

Who Gets To Be “Unlimited”? Feminism, Caste, And The Politics Of Limit-Breaking

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By [Sumit Baudh](#) Mar 2, 2026



Power does not always announce itself through explicit insult or open exclusion. Often, it works more quietly: through words that appear neutral, reasonable, and even progressive, while carrying the force of older hierarchies beneath their surface. This essay is concerned with such words, terms that operate as linguistic proxies, enabling domination to persist precisely because they are not immediately recognisable as injurious.

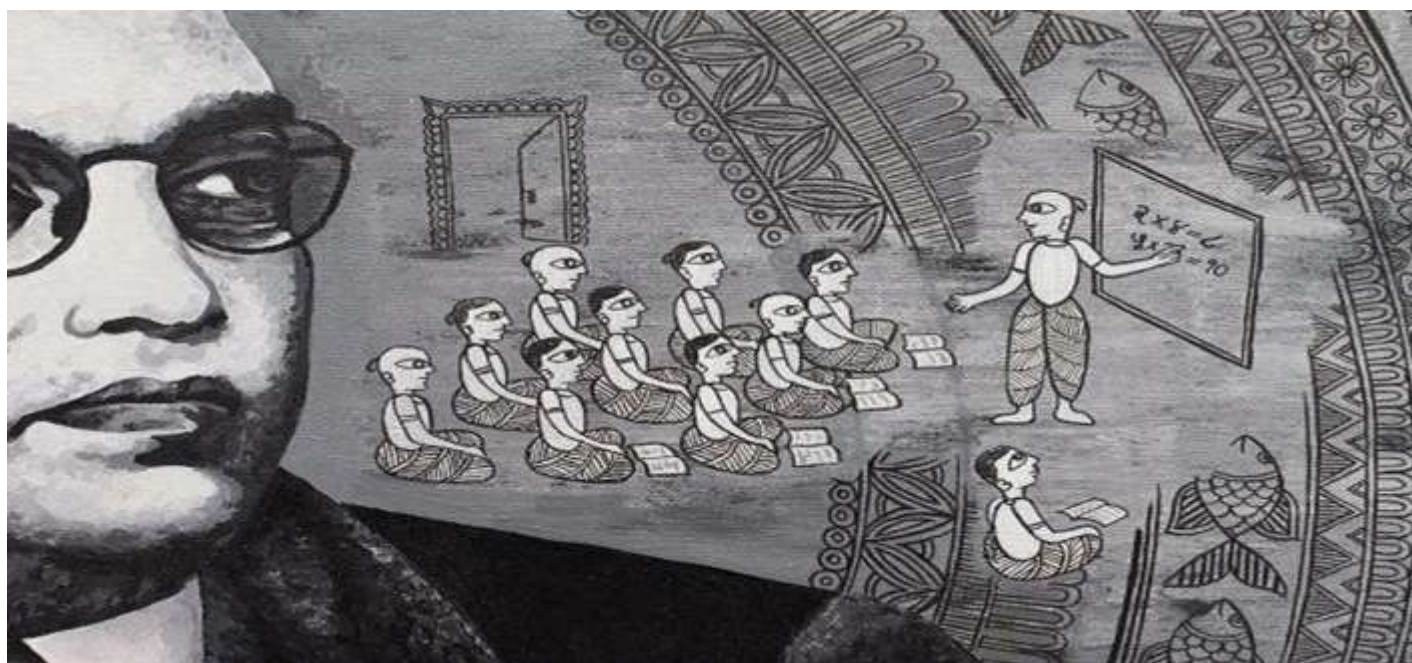
In contemporary Indian public life, English frequently performs this proxy function. Words that would sound unmistakably hierarchical or derogatory in Hindi, Urdu, or other vernaculars often circulate in English with a veneer of sophistication and neutrality. This is especially visible in feminist, legal, and elite institutional spaces, where English is not merely a medium of communication but a marker of ethical seriousness and cultural legitimacy.

Taking the word *limit* as a point of departure—and later, *bugger* from queer legal history—this essay reflects on how proxy language can mask caste-, gender-, and sexuality-based hierarchies even within emancipatory projects. Rather than critiquing feminism from outside, it asks how intersectional politics might extend their

attentiveness to language itself, and to the injuries that persist when hierarchy speaks softly rather than loudly.

