reformers into the political mainstream. Gandhi wrote about this community constantly—there are more entries for 'Bhangi' in Gandhi's collected works, by far, than for any other caste save Brahmans. One of the recurring themes in these entries is the religious value of the occupation of scavenging, which Gandhi saw as deeply and rightly tied to Bhangi selfhood:

> an ideal Bhangi, while deriving his livelihood from his occupation, would approach it only as a sacred duty …. He would consider himself responsible for the proper removal and disposal of all the dirt and night-soil within the area which he serves and regard the maintenance of healthy and sanitary condition [*sic*] within the same as the *summum bonum* of his existence.
> (Gandhi 1936, 336)

In 1946, sanitation workers in Bombay held a strike. In a response in his weekly *Harijan*, Gandhi (1946b) wrote: 'There are certain matters in which strikes would be wrong. Sweepers' grievances come in this category.' After remarking on the importance of proper scavenging for public health and stating his opposition to coercion as a political tactic, Gandhi concluded that

> Now that the *hartal* [strike] is at an end, it is the duty of everyone to stretch out the hand of fellowship to the *Bhangis*, educate them, see that they are properly housed, permit them, like anyone else, to live wherever they choose, look in the matter of an equitable wage for them and see that justice is meted out to them *without their having to demand it*.
> (Gandhi 1946b, 96, emphasis added)

With sympathy and concern for their well-being, that is, Gandhi insisted on the inadmissibility—indeed, the *wrong*ness—of Dalit labour insubordination, or even making demands, in the special domain of sanitation work. Like the missionaries who preceded him, Gandhi counselled Dalits to resume their work—a 'sacred duty'—while leaving to 'everyone' the reformation of labour regimes.

The subtle conceptual separation of Dalits from 'everyone' emerges in somewhat sharper relief in a follow-up article in which Gandhi elaborates his position in response to a 'Harijan friend [who] complains bitterly about my article on sweepers' strike'. After rehearsing his spiritualization of sanitation labour—here likening the Bhangi to the Hindu god Shiva who 'cleanses the mind of man'—Gandhi reiterates the necessity both of social reform and of Dalit quiescence:

> I tried to show in my article the duties of *Bhangis* as well as of citizens. I have often said that every kind of injustice is meted out to *Bhangis*. I have no doubt that citizens do not fulfil their obligations to them …. The *Bhangis* may not go on strike for lack of these amenities but it is up to all citizens to raise their voice on behalf of them.
> (Gandhi 1946a, no page number)

Gandhi's prescription for redressing the wrongs of untouchability rests on an unselfconscious conception of 'Bhangis' as a category distinct from, indeed contrastive with, 'citizens'. But, like colonial deployments of the category of 'the public' to mean in practice 'everyone-except-Pariahs', Gandhi's formulation here is no less consequential for being unreflective—as has been borne out by the subsequent history, vis-à-vis Dalits engaged in sanitation labour, of institutions heir to Gandhi's vision: the Harijan Sevak Sangh, the Congress Party, and the Indian Republic. What the father of the nation advocated, in language that echoed the exhortations of several decades of missionaries, colonial administrators, and landed elites, was gentle servitude, conceived of as spiritual, by actors unselfconsciously imagined as the other of the citizen.

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# *Response to Readings of* The Pariah Problem

RUPA VISWANATH

*University of Gottingen*
*Email: rupa.viswanath@cemis.uni-goettingen.de*

Colonial Madras was a slave society—a fact few histories disclose. *The Pariah Problem* traces this historical erasure to a deliberate strategy on the part of colonial officials. Empire-wide calls for abolition that began circulating in the nineteenth century alarmed these men; abolition threatened the lucrative alliance between the state and dominant landed groups, who together appropriated the surplus produced by unfree Dalit labour.[9] In response, officials developed a euphemistic discourse on caste-based agrarian servitude, insisting that, in India, slavery was 'gentle', indeed 'in name only', and that Dalits were joined to their masters by a system of mutually recognized rights and responsibilities. The trope of 'gentle' slavery was buttressed by claims that Dalits were content with their lot—and chafed only when instigated by meddlesome 'outside influences'. Endogenous Dalit dissent was, in official terms, simply illegible. The authentic Dalit imagined by the state was a compliant farmhand unable to conceive of a better life for herself.

