

Cast(e) in Disgust: Is an Empathic Reading of Caste Possible?

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Abstract

This essay examines the question of empathy within the discourses of caste in India and argues that the presence of this deeply hierarchical system, which is premised on the idea of disgust, does not allow for the production of empathy or empathic political spaces. Locating itself in a particular case of caste violence and its counter discourse in the Una District of the state of Gujarat in western India, this essay examines the affectual politics of the presence of the animal and the animal-like in caste publics and the consequences that it has for the question of empathy.

Keywords

caste – animal bodies – empathy – disgust – leather – senses

1 Introduction

I was at Nellore on the 6th of April. I met ‘untouchables’ there and I prayed that day as I have done today that if I have to be reborn, I should be born an ‘untouchable’, so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings, and the affronts levelled at them, in order that I may endeavour to free myself and them from that miserable condition. I prayed that ... I may be born again amongst the ‘untouchables’ to bring my Hinduism to its fulfilment.

M. K. GANDHI¹

¹ M. K. Gandhi, speaking at the Suppressed Classes Conference in Ahmedabad: M. K. Gandhi, *The Removal of Untouchability*, ed. Bharatan Kumarappa (Ahmedabad: Navjivan Press, 1959),

The effect of caste on the ethics of the Hindus is simply deplorable. Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity.... There is charity, but it begins with the caste and ends with the caste. There is sympathy, but not for men of other castes.

DR B. R. AMBEDKAR²

In July 2016, in the Una District of Gujarat in western India, four Dalit men were accused by a mob of self-styled *gau-rakshaks* (cow-protectors) of killing a cow to sell its hide and carcass.³ They were publicly flogged and the video of this event was subsequently circulated widely through social and mainstream media. These four men belonged to the Sarvariya caste, which has traditionally been associated with leatherwork within the rigid rules of the Hindu caste system. This incident was one in a series of nation-wide assaults on Dalits and Muslims, especially those engaged in cattle trade, slaughtering, flaying and leatherwork, from the time that the majoritarian Hindu right-wing Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) came to power at the centre in 2014. The BJP, following its hard line on religious nationalism based on the idea of *Hindutva*, brought back the focus on the cow as a holy animal comparable to the figure of the life-giving

3. This speech was originally published in Gandhi's own newspaper, *Young India*, on May 4, 1921. Gandhi is one of India's most prominent figures in the anti-colonial movement. Espousing a philosophy of *ahimsa* (non-violence), Gandhi has also been an important voice in the debates over caste, untouchability, cow protection and Hinduism.

- 2 Dr B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, ed. S. Anand (Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2014), 259. Dr Ambedkar was, and continues to be, the most important anti-caste voice in modern India. He was Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution and is widely recognised as the 'father of the Indian Constitution.' As independent India's first law minister, Dr Ambedkar was central in instilling a spirit of social justice and equality in the Constitution and the law. Dr Ambedkar and Gandhi were engaged in many compelling political debates during their political careers, especially over the issue of caste. Some of these issues will be touched upon in this essay.
- 3 The caste system in India represents a hereditary graded hierarchy of people, objects and occupations. According to this discourse, the Hindus are broadly divided into four *varnas* (groups) and many castes and sub-castes within these *varnas* – Brahmin (the priests and purveyors of knowledges), Kshatriya (warriors), Vaishya (traders), and Shudra (those who perform physical labour). While the first three *varnas* are considered 'upper-castes' and relatively superior and pure, the Shudras are considered to be lower than the rest. Beyond these groups lie the Atishudra – the 'untouchables' who are supposed to perform menial tasks like cleaning, scavenging, leatherwork and midwifery, and are considered to be so polluted that they are outside the *varna* system. 'Dalit,' which means 'broken-down,' is the self-referential term adopted by most of the erstwhile untouchable community in India. While untouchability as a practice was officially abolished in 1955, it continues socially. Through political and literary movements, the term 'Dalit' has also been re-signified to connote a powerful being who stands up to or speaks to power.

and nourishing mother.⁴ Subsequently, the slaughter of cows, buffalos or oxen, and the sale of their meat, have been made legally punishable crimes in most parts of the country.⁵ Groups of self-styled cow-protectors, backed by Hindu nationalist groups, threaten anyone suspected of killing a cow with

