



## Tracing the cultural identity of Dalits in India through historical lens

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### Abstract

Caste and religion are widely acknowledged aspects of Indian society, yet they remain among the most under-discussed issues. Academics, students, social scientists, politicians, and lawyers in India have not sufficiently addressed the complexities of the caste system. This is in part due to the pervasive belief that caste represents an uncomfortable truth in Indian society.

Additionally, there is a hesitancy to engage in conversations about caste, often driven by the fear of backlash from both the higher and lower castes. Consequently, discussions regarding caste and caste-based ideologies have been relatively rare. Compounding this reluctance is the fact that caste in India is intricately intertwined with political practices, discouraging many scholars from exploring this subject for fear of political repercussions.

Remarkably, even educational institutions, which should ideally promote open-minded thinking and debate, tend to sideline the issue of caste in their academic agendas.

This paper serves as an exploration of the cultural identity of Dalits. It also introduces novel ideas regarding their experiences and struggles." If you have more text or specific details you'd like to include or change, please feel free to let me know.

**Keywords:** Muslim women, slum, socioeconomic, poverty

### Introduction

The Dalit lifestyle provides one reason why Dalits are denied cultural identity in India. Here's a look at whether joining would raise questions about the pan-Indian way of life. Atheism is a form of cultural hegemony and thus offers a cultural explanation of caste. It is also considered an aesthetic war in the context of the lifestyle war between the dominant tradition and the subordinate way of existence in India. In the long run, we furthermore provide a reason as to how the mode of survival has become a tool in the palms of the ruling aesthetic. In fact, we can have Marxist and Ambedkarite interpretation of the way of life. An attempt has been made to explore how the hegemony of each caste and caste discriminate in areas including society, politics, subculture, religion and law.

Even after 75 years of independence, Dalits in India continue to face pervasive discrimination and brutal treatment from higher castes. It's important to note that the caste system and social identity based on caste are unique to India and not found elsewhere. Indian society is rife with caste discrimination, as numerous studies have revealed. Despite various anti-caste discrimination laws and

provisions, violations of these norms remain commonplace. Even the United Nations has attempted to address the discrimination faced by Dalits in India. Regrettably, India is often found wanting in upholding existing laws against caste discrimination and human rights violations. Moreover, Dalits are visibly segregated in all aspects of life, forced to endure deplorable conditions, and subjected to various forms of abuse by higher-caste individuals. Violence against Dalits takes the form of inhumane atrocities, rapes, and murders. As a result, caste discrimination is considered the root cause of violence against Dalits and functions as a concealed form of apartheid in India.

Untouchability is closely tied to discrimination, with historical roots in Indian society as a social structure. It has socio-economic underpinnings, dividing society into distinct segments with varying social status. The practice of untouchability persists in both rural and urban areas, affecting all aspects of daily life. Dalits often live in segregated areas and slums, with separate wells or water tanks in many villages. They are barred from taking processions on public roads passing through higher-caste settlements and are denied access to temples. Dalits are

often relegated to menial and degrading work, facing abuse from those of higher castes.

Although India's constitution prohibits caste discrimination, enforcement is lacking, and the practice of untouchability contradicts constitutional provisions, such as Article 17, which abolishes untouchability. Laws exist to combat such social evils, yet discrimination against marginalized groups in India continues to persist, despite governmental efforts to empower them.

The principles of the Indian constitution, including equality, fraternity, liberty, and social justice, promise all citizens political visibility, equal status, freedom of speech and religion, and the right to choose their profession. However, research shows that while the nation has achieved political justice, social and economic justice remains a challenge. Caste and class-based inequalities persist in various fields, hindering Dalit liberation and overall development in India.

India is a diverse, multicultural society with many cultures and nationalities, even though it projects a dominant cultural tradition. Criticism can be directed at this dominant culture for not adequately representing tribal and other social segments. A vibrant Dalit culture exists in rural villages but often remains underrepresented in mass media and literature. There's a significant Dalit culture outside the national mainstream culture that remains unnoticed. The dominant Aryan culture is often considered India's primary culture, striving to assimilate various cultural elements.

Hinduism encompasses diverse cultures, with a prevalent cultural hegemony that can be predatory. To truly grasp Indian culture, one must look beyond the perspective of the upper castes and understand the experiences of suffering, castles, betrayal, and untouchability. Within Hinduism, cultural paradigms create a false dichotomy of 'pure' and 'impure' in aesthetics and poetics.