[9] The term 'Dalit' is of recent origin and was originally linked to the Ambedkarite political movement. It has since been adopted as a neutral umbrella term for dominated *jati*s excluded from the classical fourfold varna system.

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The historiography on missions reproduces this vision, telling us it was missionaries who first introduced ideas of human freedom and equal worth to long-suffering Dalit labourers, encouraging them to struggle against caste domination for the first time. Ironically, the missionary archive itself provides definitive evidence against this view, overlooked by missionary historians whose script has largely relegated Dalits to a passive role. Yet, time and again in these collections, one finds Dalits striving to challenge caste domination not because of missionaries, but despite them. Apart from a few historically exceptional individuals whose story *The Pariah Problem* tells, Protestant missionaries worked actively to discourage rebellion and preached that, while all souls are equal in God's sight, distinctions of social rank are a necessary feature of any well-ordered society and should be respected as such.

Missionaries also contributed, if unwittingly, to the mystification of Dalit subordination by helping to popularize the view that caste was a fundamentally religious phenomenon and that the exploitation of Dalit labour and Dalits' lack of access to common resources were epiphenomenal to the Hindu ritual theory that classified them as polluting. This conceptual reduction of Dalitness to ritual impurity had paradoxical effects. First, it allowed dominant castes in rural Madras to defend their prerogatives with respect to caste inferiors as 'religious rights' eligible for protection under the colonial policy of non-interference in religion. Decades later, the missionary view of Dalitness as mere religious prejudice was seized upon by Indian nationalists as proof that Dalits were and had always been Hindu, in order to undermine their increasingly popular demands for political self-representation (cf. Roberts 2016, 111–15). Much later, this view of caste would come to be enshrined in the works of leading anthropologists, including Louis Dumont.

## Reading missionary–Dalit alliances

For Dalits in colonial South India, the presence of missionaries provided an opportunity to alter the conditions of their subordination. *The Pariah Problem* shows that Dalits pursued even slender possibilities of escape with dogged determination: mission archives are rich repositories of collective Dalit action. Dalits themselves often initiated contact with missionaries and sought out conversion; they flouted landed elites even when missionaries warned them to keep the peace; and they spread Christianity among their kinfolk in neighbouring villages much more effectively and quickly than missionaries could ever dream of doing

themselves—facts that are recorded, but never analysed, in mission histories. Dalits, moreover, made plain what they expected from their relationship with missionaries.

In case after case, we find Dalits seeking to leverage their new relations with missionaries to change the everyday conditions of the *ceri* (Dalit ghetto) by donning new and clean clothing, operating schools, and insisting on the presence of an educated and articulate outsider who would serve in the prestigious role of resident teacher, at a time when even most caste people were uneducated (Viswanath 2014: 73–79). Their most consistent demand—often put forth as a condition for agreeing to convert—was for education for their children (Ibid., 75). These demands constituted a direct challenge to landed-caste domination because Dalits were normally forbidden from wearing respectable clothing and from being educated. Landed castes responded by pressuring converts, often by violent means, to cut off relations with missions. Yet Dalits took these risks time and again. The history of Dalit engagement with missionaries and with new employment opportunities afforded by the colonial encounter[10] provide overwhelming evidence against colonial platitudes about Dalits' culturally engendered acquiescence and the gentleness of Indian servitude. Instead, records demonstrate the widespread existence of Dalits willing and eager to break from what officials described as the benevolent paternalism and comfortable security of their bondage. In the 1910s, the state decided to offer Dalits in the district of Tanjore a chance to gain ownership of their house sites—a critical piece of leverage for labourers because landlords used the threat of eviction to demand compliance. Officials and elites, raised on the fiction of Dalit contentment, were certain the scheme would never get off the ground—but were instead flooded with applications from Dalits across the countryside (Ibid., 208–11).