- 4 BJP and its allies came to power with an overwhelming majority of 343 seats amongst the 545 total seats available in the central Parliament. The party follows a strict ideology of religious nationalism based on the philosophy of Hindutva. This was first proposed by V. D. Savarkar, an Indian Hindu political activist and lawyer active during the early to mid-twentieth century in the western state of Maharashtra. In his pamphlet, *Hindutva*, first published under the nom de plume 'Maratha' (signifying a dominant caste, regional, and linguistic identity in Maharashtra), Savarkar argues that 'Hinduism is only a derivative, a fraction, a part of Hindutva': see A. Maratha, *Hindutva* (Poona: Jagadhitechu Press, 1923), 3. Hindutva can be described as the essence of being Hindu, and according to Savarkar, has three elements: a common nation, race and civilisation. Importantly, Savarkar argued that those who are born in India, but whose religious land and affiliation lie elsewhere, cannot be a part of the common nation and civilisation of Hindustan (another name for India). This includes Muslims and Christians (100). The idea of Hindutva thus argues for a homogenous nation based on dominant Hindu cultural and religious identity. Importantly, in 1995, in a series of three judgements, the Supreme Court of India (SC), defined Hindutva as a 'way of life' and not as 'narrow fundamentalist Hindu religious bigotry': see *Manohar Joshi vs Nitin Bhaurao Patil & Anr*, 1996 AIR 796; *Dr Ramesh Yeshwant Prabhoo vs Shri Prabhakar Kashinath Kunte*, 1996 AIR 1113, and *Prof. Ramchandra G. Kapse vs Haribansh Ramakbal Singh*, 1996 AIR 817. In 2016 the SC declined to revise this verdict on appeal by lawyers and political activists who argued that the 'way of life' argument hurts the interests of the religious minorities in the country, who are then forced to follow dominant Hindu norms in their everyday lives. This is especially true in a context where Hindutva is explicitly used by BJP and its affiliates as synonymous with, and sometimes even superior to, the religious idea of Hinduism. The party also has a complex relationship with the lower-caste groups and Dalits because of its desire to assimilate them into the Hindu fold while retaining the caste system, at the same time as some sections of these groups oppose the Hindu philosophical and religious precepts on which the caste system is based: see Kancha Ilaiah, *Why I Am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy* (Calcutta: Samya, 2002). Scholars have often thus made a distinction between Hinduism and Hindutva, arguing that the latter is a more violent, hegemonic and political form of the former. For an elaboration of this debate see Jyotirmaya Sharma, *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2011). This distinction has also been challenged by those who argue that this binary lets Hinduism off too easily, and does not consider the fact that Hindutva relies on and propagates through the doctrine of Hinduism: see Brenda Cossman and Ratna Kapoor, *Secularism's Last Sigh?: Hindutva and the (Mis)Rule of Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Ronojoy Sen, *Legalizing Religion: The Indian Supreme Court and Secularism*, Policy Studies, 30 (Washington DC: East-West Center, 2007).
- 5 In May 2017, the Central Government issued rules under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (1960) which banned the sale of animals for slaughter across the country. It also changed the meaning of 'cattle' to include bulls, bullocks, steers, heifers and calves. The earlier bans which existed at the level of some federal states allowed bulls and bullocks to be slaughtered.

lynching, giving rise to multiple incidents of caste and religious violence, especially targeted towards already marginalised communities like the flayers, slaughterers and tanners.

Consequently, there have also been episodes of retaliation against the *gau-rakshaks* and the government's refusal to take concrete action against them. Several legal petitions were filed against the Central government by meat traders and leather-producer associations, challenging the ban on slaughter, citing loss of revenue.⁶ Petitions were also filed by concerned individuals and civil society groups against the lynching and intimidation.⁷ Some incidents of counter-violence against the *gau-rakshaks* were also reported. The most spectacular event of counter-discourse was triggered by the Una incident.

The four men who were publicly flogged had been employed by the village *sarpanch* (the head of the constitutionally elected village council) to dispose of the carcass of a cow that had died of natural causes. This incident led to massive Dalit protests in the state, as a part of which Dalit groups dumped cow carcasses outside municipalities and government offices, exhorting the upper-caste Hindus to 'bury their mother on their own'. Some groups also sent postcards to Amitabh Bacchhan, Gujarat's tourism ambassador, which read 'Badbu Gujarat Ki' (The Stench of Gujarat), a parody of the official slogan 'Khushbu Gujarat Ki' (The Fragrance of Gujarat), referencing the widespread malodour and rot these carcasses introduced into public discourse.⁸ This essay focuses on this incidence of carcass-dumping by Dalit groups in order to discuss the affectual and material significance of the affect of decay and the emotion of disgust which the carcass introduces into what can be called anaesthetised political discourse.⁹ This carcass, I argue, not only forces the

6 See Faisal Malik, 'Dealers File Petition in Supreme Court Challenging Beef Ban,' *Hindustan Times*, 22 August 2016, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/mumbai-news/dealers-file-petition-in-supreme-court-challenging-beef-ban/story-ocZafBOJoqrLd4NtcXdBL.html>. In July 2017, the SC ordered a three-month stay on this ban, forcing the government to reassess the situation. Subsequently in November 2017, the government rolled back this ban. The ban on sale and consumption of beef, however, remains.

7 Express Web Desk, 'Cow Vigilantism Unacceptable, Onus on States to Prevent Lynchings: Supreme Court,' *Indian Express*, 3 July 2018, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/lynchings-by-cow-vigilantes-supreme-court-states-5243938/>.

8 Scroll staff, 'Come Smell the Cow Carcasses, Dalits Tell Gujarat Tourism Face Amitabh Bachchan,' *Scroll*, 14 September 2016, <http://scroll.in/latest/816461/come-smell-the-cow-carcasses-dalits-tell-gujarat-tourism-face-amitabh-bachchan-in-1100-postcards>.

9 The idea of 'anaesthetic' refers to the Greek word *anaesthesia*, which means devoid of sensation. Here, it refers to the way in which the political discourse is considered to be a non-sensuous, non-affective space where the violence of caste is subsumed under innocuous ideas like division of labour. The carcass challenges this non-affective space through its malodour, which produces disgust and forces one to take notice of the violence of caste. The word

dominantly Hindu and upper-caste publics to come to terms with the violence of caste discourse but also, and importantly, makes use of disgust and malodour to overturn the power hierarchies inherent in the systems of caste. In effect, then, this carcass and the act of throwing it into public spaces highlights the impossibility of, and simultaneously the need for, empathy within this discourse.