The dominant culture in India, perpetuated by Hinduism, is controlled by a minority that represents less than 15% of the total population. Language hegemony is also significant, as English speakers constitute less than 2% of the population, while over 50% live below the poverty line. For instance, 50% of Scheduled Castes (Dalits) work as agricultural laborers, rickshaw pullers, head load workers, construction laborers, and bid workers. However, their lives and experiences are seldom reflected in cultural texts produced in India.

Only 2.5 crore people in India regularly read newspapers, accounting for just 2.5% of the population. As a result, this small percentage shapes the cultural expressions of India, representing it primarily through industrialists, journalists, experts, bureaucrats, the judiciary, the film, entertainment, and sports industries, investors, bankers, educators, religious and trade union leaders, scientists, and more. Consequently, the art, customs, and lives of Scheduled Castes, tribal communities, and backward castes are rarely acknowledged in the dominant culture.

Culture often defines human existence, and by controlling culture, it becomes possible to maintain it.

Privileges granted to the higher castes have deeply rooted cultural norms, values, and ethics, forming the foundation of various religions. The essence of religion lies in the preservation and dissemination of a way of life. Consequently, when we examine the cultural and philosophical traditions of "Hinduism" or Brahminism, we

find that Hinduism, as a religious practice, does not inherently incorporate democratic principles. Its caste system has led to widespread illiteracy and poverty affecting 70% of the population. In such circumstances, it becomes challenging to ascertain whether Dalits and the oppressed have cultivated their own distinct culture.

Historical evidence suggests a political conspiracy by the upper castes. For instance, Jagjivan Ram was denied the position of Prime Minister due to his untouchable status. In a society where fundamental human rights are denied, aggression often becomes the prevailing cultural norm. If Hinduism were to uphold the fundamental tenets of democracy-equality, liberty, and fraternity-the dominant religion in India would not only fail to teach these democratic values but also create a cultural divide between caste Hindus and untouchables. This divide perpetuates the caste system, with untouchables considered impure and tribals as problematic, while the higher caste is viewed as cultured, deserving, and fit to rule.

While some argue that these divisions no longer exist in contemporary India, it is a misconception. The ongoing conflict in Kashmir serves as a glaring example of daily violence. India grapples with religious conflicts, linguistic divisions, and caste-based struggles. The story of Parashuram, who killed and cast his axe into the Arabian Sea, underpins the persistent Brahmin-Kshatriya conflict that endured even after India achieved independence.

The cultural narrative of Hinduism implies that in contemporary India, there is a lack of cultural avenues for expressing ordinary human experiences. The Brahmins, the primary proponents of this religion, have categorized people into two groups: those who can enjoy various aspects of life, including time, place, subjects, and individuals, and those who are considered pure and impure. Hegemony is deeply ingrained in this division between the natural and impure. The concept of time

Time is divided into natural and impure. a new top Minister is sworn in simplest after a Brahmin priest fixes an "auspicious" time. during the Rahu kala not, nothing ought to be executed. India became unbiased at the stroke of midnight

(Aug 14, 1947) due to the fact the Brahmin monks found no other "auspicious time" for such a historic event.

Tamil Nadu leader Minister M. G. Ramachandran's plane's arrival (he is getting back from treatment in the U.S.A.) in Madras was delayed (1987) by using 15 mins to keep away from the

Rahu kala. (1988: thirteen-14).

The Brahminical binaries create divisions in various aspects, separating spaces, objects, and even people into classes based on purity. This division is evident in the development of a city, where certain areas are deemed pure, while others like the Cheri, where Untouchables live, are seen as impure spaces. Similarly, the concept of food and even colors is divided into natural and impure categories in Indian culture, favoring the privileges of the Brahmins. For instance, vegetarianism is promoted as inherently pure, while meat-eating is considered impure.

This division extends beyond physical elements and time and also applies to people. Myths, stories and Puranas have propagated the belief that a Brahmin is sacred and sacred, granting them access to the sanctum sanctorum of the temple. Many temples in India still deny entry to Dalits and non-Hindus. For example, Jagjivan Ram was not allowed to unveil the statue of Sampurnanand because he was a Dalit, he was considered impure. Hinduism's culture, with its religious practices, myths, and Puranas, is deeply entrenched in the binary of purity and impurity. To highlight the hypocrisy of this categorization, one can observe the Ganga, considered a purifying river, with dead bodies floating in it.