Zoe Sherinian's published research provides a compelling account of contemporary Dalit Christian activism within the CSI. Her work is based on interviews with anti-caste Christians in the present day and on mission archives that she interprets through the framework of contemporary Dalit Christian theology in the mainstream liberal tradition. Sherinian finds, as I have, that most Dalit Christians today accept standard missionary historiography that celebrates missionaries as heroic agents of radical change. She acknowledges that this is not a

[10] These included military service; employment in the homes, stables, and offices of British officials; and, later on, labour migration through indenture.

historically accurate picture of Dalit conversion and that missionaries who were committed to more than symbolic gestures and occasional tirades against caste were rare. But she believes she has found additional examples—examples that she thinks provide a 'significant' challenge to my analysis. How so? 'Exceptional missionaries,' Sherinian avers, 'contributed to the creation of exceptional Dalits.' By not acknowledging the contribution of these exceptional missionaries, in Sherinian's view, I fail to acknowledge the 'exceptional Dalits' that these missionaries helped to produce and whose descendants are her own informants in the world of Church-based activism.

These remarks reveal an irresolvable tension in Sherinian's work: she agrees with me that Dalits were actively involved in initiating and shaping the mission encounter and did not require missionaries to explain unfreedom to them, and yet wants to insist on the uniquely transformative nature of the specific mission society from which her present-day interlocutors emerged and to suggest *they could not have done so* without the support of this particular mission. To make her case, she leans heavily on the testimony of present-day converts whose apparently unmediated access to their ancestors' inner worlds she does not explain; supporting evidence comes from archival accounts showing that some American Madura missionaries went so far as to suspend members who refused to partake in a ritual 'love feast' where Dalits and non-Dalits co-dined. In her view, the fact that missionaries other than those cited in *The Pariah Problem* engaged in symbolic attacks on the ritual dimensions of untouchability reveals 'cracks' in the 'hegemonic historical record' that my book apparently erases—cracks that she argues 'made a difference, contributing to change'.

The idea that missionaries were a mighty force against caste, however, is not a crack in the hegemonic historical account, but a restatement of it. Where *The Pariah Problem* differs is not by attempting absurdly to claim that missionaries made no difference, but rather in questioning the 'prime-mover' role that missionaries are accorded in standard missionary histories with respect to Dalit struggle. Missionaries, I show, provided opportunities for Dalits to resist their status even when they did not intend to do so (cf. Viswanath 2010). That some Protestant missionaries were willing to expel converts who refused to participate in a ritual meal with Dalits bespeaks a higher level of commitment than the majority of their peers to the doctrine of Dalits' spiritual equality. But the equality of all men in the eyes of God was a position embraced in theory by all Protestant missionaries in the period of my study—a fact that my book explains very clearly. What has yet to be shown is

that these ritual celebrations transformed labour relations, as Sherinian would have us believe, or that the equality missionaries proclaimed at the spiritual level implied a commitment to undoing worldly relations of servitude.[11]

Sherinian believes that the examples of upwardly mobile Christian Dalits—themselves necessarily a minority in any congregation—who found new employment in missionary institutions refute my argument that the agrarian labour regime remained fundamentally unchanged for Dalits through missionary encounters. That the life stories of those lucky individuals and their descendants were materially transformed goes without question and holds irrespective of any additional spiritual inspiration they may have derived from the Christian message itself. But a labour regime is not a matter of individual circumstances. It is a structural reality comprising state and social institutions that together govern and enforce the relationship between those who labour and those who control that labour, in such a way as to ensure regular, productive work. A labour regime is transformed when the position of workers as a whole is transformed by ending their employers' monopoly on land and coercive force. At a time when most Dalits were trapped in agrarian servitude, pious donations by American churchgoers back home created a miniature alternative economy (though not a self-sustaining one) within the mission compound to which some Dalits escaped. But the existing agrarian labour regime was not transformed by plucking a few fortunate converts out of it and employing them instead as mission servants, schoolteachers, and so forth.

In a section proclaiming the love feast as both symbolic and material, Sherinian writes: 'I instead consider the love feasts not as irrational symbolism, not as charity, not as merely ritual practice, but as psychological and spiritual symbolism *put into action*' (emphasis in original). I have never characterized the symbolism of the love feast as 'irrational', nor do I at any point make the distinction that Sherinian wishes to attribute to me between ritual practice and 'action'. Sherinian italicizes her phrase 'putting into action' as if, by simply revealing that symbols include action and interaction among real people and things—symbolic action—she has made an argument about a transformation of