The carcass produces a counter-narrative to the evocative wish of Gandhi, an upper-caste Vaishya, to be reborn as an untouchable, in order to fulfil his religious duty within Hinduism. The empathic rebirth that Gandhi desires, not in this life, but in some deferred time, is made null by the insistence of Dalit groups that upper-castes like him take stock of the dead cow in the present, while they are still considered to be ritually pure and superior. This powerful threat in fact closely follows Dr Ambedkar's formulation that sympathy can only exist for members of one's own caste and never for the others.¹⁰ The production of and sustained investment in empathy is a complex process, especially in diverse societies. This is made even more difficult in societies whose civilisational ethos is rooted in *not* empathising. Such a denial of empathy, via an institutional and structural logic, lies at the core of the caste societies in India. These societies, governed by the segregationist logic of caste and untouchability, constitute themselves by the very denial of the 'other' through mechanisms like purity-pollution or ascribing of lower status. As such, the emotion of disgust, and not empathy, marks the socio-political processes in these societies in relation to caste, and the maintenance of distance becomes their foundational logic.

It is this argument that this essay takes forward in the context of the relationship between the Hindu-right's argument for the purity of the cow and the nation and the Dalit challenge to this idea through and in the form of the malodorous carcass. Leather, given its intrinsic relationship with the rotting hides and carcasses of cattle, is an important element in this narrative. Leather is not just an odorous product, but within the Hindu caste system, is also considered

has been used extensively in this sense in the works of sensory studies scholars like David Howes and Constance Classen to refer to the ways in which our understanding of the world is structured through sensory modes of knowing and feeling: see *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, ed. David Howes (Oxford: Berg, 2005).

10 In her introduction to this collection of essays, Juanita Feros Ruys argues that 'empathy can produce affective states such as compassion and sympathy (which are concern for another's plight)'. It is in the context of this relationship between empathy and sympathy that we can perhaps understand Dr Ambedkar's usage of 'sympathy,' not as a uni-directional feeling of pity towards the other, but a process of shared understanding of each other's experiences arising from an empathic condition. This very condition, argues Dr Ambedkar, is missing between castes.

an object highly polluting for the ostensibly clean 'upper' castes. Constituted around death, the carcass complicates the idea of the cow as a sacred animal put forth by the Hindu right.

The essay is organised in two sections, the first of which examines the question of caste and the public sphere, foregrounding the concept of empathy and related ideas like civility and the sharing of experience. The second section analyses the Una incident in light of the long history of political mobilisations around the cow and the impossibility of arriving at an empathic understanding amongst the groups and individuals who are framed by the discourse of caste.

2 The Politics of Caste and Disgust

Caste is widely regarded as one of the defining principles of social, political, and economic life in large parts of Hindu-dominated India. It is a complex discourse of categorisation, value-ranking, and a careful balance of norms and rules. It derives its significance and power from the fact that it is an ascribed category – one is born into a caste and has very limited chances of altering this, even with a change in occupational and economic status.¹¹ Caste thus forms a systemic framework for an individual and a community. For those who benefit from this discourse, it represents a valuable system for management of labour, resources and status.

Within academic discourse, caste has variously been understood as a system, an arrangement of status groups, a discourse, and at times a co-operative division of labour. Caste has been discussed through its provenance in Hindu religious scriptures such as the **Dharmashashtras** (a genre of scriptures written in Sanskrit which form an important part of the corpus of Hindu religious texts), and in particular, Hindu socio-legal texts such as the **Manusmriti** (in terms of caste, the Manusmriti is the most important Dharmashashtra since

11 Sociologist M. N. Srinivas has argued that lower-caste groups often follow the idea of 'Sanskritisation' where they attempt to replicate social and cultural codes to achieve a higher social status. This idea has been critiqued for its assumption that lower-caste groups necessarily aspire to what is considered to be superior status by some: see M. N. Srinivas, 'A Note on Sanskritization and Westernization,' *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (1956): 481–96. Other studies have argued that it has in fact been quite difficult for these groups to gain higher ritual status, even with changes in economic, educational and political status, due to the ascribed and entrenched nature of caste. See, for instance, Owen Lynch, *The Politics of Untouchability: Social Mobility and Social Change in a City of India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969); and Ashwini Deshpande, *The Grammar of Caste: Economic Discrimination in Contemporary India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

it lays down the details of the social stratification of caste). Caste has also been looked at from the vantage of affirmative action policies, reservations and identity politics.¹² Perhaps the most important understanding of caste has come through the anti-caste movements which have made forceful arguments against inequality, discrimination and power hierarchies, in favour of an egalitarian and democratic socio-political ethic.

Accordingly, there are various ways in which caste has been defined, although most definitions retain some of the basic characteristics – endogamy, restrictions on commensality between members of different castes, hierarchical grading of castes, the possibility of pollution caused by defiled objects and people, and a system of traditional and hierarchical occupations.¹³ These are based on the fundamental idea that some people, objects, and occupations are lower and thus impure. Their touch, sight, sounds and odours contain the capacity to pollute those who are ranked higher. This pollution can arise from people and objects or from phenomena like death and childbirth. These ideas of purity and pollution span a vast range of everyday life situations and govern both the public and private spheres in matters of commensality, food habits and choices, sartorial practices, kinship and marriage, occupational choices, hygiene and sanitation, and even intimate spaces such as friendships and sexual relationships.