As Hinduism continues to exert its influence on the political and economic spheres in India, a discernible relationship emerges between cultural production and power dynamics. The cultural acceptance of Brahmins as inherently pure legitimates their pervasive presence in religious, marital, birth, and death-related ceremonies. This cultural hegemony systematically diminishes the worth of Dalits to an extent where even a prosperous Dalit may perceive themselves as inferior to a less affluent Brahmin. The economic hardships endured by the untouchables in India directly result from this cultural dominance, as they grapple with the pervasive societal label of impurity imposed upon them. This complex interplay between culture, caste, and economic status underscores the profound impact of cultural hegemony on the struggles faced by Dalits in India.

As long as the notions of purity and pollution persist in society, they pose obstacles to the realization of human rights. Examining the cultural context in India, we observe how casteism influences practices related to marriage and dietary habits. The higher castes, through entrenched stratagems securing their privileged status, construct robust cultural boundaries in Indian society, impacting interpersonal relationships, including those of a marital nature. These cultural boundaries, rooted in caste dynamics, create significant impediments to the attainment of human rights. The entrenched influence of casteism in shaping cultural norms underscores the multifaceted challenges in realizing human rights within the intricate fabric of Indian society. It accentuates the pressing need for cultural transformation and societal evolution to foster a more inclusive and equitable environment that upholds the principles of human rights for all.

Scriptures and myths endorsed by Hinduism have perpetuated the subordination of women. Are there any cultural texts alive in society that promote the interests of women? The Manu smriti, for instance, explicitly states that women have no standing in Hindu society. Prior to marriage, they are under the guardianship of their parents; after marriage, under their husbands; and after becoming widows, under their children. Casteism, intolerance, biased Brahmins, and inequality are byproducts of the Indian dominant culture, perpetuated through mediums like TV serials such as the Ramayana, print media, and educational systems. This culture is an example of Sanskritization, whereas the Untouchables possess their unique cultural identity as worshippers of nature. They have a rich cultural heritage and can be acknowledged as pioneers of world civilization since they founded the Indus Valley Civilization.

There is a flexible response to life in rural India. No cultural hegemony or strategy of the dominant culture can truly eliminate multiculturalism in India, which opposes the overall influence of Brahmanical culture.

Even though the Aryan invasion is today over 3000 years old, the invaders could not completely damage our wonderful cultural identity. In each village, our people stick with their existence style, their very own language, their own shrine, their very own traditions, and their personal way of life. their very own temples priests and deities. Their dress, meals way of life, and way of life are even nowadays separate.

Hinduism and its major traditions are intertwined, creating a cultural aggression. The tribals have started protesting against this cultural attack by starting an anti-Aryan movement. The press and other media have become the guardians of the dominant culture. The cultural principles of right-wing political parties supporting the concept of Hindu Rashtra in India pose a significant threat to the multilingual, multi-religious and multi-ethnic fabric of Indian culture.

Culture serves as a dynamic stage where various regional religious practices come to light. A delve into Indian cultural history unveils the profound impact of the Aryan ideology, which, having secured special privileges through religion, systematically marginalized other religious practices like ancestor worship, denigrating them as forms of demon worship. A striking example lies in the traditional art forms of Karnataka, particularly Yakshagana, which was completely appropriated by the higher caste Hindus, diluting its original essence.

This cultural appropriation reverberates in the Dakshina Kannada district, significantly impacting the cultural expression of Yakshagana, originally a celebration of the protectors of Jain Tirthankaras. The narratives of myths and legends illustrate the inevitable appropriation of local dance dramas. Presently, Yakshagana has become a Brahmin-dominated prerogative, often harnessed to promote Hinduism while relegating non-Hindu SC/ST/BC communities to the periphery in this widely popular rural dance-drama.