[11] Viswanath 2014, 52–57 describes and analyses the consequences of the distinction that missionaries of the late nineteenth century were careful to draw between spiritual equality (equality 'in the eyes of God') and the worldly distinctions of rank that they regarded as both natural and necessary.

material conditions. Needless to say, Sherinian is on solid ground in noticing that symbols are themselves a material reality … as are feasts and the people who consume them. But, when scholars distinguish between the material basis of class relations and symbolic remedies, it is not because they think symbols lack material form, but because the remedies these symbols evoke are lacking. In every village, landless labourers and landlords celebrate harvest festivals together, without in any way transforming the relationship of dominance and exploitation that divides them; modern corporate 'team-building' exercises create feelings of camaraderie, but workers do not thereby become bosses. The love feast was likewise fully compatible with the unfree labour arrangements that characterized Tamil society at the time and served mainly to create a sense of unity among Christians themselves.

The conceptual core of Sherinian's argument, however, turns not on the love feasts and employment opportunities the American Madura mission provided, but on the 'psycho-spiritual self-empowerment' that she believes love feasts and employment engendered. Speculation with respect to the inner lives of long-dead persons was not a component of my research, for reasons that I have explained (Viswanath 2014, 9–10), but, if Sherinian's point is merely that signs of support from missionaries must have given Dalits an additional boost, I do not doubt it. In that case, however, it seems reasonable to assume that Dalits would also have been 'psychologically empowered' by new employment opportunities in missions that did not hold love feasts, or in the home of a colonial officer, or by contact with an emergent Dalit movement and the rise of a first generation of Dalit politicians. Sherinian offers no evidence that 'psychological empowerment' was experienced exclusively or even to a greater extent by the converts of the American Madura mission—nor could she have, since this is the only mission she has studied—let alone that Dalit resistance depended on what she calls 'nurturing relationships' with those missionaries. In fact, we have ample evidence of anti-caste activists and successful Dalit Christian families emerging from much less radical churches, even the Catholic Church, notorious for its support of caste hierarchy in India. These converts turned the messages of Christianity to their own ends and deployed missionary education and mission employment to advance the position of their families, just as Sherinian's interlocutors do (Mosse 2012). And, of course, Dalit anti-caste activism and upward mobility in colonial Madras were never confined to Christians (in Tamil country, the most influential example is Pandit Iyothee Thass) (Ayyathurai 2010). Sherinian's notion of 'nurturing', moreover, is redolent of the

paternalism my book criticizes as central to mission and state discourses asserting Dalits' alleged passive acceptance of domination—discourses used to legitimize support for the agrarian status quo.

The central thrust of Sherinian's response to my research is that my 'scope is limited', that I 'fail to recognize the impact of religious ritual or belief on the subjects of our research' (p. 15) and that, if only I had broadened my scholarly methods and historical and relational scope, it would have created a more complicated picture of this history. Sherinian hints, furthermore, that my 'perspective is circumscribed by an academic stance … that is wary of conservative religious ideology' (p. 15)—that it is irrational prejudice rather than evidence that leads me to discount Christian testimony. She deduces anti-Christian bias, in other words, from my failure to treat the stylized narratives of faith-based communities (dubbed 'oral history') as evidentially equivalent to extensive archival records of those very same communities. I harbour no bias against Christianity or any other religion and regard such speculation on Sherinian's part as wild. I did not include the narratives of present-day Christians regarding their ancestors' mental states in *The Pariah Problem*, not because I am biased against Christianity nor because my research was so narrowly focused that I never encountered such stories, but because existing evidence overwhelmingly confutes them. I encountered the myth of Dalit passivity and subsequent 'awakening' thanks to outside influence before even commencing empirical research, as it is a mainstay of published histories of Indian Christianity. But the archival evidence that missionaries themselves left behind paints a very different picture. Sherinian, by contrast, claims to be broadening the evidentiary base and 'complicating' the picture. Her conclusions, however, only buttress the very same myth.

## The 'public' sphere, the 'private' home, and Dalit women

I thank Lucinda Ramberg for raising questions about transformations in gender regimes in new convert households. Although not within my book's ambit, her queries allow me to reflect on how the forms that exclusion took in newly reconfigured publics in colonial Madras occurred alongside changes in the nature of privacy and the representation of the paradigmatic national woman.