Caste has been understood broadly through two conceptual frameworks. The first derives from the German sociologist Max Weber's idea of status groups, where caste is considered as a hierarchically arranged order of closed status groups. Alternatively, the cultural understanding of caste views it as a discourse derived either from religious sources or the dominant cultural context of a society. Ideas such as purity and pollution, segregation and occupational fixity are thus attributed to religious or scriptural ideology. Celestine Bogle and Louis Dumont are the most significant proponents of this approach.¹⁴ Due to its reliance on cultural and religious sources, this latter view also proposes

12 In the context of India, 'reservations' refers to the state's policy of reserving seats in higher education institutions as well as government jobs for members of the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). 'Scheduled Castes' is the government category used to denote people who belong to the formerly untouchable castes. The policy of reservations was put in place to compensate for the disadvantages faced by these communities and provide them with a level playing field in terms of education and employment.

13 Edmund Leach, 'Introduction,' in *Aspects of Caste in South India, Ceylon and North-West Pakistan*, ed. Edmund Leach (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 1–10 (2–3); André Béteille, 'Caste: Pattern of Status Groups,' *Seminar* 70 (1965): 14–16; and G. S. Ghurye, *Caste and Race in India* (Mumbai: Popular Prakashan Private Limited, 2008), 1–30.

14 Celestine Bogle, 'The Essence and Reality of the Caste System,' in *Social Stratification*, ed. Dipankar Gupta (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 64–73; and Louis Dumont,

caste as a specific feature of Hindu society. However, leatherwork is closely associated with Muslims in India, mainly due to the community's predominance in the slaughter trade. While scripturally Islam does not support the idea of caste-based segregation, Muslim societies in India have been known to practise caste. For a theoretical understanding of the ideas of purity, pollution and occupational segregation within caste, this essay relies on the framework proposed by Bougle and Dumont.

Bougle lists three tendencies that characterise the spirit of caste – reciprocal repulsion, hierarchy and hereditary specialisation. Bougle argues that 'this spirit of caste gives rise to horror of misalliance, fear of impure contacts and repulsion for all those who are unrelated'.¹⁵ Following Bougle, Dumont bases the theoretical understanding of caste on three sets of overlapping binaries – pure and impure, religious authority and secular authority, and the Brahmin and the untouchable. The Brahmin's purity stands in direct opposition to the impurity of the untouchable, and this opposition provides the ideological basis for caste. Dumont argues that the basis of separation between castes, especially from the untouchables, lies not just in impurity, but in notions such as hygiene, which are used as facades to talk about impurity. This impurity derives, for instance, from the 'nauseating smell of the skins that they are accustomed to treat'.¹⁶ This in turn creates a specialisation of impure tasks which 'leads to the attribution of a massive and permanent impurity to some categories of people'.¹⁷ In this system, not only bodies but also objects are ranked by their pure or polluted status. Dumont argues that 'objects are distinguished by the greater or lesser ease of their purification – a bronze vessel is merely cleaned, an earthenware one replaced – and their relative richness – silk is purer than cotton, gold than silver, than bronze, than copper'.¹⁸ Objects are not only polluted by contact but also by their utility and the person using them.¹⁹

The issue of empathy within the caste discourse thus has to navigate this difficult terrain marked by disempathy, distrust and, most importantly, disgust. Empathy, as Carolyn Pedwell argues, is 'the affective act of seeing from another's perspective and imaginatively experiencing her thoughts, emotions

Homo hierarchicus: An Essay on the Caste System, trans. Mark Sainsbury (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

15 Bougle, 'The Essence and Reality of the Caste System,' 9.

16 Dumont, *Homo hierarchicus*, 47.

17 Dumont, *Homo hierarchicus*, 47.

18 Dumont, *Homo hierarchicus*, 49.

19 Dumont, *Homo hierarchicus*, 50.

and predicaments'.²⁰ An empathic relationship thus requires not only a degree of discursivity with the other, but also a consideration of the other as a person or a being worthy of one's affective and cognitive attention, even if it is pity. Amy Coplan, in her elaboration on some of the definitions and concepts surrounding empathy, states that key to understanding another's state is to 'imagine ourselves in the other's circumstances'.²¹ It is here that the idea of empathy becomes complicated, because it assumes that even in a hierarchical relationship the dominant *wants to* and *is able to* imagine themselves as the other, without necessarily having recourse to or even being interested in the kind of experiences, physical conditions and affective states that the latter might have undergone. In contexts such as caste, which are produced through power, this will to know and experience the other is not just absent, but systematically curtailed and avoided. The serious injunctions against inter-caste marriage, sexual and intimate relationships, and even prohibitions on sharing food and water, especially with the lower-castes and untouchables, underline the idea that the norms of caste are fundamentally set against any sort of affective, emotional or material sharing or understanding.