“Limit” as Proxy: From Neutral Boundary to *Aukaat*

In everyday speech, the word *limit* appears deceptively straightforward. It suggests a boundary or reasonable constraint, something that is presumed to apply equally to all. In colloquial Hindi–English usage, however, *limit* often functions as a proxy for *aukaat*, a term that names one’s assigned social stature. When someone is told “*apni limit mein raho*,” what is being invoked is not merely behavioural restraint, but an injunction to remain within a socially sanctioned place.



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The difference between *limit* and *aukaat* is not semantic alone; it is political. *Aukaat* is immediately legible as hierarchical and derogatory. It announces inequality openly, leaving little ambiguity about who is being positioned as inferior. *Limit*, by contrast, sounds managerial, ethical, and even commonsensical. Its Englishness allows it to circulate as a neutral instruction rather than a social judgment, masking the asymmetry embedded within it.

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This masking is precisely what gives proxy language its force. By translating a caste- and gender-coded injunction into English, hierarchy does not disappear; it becomes harder to recognise. The command to “know one’s limit” is stripped of overt violence while retaining its disciplinary power, allowing it to travel across homes, workplaces, and institutions without provoking resistance.

It is worth noting that *limit* is not the first linguistic clarification of caste hierarchy into something more diffuse. The vernacular term *aukaat* itself already performs a translation: from explicit caste location (*jaat, jati*) into a more generalised notion of social stature. In this sense, *aukaat* abstracts hierarchy from inherited structure to individual position, allowing it to circulate across caste, class, gender, and age. The later shift to English terms such as *limit* does not initiate this abstraction but completes it, further sanitising hierarchy by rendering it managerial, neutral, and ostensibly universal.

Delayed Recognition and Ambiguous Authority: A Personal Encounter with “Limit”

The workings of proxy language become clearest not only in public discourse but in intimate spaces, where hierarchy is least expected and therefore least questioned. In a strained exchange with my elder brother, I was told curtly to “*apni limit mein raho.*” At the time, the phrase registered as a rebuke, but not immediately as an injury. It was only when I asked my brother what *limit* meant, and received the answer *aukaat*, that the force of the statement became clear.

The moment was marked by irony and ambiguity. Both of us are Dalit, which renders the invocation of *aukaat* particularly jarring. Yet the hierarchy being asserted did not rest on caste alone. Age, though nominal (we are less than two years apart), offered one axis of authority. Sexuality offered another. My being openly queer and publicly vocal had long been a source of disagreement between us. It was framed less as disagreement than as an insistence that I should be more discreet about my sexuality.

What *limit* enabled, in this moment, was a convergence of these registers—age, morality, sexuality, and propriety—without naming any of them explicitly. The injury was immediate and unmistakable. What was deferred was the broader analytic recognition of how such proxy language travels beyond intimate encounters. It would take much longer for me to connect this moment to an earlier, seemingly unrelated feminist narrative in which *limit* appeared unmarked, even emancipatory. This shows how easily hierarchy can remain inaudible, yet effective, when it does not speak in its own vernacular.

Unlimited Girls: Feminist Reclamation and Its Unexamined Residue

The documentary *Unlimited Girls* (dir. Paromita Vohra, 2002) offers a useful point of entry into how feminist discourse has reclaimed the language of “limits.” In a vernacular register, being described as “unlimited” can function as a disciplinary comment—an insinuation that a girl or woman has crossed the boundaries of acceptable conduct. The film’s title, and the wider feminist circulation of “unlimited” as a positive signifier, perform a deliberate inversion: a term used to mark transgression is reworked into a language of refusal and possibility.

There is no question that this reversal confronts patriarchal control over women’s behaviour, speech, and aspiration.

The difficulty posed by proxy language is not a lack of political commitment, but its capacity to evade political scrutiny.

As discussed earlier, limit often functions as a proxy for *aukaat*, invoking assigned social stature rather than a neutral boundary. When this proxy is reclaimed through English, the patriarchal injunction is reversed, but the caste-coded residue of limit/*aukaat* may remain unexamined. To be “unlimited” is to imagine oneself capable of exceeding imposed stature without catastrophic consequence.