To answer questions about the changing nature of publics or privates requires us to recognize the polysemic nature of these terms and the multiple dimensions along which the distinction can be asserted. The interest in publics among South Asianist historians, inaugurated by the Habermasian debate, in fact concerns only one very particular kind of public, the public sphere, and it is this that the scholarship has focused on (Habermas 1991; Calhoun 1993; Scott, Ingram, and Tareen 2016). Understanding the governance of Dalits in the nineteenth century, however, requires us to examine several linked but distinct kinds of publicness. For 'public' carries many meanings: consider the very different implications of the word in public woman, public school, publicly owned corporation, and public good. Moreover, as a deeply contested concept, we should expect that 'the gaps between neighbouring senses will depend on certain beliefs about the natures of societies and of individuals … rather than on purely logical entailments' (Benn and Gaus 1982, 5).

First, Dalits were tacitly excluded from 'the public' in one important sense because dominant ideologies defined them as fundamentally exterior to 'society proper' and therefore forbade them access to public goods and resources, prevented them from expressing their political views in public fora, and so on; Joel Lee demonstrates that Gandhi's vision of 'the citizenry' likewise referred in fact only to non-Dalits (Lee, in his contribution to this Roundtable above). Yet, at the same time, a distinct form of publicness was inescapable for Dalits and this equally contributed to their exclusion from forms of economic and cultural capital available to the 'respectable classes'. For, in addition to the unwaged labour of social reproduction, which was borne by women of all castes, Dalit women in colonial Madras as elsewhere also performed farm labour, of specific kinds considered suitable for women and at wages lower than those of Dalit men. The ubiquity of Dalit women's participation in the workforce made them highly unusual among Indian women.[12] In colonial and postcolonial India, moreover, upward mobility on the part of individual families as well as caste groups has often entailed the relegation of women to the home. The publicness of

[12] Agrarian labour is, even today, the most common form of labour that women perform in India, in a country that otherwise has a comparatively very low percentage of women working outside the home; gendered restrictions on mobility have kept more women in the grip of the household than in countries with far less robust economies. See Pande, Moore, and Johnson 2016.

the Dalit woman departs from this norm of respectability and entailed the exclusion of Dalit women from the national imaginary.

For, as Mrinalini Sinha, Shailaja Paik, Partha Chatterjee, and Charu Gupta have observed, the construction of the 'national woman' *as homemaker* was central to the ideological agenda of anticolonial nationalism (Sinha 2006; Paik 2014; Chatterjee 1993; Gupta 2001). This construction at once ratified the gender norms that continue to regulate Indian society, where 'occupying public spaces, working, earning and spending … [are coded] as strongly masculine activities' (Osella and Osella 2005, 14, citing Jackson 2000), while women who work in public are deemed morally suspect. In nationalist representations, women who did not work for wages were hierarchically ranked above those who had to. If the national public was closed to Dalits, what we may call the 'national private'—the sphere of the national woman—was equally exclusionary (Paik 2014).

It is also important to observe that the elite construction of the private as the home, by simply conflating the private with the domestic, obscures how differently the home operates to exert social control in different strata of society. The domestic sphere was not the same kind of 'private' for Dalits as it was for caste people. The notion of the home as the site of spiritual autonomy and authentic self-expression implicitly depends on the fact that the paradigmatic national woman's home was a form of property that was hers to care for and the patriarch's to own. I emphasize that the property relation here is a relation not just between people and things, but also among people. As legal theory has long recognized, the essence of property is the right to exclude (Harris 1993, 1731). To equate the home with privacy and autonomy is to assume such a right—a right that Dalits did not possess.

The Dalit labourer's home, instead, was a source of bitter contest. As I describe in *The Pariah Problem*, Dalits' house sites were owned by landlords, such that a labourer who provoked his master's ire could lose both his job and his home at once. Forced eviction was one of the most potent tools of labour control given the absence of alternative employment or housing; eviction was tantamount to the rapid demise of the Dalit family. To analyse public and private in colonial India thus requires examining how property arrangements vary across society and how these terminologies were not simply analytic, but used by the state and other dominant forces to regulate access to resources (Viswanath 2014, 190–216).