Even when empathy can be exercised, it has been seriously questioned with regard to its motives, outcomes and ethics. Pedwell, for instance, argues that empathy in unequal relationships can involve 'problematic appropriations or projections on the part of the "privileged" subjects', given that they may already be involved in the production of this inequality.²² This problem of appropriation has been an important element in the debates over authorial voice in the field of Dalit literature, writing and politics, where similar apprehensions have been raised regarding the status of both the Dalit and non-Dalit interlocutors. Gopal Guru's extremely important intervention in this regard, in the form of his essay, 'Dalit Women Talk Differently', locates Dalit women's voice and political agency as markedly different from that of both Dalit men and the upper-caste/class-dominated women's movement in India. Guru argues that 'the less powerful members of a society have a more encompassing view of their social reality than others because their disadvantaged position grants

20 Carolyn Pedwell, 'De-colonising Empathy: Thinking Affect Transnationally,' *Samyukta: A Journal of Women's Studies*, Special Issue: 'Decolonizing Theories of the Emotions,' ed. S. Gunew, 16, no. 1 (2016): 27–49 (5). I am using here a copy of the essay available online as a PDF, <https://www.scribd.com/document/363015349/De-colonising-Empathy-Thinking-Affect-Tr>, which is paginated 1–32. Page references hereafter refer to this version.

21 Amy Coplan, 'Understanding Empathy: Its Features and Effects,' in *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3–18 (10, emphasis in the original).

22 Pedwell, 'De-colonising Empathy,' 6–7.

them a certain epistemic privilege over the others.²³ The appropriation of this epistemically invested voice by an empathetic one, in Guru's estimation, will actually constitute a violence of another order. The issues that Guru and Pedwell raise highlight the complex problems of being able to think, write and produce solidarities with the other without either overpowering her, and/or appearing too distant.

In a response to Guru's essay, feminist scholar Sharmila Rege argues that by privileging experiences in this fashion, there now exist 'multiple/pluralist feminist standpoints', within which caste becomes the burden of only the Dalit woman, since only she has the epistemological position necessary to understand and oppose caste norms.²⁴ Rege calls for shifting instead to a 'Dalit-feminist standpoint' where both the Dalit women's movement and the upper-caste/class women's movement engage in a dialogic manner.²⁵ This argument is closely mirrored by Pedwell when she borrows Megan Boler's suggestion of working towards an empathetic engagement which 'radically shifts [one's] self-reflexive understandings of power relations' and enables one 'to recognize oneself as implicated in the social forces that create the climate of obstacles the other must confront',²⁶ especially in contexts of post-coloniality.

In asking for dialogic engagement and self-reflexivity, both Rege and Pedwell are setting a powerful agenda for the working of empathy in contexts of entrenched powers and hierarchies. It is precisely these qualities which I argue are missing from the engagement between the Dalits and the upper-castes, mainly because of the ways in which the caste discourse exercises its power. There is very limited context for the two groups to find a common ground in which to discover empathy, especially when deeply contested issues like the status of the cow are at stake. It is here that the counter-discourse provided by the Una incident assumes importance. William Ian Miller, writing about the emotion of disgust, argues that emotions such as disgust are deeply political in nature because they 'work to hierarchize our political order'.²⁷ In Una, the Dalit groups were able to turn around the emotion of disgust, which is

23 Gopal Guru, 'Dalit Women Talk Differently,' *Economic and Political Weekly* 30, nos. 41–42 (1995): 2548–50 (2549).

24 Sharmila Rege, 'Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of "Difference" and Towards a Dalit-Feminist Standpoint Position,' *Economic and Political Weekly* 33, no. 44 (1998): WS 39–WS 46 (WS 39).

25 Rege, 'Dalit Women,' WS 39, 45.

26 Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (London: Routledge, 1999), 157, 166, cited in Pedwell, 'De-colonising Empathy,' 7.

27 William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 8.

usually targeted at them, into a powerful challenge to the upper-castes, exhorting them to participate in an experience that is disgusting and repulsive: that is, to engage in a dialogue on the terms set by the marginalised. In doing so, the Dalits were not just eschewing any hope for empathy from the upper-castes, but also denying them the possibility of this. It is in this denial of dialogue and empathy that Una's most significant political impulse lies – which is also the ground of the debate between Dr Ambedkar and Gandhi with which this essay began.

One of the most important aspects of this debate on the issue of caste was to determine how to end this system of oppression. Gandhi believed that it was possible for the upper-caste Hindus to empathise with the abhorrent conditions imposed on the untouchables due to the practice of untouchability, and that the solution thus lay in their change of heart and abolition of this practice. Caste, as a system itself, not only had to remain but was, in Gandhi's thought, crucial to the sustainability and perpetuation of Hindu religion and society. Contrary to this position, Ambedkar argued for the radical annihilation of caste itself, since one could not expect the upper-castes to give up a practice that provided them with immense power simply out of empathy for the other, who is also the one they oppress.²⁸ In an interesting recent intervention into the debate between caste and democratic practice, Suryakant Waghmore examines the way in which Dalit groups demand that civility be part of the political process in order to make it more democratic and egalitarian.²⁹ Waghmore, taking forward Norbert Elias's idea of 'the civilising process' in the context of 'the caste habitus of postcolonial India', argues that because of the deep-rooted presence of caste, democracy in India has taken root without the accompanying principle of civility.³⁰ Routine instances of caste violence indicate that upper-caste groups have not been able to extend the ideal of civil democracy to lower-castes. In fact, Waghmore argues, it is the lower-caste groups who, through their involvement in anti-caste and democratic movements, are extending the contours of civility in India.³¹

Waghmore is right in pointing out that there has been a lack of civility in the workings of the public sphere in India, predominantly due to the presence of the deeply hierarchised norms and practices of caste. However, when considered in relation to historical fact and political opinion, such as that of

28 Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, 290.