The historical transformation of cultural expressions, driven by religious hegemony, has led to a situation where these art forms, once diverse and inclusive, have become instruments of exclusion and cultural dominance. The evolution of Yakshagana exemplifies the complex interplay between culture, caste, and religion, highlighting the enduring challenges faced by marginalized communities in preserving their cultural heritage against dominant forces. This cultural appropriation not only impacts the essence of these traditions but also perpetuates social hierarchies, underlining the need for cultural inclusivity and equitable representation in the rich tapestry of Indian heritage.

Culture is also mediated through media, and the author argues that upper-caste Hindus have effectively monopolized the media, creating a form of cultural Nazism. Through their newspapers and journals, they malign Muslims and Christians, tarnishing their image and creating prejudice against these egalitarian religions among the native population. Language plays an important role in

culture, with a dominant language having cultural hegemony over minor languages. This linguistic dominance is exemplified by how Hindi and the Devanagari script have replaced many native languages in India. This linguistic dominance in Indian society...

Though UP, Bihar, Haryana, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh had numerous languages like Ardha-Magadi, Khadi Boli, Mundari, Haryanvi, Braj Bhasha, Rajasthani, etc. all of them have been swallowed and the place became called "Hindi belt".

Caste plays a crucial role in shaping the cultural identity of any community. Stuart Hall defines cultural identity as a collective representation of the past, crafted through memories, dreams, and narratives. Dalits reclaim their caste identity by revisiting their history through memorials and narratives. The cultural politics of Brahminical dominance has suppressed the caste identity of Adivasis and lower-caste Hindus. In India, various caste identities that once included diverse communities have gradually been unified into a hierarchical caste pyramid. At its apex are the Brahmins, who consider themselves the most elevated, holy, and even equivalent to the Earth deities, the Bhudevi and Lord. In this hierarchical structure, Dalits face the pervasive caste identity upheld by Arya Brahminical culture, acting as a powerful tool against it.

The cultural stratification embedded in the Brahminical order has systematically subdued the caste identity of Adivasis and lower-caste Hindus. The caste pyramid, once a mosaic of diverse identities, has been gradually streamlined into a Brahminical framework, where the apex Brahmins regard themselves as the epitome of sanctity, even akin to deities. The Dalit caste identity stands as a potent resistance against the cultural hegemony of Arya Brahminical traditions in India. Through reclaiming their history and asserting their caste identity, Dalits challenge the entrenched cultural hierarchy, forging a path towards a more inclusive and egalitarian societal fabric.

Brahminical hegemony has not only assaulted the cultural identity of Dalits but has also rendered ineffective the political dimensions of caste-based identity among them by forcefully suppressing it. History is not just a record of past events; scholars like Stephen Greenblatt and Clifford Geertz view it as cultural material and representation, serving the interests of certain groups. In the realm of new historiography, history operates as a point of convergence between culture and politics, providing a framework to understand how history has been manipulated by the predominant culture in India.

Brahminical dominance, through cultural and political maneuvers, has not only attacked the cultural identity of Dalits but has also neutralized the political dimensions of caste-based identity among them. Understanding history in this light becomes crucial to decipher how the predominant culture in India has manipulated history to serve its interests. This perspective challenges the traditional narrative and unveils the complex interplay between culture, politics, and historical representation, offering a more nuanced understanding of the power dynamics at play in shaping the cultural and political landscape of India.

Myths are often regarded as carriers of a society's culture, but they are typically appropriated by dominant cultural groups. In the case of Hinduism, higher-caste Hindus have incorporated gods and mythical figures from non-Brahmin backgrounds into Brahminism to strengthen their own position. Hinduism, therefore, represents not only religious hegemony but also cultural dominance that has undermined the language, literature, folk art, religion, and history of Dalits. Cultural hegemony erases the cultural identity of Dalits.

The three works studied in this chapter are deeply political as they seek to advocate for Dalit causes. They highlight the issue of casteism and the plight of Dalits in India, aiming to raise awareness within Indian society and also on the global stage, including international organizations like the U.N. and the International Human Rights Commission. This effort is intended to initiate discussions and debates on the atrocities committed against Dalits at a global level, bringing the concerns of Dalits to the same level of international attention as the issues faced by Black communities worldwide. This approach seems to be the most effective way to garner global attention and recognition for the issues related to the culture, religion, and languages of Dalits. It also underscores the limitations of both Hinduism, with its focus on individual redemption, and Marxism, which often overlooks caste systems, in addressing the complex issues of Dalit upliftment.

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