## Religion, the state, and legitimate violence

In the history of South India, the monopolization of landed property and ostensibly public resources, and the exclusion of Dalits from them, is inextricable from the governance of religion, and specifically how the Hindu religion came to be understood by the most influential voices in society as the *source* of caste hierarchy. Much scholarship on Dalits has uncritically taken up this view, assigning an explanatory and even causal role to the notion of Hindu purity. Yet this takes at face value the discourse of caste elites from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who had a clear incentive to describe the discriminatory practices they engaged in—such as the monopolization of public goods—as simply the observation of Hindu 'religious scruples'. This is so because the colonial state promised to exert its authority to protect 'religious sentiments' from 'offence'. Any attempt to challenge exclusionary practices, say, by opening the use of a well or a road to all, could be represented as hurtful insults against the Hindu religion, which the state would legally redress. These same laws are still on the books and continue to provide the legal means by which dominant groups freely exercise extrajudicial social control. As I have argued elsewhere, the adjudication of religious sentiment in modern India is linked closely to the threat of physical violence—the legal regime anticipates violence as an unlawful *but natural* response from those whose sentiments are hurt (Viswanath 2016). The state protection of sentiment thus incites public and violent masculinity, legitimizing what Brian Pennington refers to in his discussion as the representation of the authentically Hindu male subject as one who protects his honour by means of retribution. The religious conceptualization of caste, by rendering Dalits Hindu, further naturalizes the domination of Dalits as merely a means of 'protecting' their own community and values. In this vein, Pennington draws our attention to the laws banning so-called forced or coerced conversion in India, which categorize Dalits together with women and children in the same innocuous phrase as persons particularly vulnerable to the 'allurement' of proselytizers. The state takes on the role of community patriarch, jealously guarding those construed as powerless minors. As Pennington observes, the laws necessitated the deployment of 'convert' in the transitive sense in Indian jurisprudence for the first time. Conversion became not something one did, but what was done to those too vulnerable to resist out-group predation. Moreover, the state is not just any patriarch, but a Hindu one, since organizations devoted to converting Dalits and tribals *to* Hinduism, from Gandhi's Harijan Sevak

Sangh, to today's proselytizing missions of the RSS, are never targeted by these laws. Hindu normativity, as Pennington argues, lies at the very heart of secular postcolonial India.

## Comparison and credibility

Finally, I turn to the articles of Joel Lee and Uday Chandra, which urge us to consider what makes comparison intellectually productive, as well as how it ought to be done. Chandra argues that interregional comparison across subordinated groups is inescapable and need not result teleologically in artificial assertions of generalizability. He politely asks, furthermore, whether my own comparison to the work of Gyan Prakash on Bihar might be a case of apples and oranges. Let me clarify my position on Prakash and then take up comparison more generally, drawing on Lee's article and others.

Towards the end of the book, I draw a line of filiation between several recent scholarly works on bondage, caste, and Christianity in colonial India, and colonial-era tropes about Dalitness and caste—such as the view that Dalits were for the most part resigned to their servitude—that I found in the historical record. I demonstrate that these tropes, which first entered the public sphere in the late nineteenth century and later permeated Indian nationalist discourse, seem to have found a place in contemporary scholarly writings. This is relevant to Bihar not because the conditions of agrarian labour were identical to those in Madras, but because colonial officers across British India partook of the same justificatory discourses in their design of welfare policy targeting outcaste labour.

In *Bonded Histories*, Gyan Prakash makes an ambitious theoretical argument concerning the very categories of freedom and slavery by examining unfree agrarian labour in colonial Bihar. Before I address the specific claims I contest, it is useful to situate them within the overall agenda of the book. Prakash contends that the very concept of slavery depends on an idea of human freedom developed in eighteenth-century Europe. Colonial officers portrayed themselves, he argues, as purveyors of freedom to justify their predations in the countryside. The radical restructuring of the agrarian economy could then be represented as a noble mission to free benighted *kamias* (Dalit agrestic servants). Once freedom was defined authoritatively in a particular way and aligned ideologically with the colonial project,

Prakash argues, Indian unfree labourers came to signify its opposite, defined, *ex post facto*, as slaves, and therefore requiring official rescue. 'Freedom', in this reading, was just another tool in the colonial ideological onslaught that ranked natives as civilizationally inferior. With this, I am mostly in agreement.[13]