29 Suryakant Waghmore, *Civility Against Caste: Dalit Politics and Citizenship in Western India* (New Delhi: SAGE, 2013).

30 Waghmore, *Civility Against Caste*, xx.

31 Waghmore, *Civility Against Caste*, xxi–xxii.

Ambedkar on the experiences of caste, it is obvious that civility or even an appeal to civility is not possible without an annihilation of caste itself. The very basis of civility lies in being able to consider the other as a full human being who is entitled to respect and dignity, not only in the absolute sense but, more importantly, as part of a dialogic process. The precursor to this civility, thus, is empathy – being able to empathise across difference and diversity. The very idea of caste denies this possibility since caste precludes not just equality, but any form of non-hierarchical dialogic interaction. It is here that the throwing of the carcass into public spaces in Una assumes significance. This act, I argue, plays on the disgust pervasive within the public space, and instead of demanding empathy, demands a reversal of caste power at the very least, and its annihilation at best.

The next section will examine the incidents of Una in the light of the above debates, and also crucially locate it within the discourse of the emotion of disgust and the sensory politics of malodours.

3 The Impossibility of Empathy

It is not incidental that all those who have been targeted by the *gau-rakshaks* have been involved in some way with the death of the cow. Consuming beef as food, working with the hide, bones or other body parts of the cow, disposal of the cow carcass, and even selling off an old cow, all reference the end of the use-value of the cow as a nurturing and life-giving being.³² The production of leather, which the Savariya family in Una was engaged in, fundamentally relies on the death of the cow, on its carcass.³³ Leather production is often

32 It is important to note that all these activities are carried out by some of the most marginalised segments within the Dalit and Muslim communities, with the possible exception of consuming beef, which is eaten by a much larger cross-section of people from all religious and regional diversities. However, even then, because beef, or 'buff' (meat from buffalo), is much cheaper than other meats, it almost exclusively forms the staple diet for large parts of the Dalit communities, especially those who have not aligned themselves with Hinduism. For a deeper analysis of the relationship between caste and consumption of beef, see Shraddha Chigateri, "'Glory to the Cow: Cultural Difference and Social Justice in the Food Hierarchy in India,' *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 31, no. 1 (2008): 10–35.

33 In terms of Indian leather production, the most important resource is the buffalo since it is found in large numbers on the subcontinent. However, in the socio-religious perception of leather production, the slaughter of cows occupies a disproportionately large space. This is primarily because of the purported significance of the cow in Hindutva-dominated contexts.

characterised as a smelly, disgusting process because of the rotting nature of hides, and the presence of organic matter like blood, fat and hair.³⁴ In India, this disgust and malodour acquire an enhanced affect due to the association of bodily matter and death with caste pollution. As discussed earlier, not only does caste attach itself to the bodies of those born into it, it is also a classification of objects and spaces according to norms of purity and pollution. The polluted status of the carcass, the defilement produced by the stench of organic matter, and the status of leather itself as an object capable of polluting the caste-Hindu spaces and people, together map onto the body of the leatherworker to mark her as a threat to the purity of the caste system as a whole.³⁵

It is important to note that products of the cow's live body, such as milk, dung and urine, are considered purificatory, while at the same time its blood and flesh are impure. The same object or body, then, can be the source of both pure and impure products. The difference lies in the provenance and use-value of these products. While blood and flesh rise out of death, milk and ghee (clarified butter) from the live cow are invested with nutritive capacities. The death of the cow, whether physical or in terms of its use-value, thus poses a serious question to the Hindu-right idea of cow as sacred because of its life-giving properties, and it remains a question that the Hindu right has been unable to address so far, except by resorting to violence against communities that deal with the dead cow.

While ancient Hindu religious scriptures such as the Vedas and normative texts such as the Manusmriti provide a somewhat special status to the cow, it is only around the Mughal period that the politicisation surrounding the question of the cow begins.³⁶ Contestations around the sacred status

34 See Joseph D. Hankins, *Working Skin: Making Leather, Making a Multicultural Japan* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014), for a nuanced analysis of how leatherworkers in Japan are also stigmatised due to their association with leather. Ellen Hostetter argues that animal bodies and their products are often regarded with disgust since these 'remind us of our animality': see Ellen Hostetter, 'The Emotions of Racialization: Examining the Intersection of Emotion, Race, and Landscape through Public Housing in the United States,' *GeoJournal* 75 (2010): 283–98 (288).

35 Leather objects such as shoes, belts, and purses are often banned from Hindu temples and sacred spaces because of their provenance in death. It is also a cultural norm in many parts of and communities in India to remove footwear before entering houses, kitchens and religious spaces. While often it is argued that this is done for reasons of hygiene, the association of leather footwear with caste pollution often undergirds these notions of sanitation. Further, according to the mythological origins of the *varna* system, the Shudras were born from the feet of Brahma (the primordial man), while Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas were born from the head, arms and thighs respectively.