This capacity is unevenly distributed. In a caste-stratified society, not all women can transgress assigned limits safely. The emancipatory figure of the “unlimited” feminist subject can therefore carry an implicit presumption of castelessness—understood here as relative insulation from caste sanctions. The point is not to fault feminist reclamation, but to ask what linguistic inheritances persist even in acts of resistance.

Proxy Language and Feminist Blind Spots

The difficulty posed by proxy language is not a lack of political commitment, but its capacity to evade political scrutiny. Because proxy terms appear neutral or ethical, they often escape the intersectional attentiveness feminist analysis otherwise demands. Hierarchy does not disappear; it becomes harder to hear.

This produces a feminist blind spot—not an absence of concern with caste, class, or sexuality, but a gap between intention and linguistic effect. English enables this gap by allowing historically saturated concepts to circulate without vernacular weight. Words such as *limit* can reproduce assumptions about stature and entitlement while remaining insulated from critique.

This is not a problem unique to feminism. It reflects a broader condition of elite discourse, in which English smooths over social antagonisms. For intersectional feminist projects, however, this smoothing poses a specific challenge: if power can speak politely, resistance must learn to listen more closely.

Bugger and Buggery: Queer Law, Language, and Respectability

A similar logic of proxy language operates in the word *bugger*, whose everyday casualness stands in contrast to its legal genealogy. Derived from *buggery*, the term is inseparable from the criminalisation of non-normative sexual acts under British law, exported through colonial governance to India. For generations, buggery laws authorised surveillance, prosecution, and imprisonment of queer lives. Yet *bugger* survives largely unscrutinised, circulating as mild slang or even affection.

In queer liberal discourse as well, caste often disappears through assertions of neutrality. In my own experience of assisting a well-known queer author on a project about rural poverty, caste was carefully documented among Dalit respondents but disavowed when the same question was directed at the author himself.

Unlike identity-based slurs such as *faggot*, which directly name and stigmatise queer subjects, *bugger* is rooted in the regulation of acts rather than persons. Its violence was institutional, enacted through law rather than interpersonal abuse, and its injury displaced into legal archives.

In elite English-speaking spaces in India, *bugger* can be uttered without discomfort, even as vernacular equivalents (*gaandu*) would be unthinkable. English thus launders sexual and juridical history while retaining idiomatic authority. Drawing on my long engagement with the decriminalisation of sodomy in India, this disjunction is striking: the law has been forced to reckon with its past, but language continues to carry it quietly.

What We Sanction, What We Forget

The contrast between *gaandu* and *bugger*, or *aukaat* and *limit*, reveals a deeper asymmetry in how harm is recognised and regulated. Language politics has become increasingly attentive to direct slurs, rightly treating them as ethical breaches.

Far less scrutinised are words whose violence was enacted through institutions rather than insults. Terms like *bugger* survive because their injury was completed by law rather

than speech. Proxy words like *limit* endure because they sound like advice rather than domination.

This tendency is not unique to feminism. In queer liberal discourse as well, caste often disappears through assertions of neutrality. In my own experience of assisting a well-known queer author on a project about rural poverty, caste was carefully documented among Dalit respondents but disavowed when the same question was directed at the author himself. The author's claim to having "no caste" sits uneasily alongside a clearly caste-coded surname that marks him as Brahmin. This posture enacted a paradoxical form of caste-blind moral superiority, positioning the author as casteless while he simultaneously adopted a caste-conscious approach toward his subjects of study. This produces an epistemic asymmetry, in which caste is intensely mapped in subordinated communities while the caste location of the knowledge producer remains unscrutinised.

We are more prepared to prohibit linguistic cruelty than to interrogate the everyday vocabulary that normalises hierarchy and criminalisation. Proxy language allows these histories to persist as common sense rather than as harm.

Listening for What Language Carries

This essay has not argued that feminist or queer projects fail when they employ words such as *limit* or *bugger*. Rather, it suggests that language itself demands intersectional attentiveness. Words travel with histories that do not always announce themselves, and English has a particular capacity to carry hierarchy quietly.

If intersectionality traces how power operates across gender, caste, sexuality, and class, it must also attend to vocabulary. This is not a call for linguistic policing, but for historical listening. Attending to proxy language strengthens emancipatory politics by recognising that some of the most enduring forms of power are those that no longer sound like power at all.

Sumit Baudh works at the intersections of caste, queerness, and law, often through lives and languages that refuse neat coherence.

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