How, then, does Prakash substantiate the much bolder claims made at the end of the book, that (1) Dalits have consistently, over the period of his study, 'refused' to participate in reformist projects of the state and (2) that this refusal 'represents' a subaltern critique of the colonial discourse of freedom continuous with Prakash's own (1990, 224–25)? Let us take both claims in turn. Simply put, Prakash gives us no evidence that Dalits *refused* to participate in state welfare schemes. He asserts it several times, but the welfare schemes he imagines Dalits 'refusing' are never described. Indeed, the only evidence he gives for the existence of such programmes is a *single* document from the Revenue Department, whose contents remain mysterious. Nothing from this document is quoted and there is no specification of the programmes Dalits supposedly refused. Given the importance of this alleged refusal to Prakash's overall argument, one would like to know through what actions exactly this 'refusal' by Dalits was manifested, and on whose interpretation. Was this Prakash's own or that of the document's authors? And, if the former, on what basis did he reach it? To read an act *as* refusal is to make an interpretive claim about the intentions of Dalit actors. But we do not even know what specific actions have been interpreted in this way, let alone why.

In my own archival work, I came across countless official statements opining that Dalits would not partake in welfare schemes, so mired were they thought to be in backwardness. In an attempt to discern the empirical basis of such claims, I traced the citational chains in the official record, only to find that they led nowhere. Dalits' alleged resignation in the face of their bondage was something officers 'knew' because this 'truth' was repeated from one generation of administrators to the next. Yet, other records in the archive—usually not those of the Revenue Department, which merely set policy, but the sprawling Board

[13] It is worth noting here that the claim that freedom conceptually proceeded slavery, on which the book's overall argument rests, is hardly a settled matter. Moses Findlay, to name just one influential scholar of comparative slavery, has argued that, in ancient Greece, freedom came after and in opposition to slavery, such that to be free was defined simply as *not* being a slave. Nevertheless, I take Prakash's uncontroversial point that colonizers deployed a discourse of freedom to legitimize their rule.

of Revenue, which actually oversaw the implementation of welfare schemes—paint quite the opposite picture, showing Dalits acting with the same temerity and zeal that the mission archives record. In Madras province, moreover, these documents demonstrate that intense social conflict was the rule when welfare measures were introduced, and the success or failure of particular schemes was determined not by the extent of Dalit interest in them, but by how effectively opposition was mounted by landed castes. Given the severity of the violence and surveillance under which Prakash's kamias laboured and which he himself so vividly describes, it is possible that the 'failure' of welfare schemes in Bihar—assuming they really were underutilized, a fact we cannot assume given the paucity of his evidence—was due not to Dalit refusal, but to their being threatened or otherwise blocked by landed-caste masters. Eliminating this rather obvious possibility would be a necessary first step towards making the argument that Prakash attempts to make, but even that is missing from his account. Prakash's further claim that, in so refusing, Dalits were in fact offering a critique of 'bourgeois freedom', is even less plausible and, again, is asserted without evidence. By ascribing his own position on freedom to Dalit labourers, Prakash enlists them in the agenda of his book—a technique I described in *The Pariah Problem* as 'ventriloquism' (Viswanath 2014, 245).

Let me turn now to a more general consideration of the kinds of comparison that might be productive for research on the histories of labour subordination and domination in which I and my interlocutors are engaged. Lee's article provides us with a compelling model. While drawing on my own work, he does not start with the assumption of comparability. Instead, he points out how agrarian labour among the Chuhras in Punjab and western UP was very differently organized than it was in Madras, comprising distinct ecological and tenurial features. But he nevertheless finds several important resonances in the authoritative discourses of missionaries and national leaders, as well as in the kinds of changes Dalits sought to effect by allying with missionaries. Thus, as in Madras, Lee finds Chuhras remarkably forthright and clear-eyed about what it was they wanted—primarily education and rent-free lands—and approaching missions of their own accord to make these demands. But it is in Lee's analysis of labour control that the value of comparison fully emerges. As in Madras, Dalit conversion, which could entail Chuhras' refusal to perform the degrading work of scavenging, ignited violence from landowners that missionaries had to decide how to cope with. And, as in Madras, the means they chose was conciliation and respect for social difference: in one village, as a telling quote from a mission

biography puts it: 'thanks to the energetic action of the Missionaries … who at once pointed out the unreasonableness of their position to the converts, the danger was averted.'