36 D. N. Jha, *The Myth of the Holy Cow* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2015), 18. According to Jha (18), a 'restricted ban' on cow-slaughter was imposed during the reigns of emperors Babur,

of the cow heighten during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, especially in parts of northern India, with the increasing polarisation between the Hindus and the Muslims. The movement for cow protection began with the Sikh Kuka or Namdhari sect in Punjab around 1870 and was later strengthened by the foundation of the first **Gau-rakshini Sabha** (roughly translated as the 'Committee for the Protection of the Cow') in 1882.³⁷

The figure of the *gau-mata*, the cow as the mother, was employed quite rigorously to foster a sense of Hindu community and nation through the Cow Protection Movement and the *gau-rakshini* sabhas. The cow protection movement particularly constructed the Muslim as its other, targeting the Muslim practice of ritual slaughter and gustatory preference for meat, including beef. The politics of the cow resulted in deeply antagonistic relations between not just Hindus and Muslims but also, and significantly for this essay, between Hindus and Dalits like the leatherworking groups who routinely work with cow carcasses and also consume the relatively cheap and readily available beef.³⁸ Sandra Freitag points out how in different places, Muslims and the Chamar were alternatively the antagonists of the Cow Protection Movement.³⁹

Akbar, Jahangir, and Aurangzeb (roughly corresponding to the period 1526–1707 CE), 'to accommodate Jaina or Brahmanical sensibilities and veneration of the cow.' Jha also argues that there could have been serious injunctions against the killing of a cow belonging to the Brahmin, but other than that, at least in the Vedic period, 'the cow was neither sacred nor unslayable' (38).

37 Charu Gupta, "The Icon of Mother in Late Colonial North India: "Bharat Mata," "Matri Bhasha" and "Gau Mata," *Economic and Political Weekly* 36, no. 45 (2001): 4291–99.

38 The Cow Protection Movement has been analysed in detail by various scholars. Gupta, 'The Icon of Mother,' looks at the way that the nation was associated with feminine symbols of Bharat Mata, *Matri-Bhatic* (mother tongue) and *gau-mata* by the nationalist movement in the twentieth century. Chigateri, on the other hand, examines the implications of the sacrality of the cow for the Dalit groups in the country in "Glory to the Cow." Peter Robb provides an analysis of the politics around the cow with regard to the British intervention in the social and political scenario in India in "The Challenge of *Gau Mata*: British Policy and Religious Change in India, 1880–1916," *Modern Asian Studies* 20, no. 2 (1986): 285–319. Anand A. Yang focuses on instances of 'cow-related' killings in the nineteenth century in the context of the complicated dynamics between the Arya Samaj, Hindu and Muslim communities in 'Sacred Symbol and Sacred Space in Rural India: Community Mobilization in the "Anti-Cow Killing" Riot of 1893,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22, no. 4 (1980): 576–96.

39 The word 'Chamar,' derived from the Sanskrit word for skin, *chrm*, denotes those who work with leather. It has been considered derogatory because of its use within the traditional understanding and vocabulary of caste. In some contexts, however, the term has been re-signified to connote a positive political charge. For instance, the recent phenomenon of 'Chamar Pop' – a musical subculture amongst young Chamars in Punjab – posits 'Chamar' as a strong self-referential identity. On the other hand, in parts of Uttar Pradesh,

For instance, in Gorarkhpur, where antagonising higher-class Muslims was thought inadvisable, the target became the Chamar, 'the cow killers', who brought cows for sacrifice in the Muslim household.⁴⁰

Charu Gupta, quoting the anthropologist Peter van der Veer, has noted that the linking of Hindu love for the cow with its protection has deep roots in Brahminic rituals. In these, the body of the cow was invested with the divine and itself became a proto-nation.⁴¹ The Hindu men of this nation who had grown weak from lack of milk and ghee thus needed their mother, especially given the perceived threat of the Muslim man and the loss of autonomy under British colonialism.⁴² The mapping of the religious discourse around the cow onto the body of the nation meant that the slaughter and consumption of the cow was posited as a crime against the nation.

One of the most vociferous advocates against slaughter and beef consumption was Gandhi. While upholding the Hindu majoritarian notion of the sacrality of the cow, Gandhi however argued for the protection of the cow due to its importance for the rural agrarian economy. Further, while he condemned slaughter, for him the naturally dead cow had to be effectively utilised for its hide, and he indicated that he would not have an objection to wearing such shoes (*murdhari joota*), even inside the house or while eating food.⁴³ This, in Gandhi's estimation, would eliminate the need for *Harijans* to consume fallen meat, thus resolving the disgust felt towards this practice.⁴⁴

Gandhi's quick resolution and the collation of the questions of slaughter, beef-eating, the practice of untouchability and the affective register of disgust overlook immensely complicated debates inherent within these practices and ideas. Most importantly, however, Gandhi assumed that the affective value of the dead cow would be the same as that of the live one, if only the former could be made economically profitable. Similar arguments were made in the recent

in Northern India, the term 'Jatav' is used for self-identification by the community, and so where possible, the term 'Jatav' has been used here instead of 'Chamar'. Accordingly, the use of the term 'Chamar' in this essay is cognisant of these complexities and debates and is used in consonance with the larger academic literature on the community.

40 Sandra B. Freitag, 'Sacred Symbol as Mobilizing Ideology: The North Indian Search for a "Hindu" Community,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22, no. 4 (1980): 597–625 (622).