Lee's article also confirms what I learned through the course of research—that mission archives tell us as much about the repertoires of violence required to maintain labour subordination as they do about religion. Indeed, they tell us more about the minutiae of labouring life than any other contemporary source, since missionary men and women were the only contemporary figures to spend considerable time in Dalit ghettos and produce written knowledge on these spaces—spaces that were usually avoided by colonial officers who instead relied on village leaders drawn from dominant castes to provide information. While missionaries strove to paint conflicts between landlords and labourers as instances of the persecution of Christian converts by Hindus, Lee's account of one such conflict disrupts the missionary narrative in two ways. First, it demonstrates the distorting effects of the 'religious-persecution' idiom by showing that conflict arose when Dalits refused to perform certain kinds of labour—whether or not they had converted—and that landlords violently attempted to reinstate the status quo only when the new religion interfered with labour relations. Lee's example also provides further evidence that ritual purity and similar Hindu theological concerns are best understood as seeking to justify caste-based domination, rather than as its historical cause. Lee observes the inherent 'circularity of justificatory logics of caste' and agrees that these logics are unhelpful in any comparative analysis of the Dalit–non-Dalit divide, since Dalit labour subordination was routinely enforced through violence by landlords of any religious persuasion: in Lee's example, Muslim zamindars.

Focusing on labour subordination allows us to think critically about the category Dalit and other similar categories from the past that have sought to group together Dalit jatis from across India—and thus implicitly partake in a comparative exercise. Simon Charsley, in a fascinating account of the emergence of the term 'untouchable', argues that, because 'untouchables' share no common culture or ethnic identity, the word has no analytically useful meaning. His important point that the concept of untouchability depends on a vague and ultimately Brahmanical concept (that is, ritual pollution) to categorically unite these jatis is well taken. But his nominalism ignores the fact that, regional differences notwithstanding, the existence of a distinct and segregated subpopulation that is made to perform degrading labour, and described as dirty and immoral by those who demand this labour,

is recognized in all Indian vernaculars, as well as by pan-Indian covering terms like *panchama*, *chandala*, and *avarna*. *Pace* Charsley, Dalits across India exist not on a continuum with others, but through exclusion that marks them spatially, socially, linguistically, and, not least through labour subordination, as uniquely different from others.

Thus, while my own work focused on the productive labour of Dalit agrarian servants in Madras, Lee's examines Chuhras, whose landlords demanded not only agrarian labour of them, but also the socially necessary work of sanitation. This form of work came to be understood as ideologically emblematic of them. For those who imagine caste to be derived from ritual scruples, like Gandhi, the 'Bhangi' represented the essence of untouchability, idealized as a selfless performer of the dirty work that benefits the social whole. The fact that sanitation labour can sometimes be their sole profession might seem to set Chuhras apart to some degree from the majority of Dalit agrarian labourers. But, as I have suggested, relegating certain categories of person to the performance of hard and difficult labour, securing this labour regime through violence, and producing elaborate justificatory discourses and rituals are common across regions, and are far better contenders for what differentiates Dalits from others than ideas of ritual purity. Moreover, most Dalit castes across India were (and many still are) required to perform customary or 'symbolic' labour in addition to agrarian labour. This 'customary' work (as dominant castes describe it euphemistically)—the removal of corpses or dead cattle, the playing of 'polluting' drums for festivals and rituals, and so on—forces Dalits to publicly affirm the truth of the impurity discourse that is meant to legitimize domination. With remarkable consistency across regional and even historical contexts (that is, from the nineteenth century to movements that have taken place in the last decade), one finds that Dalits who begin to mobilize against caste domination frequently inaugurate new movements with a refusal to engage in these pageants of subordination. An attention to labour subordination and the ideological mechanisms and repertoires of violence that secure it enables the kinds of fruitful comparison that Lee's article exemplifies. It also undermines the still lingering Indian exceptionalism that shapes much of the academic discourse on caste, inviting us to engage in transnational comparison and to recognize the relations between global capitalism and the localizing practices of labour control, which, across the globe entail hierarchically and differentially organizing labour to render some strata of it super-exploitable, whether through race, caste, or migrant status.

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