41 Gupta, 'The Icon of Mother,' 4295.

42 Gupta, 'The Icon of Mother,' 4296.

43 Mohandas Gandhi, 'Gauraksha ki Shartein,' in *Gau-seva ki Vichardhara*, ed. R. K. Bajaj (Varanasi: Akhil Bhartiye Sarv Seva Sangh Prakashan, 1956), 14, 20.

44 Gandhi, 'Gauraksha ki Shartein,' 20. 'Harijans,' which literally means 'the people of God,' is the term Gandhi used for the untouchable community. This term has been opposed by various Dalit groups as being patronising and ignoring the realities of caste.

debates over cow-related lynchings. Tanuja Kothiyal, a historian, for instance, argues that because the present-day *gau-rakshaks* are alienated from the interdependent cattle exchange economy of traders, skimmers and butchers, the *gau-rakshaks* effectively remove cattle from their material context and regard them only as sacred objects.⁴⁵ In a similar vein, anthropologist Radhika Govindrajan argues that 'material economies that involve cattle – whether dairy, beef, or leather – have always been characterised by service, labor, love and violence'.⁴⁶

What these arguments do not consider, however, is the fact that the butcher and the skinner were never considered to be in the same material or affective economies as the cattle-rearer, farmer, trader or protector, because of the crucial barrier of caste pollution produced through death and the attendant disgust which follows. The affective states of service, labour and love for the cow constitute a completely different register from the disgust that violence towards it produces – even more so the disgust produced by the cow carcass. Thus, while the cattle trader and skinner may have existed in the same material economy, they were never affectively equal. Ambedkar, who understood this emotion of disgust against the untouchable body, argued in a much more nuanced fashion:

If the Untouchables have been living on carrion it is not because they like it. They eat carrion, because there is nothing else on which they can live.... If the Untouchables skin and carry the dead animals of the Hindus, it is because the Untouchables have no choice.⁴⁷

This idea at the heart of the caste discourse, that some bodies are inherently inferior and dirty, is what prevents the espousal of empathy and facilitates the continuation of the affectual economy of disgust, turning some into what Guru has called 'the walking carrion'.⁴⁸ For the caste-dominated Hindu discourse, the invocation of empathy for the caste other, in this case the leatherworker,

45 Tanuja Kothiyal, 'History Teaches Us Why Today's Self-Styled Gau-Rakshaks Will Harm the Cattle-Rearing Economy,' *Scroll*, 7 April 2017, <https://scroll.in/article/833809/history-tells-us-why-todays-self-styled-gau-rakshaks-will-harm-the-cattle-rearing-economy>.

46 Radhika Govindrajan, 'How to Milk a Cow in India: Reclaiming Gau-Seva from Gau-Rakshaks,' *The Wire*, 1 May 2017, <https://thewire.in/economy/cow-beef-gau-rakshak>, emphasis in the original.

47 Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches*, vol. 5, comp. and ed. Vasant Moon (New Delhi: Dr Ambedkar Foundation, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2014), 256–57.

48 Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukai, *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), 207.

is constantly marred by the affectual markers of death wherein the origins of leather lie. It is exactly this affectual economy which was reversed when the carcasses were thrown into public spaces in Una. The disgusting, polluted carcass was removed from the body of the Dalit and cast into the public where it lay unclaimed.

The carcass is an important stage in the life of an animal since the shift from life to death marks a shift in the kinds of affects the body produces.⁴⁹ Death signifies not just the termination of life, but, within discourses like that of caste, a moment of great ritual pollution. This sense of pollution is transient for most of the immediate kin of the deceased and can be remedied through ritual practices. However, within the rules of caste, death also produces a permanent and generational sense of pollution for those lower-castes groups such as Doms (in the case of humans) and Chamars (in the case of animals) whose occupations deal with dead bodies in terms of ritual burial/cremation and the disposal of remains. By refusing to dispose of rotting cattle carcasses, the lower-caste leatherworking groups strongly invoked this fear of the capacity of death to pollute. The slogan 'Badbu Gujarat Ki' (The Stench of Gujarat) thus hints at a deeper affectual politics of caste and bodies, beyond simply indicating the physical discomfort caused by the presence of the rotting carcasses in the public. The Una protests represent this fundamentally different affectual engagement with the political and the public. The object of the Una protests – the carcass of the cow – is significant for the simple reason that it filled the public with its stench. By marking the public discourse with the stench of this carcass, the Dalit protestors in Una effectively marked this public with caste itself.

The carcass also turned the leatherworkers from potential recipients of empathy into powerful and disruptive political subjects. The carcass challenges the idea of caste purity of the public space through the pollution and stench of death and thereby challenges the unmitigated consumption of the commodity of leather by making evident the sensuous and affective moorings of a leatherwork that stinks.

49 Miller, in his authoritative work on disgust, argues: 'Death thus horrifies and disgusts not just because it smells revoltingly bad, but because it is not an end to the process of living but part of a cycle of eternal recurrence. The having lived and the living unite to make up the organic world of generative rot – rank, smelling, and upsetting to the touch' (Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, 40).

4 Conclusions

What does the Una protest mean, then, for our understanding of empathy within the caste discourse? The inclusion of the animal, the animal-like, and the animal carcass complicates the production of an empathic understanding within human ideas of politics. Can empathy be the dominant category of organising relationships when subjects are constituted as so unlike-human? Ellen Hostetter, writing about the role of the emotion of disgust in constructing race relations in the United States, perceptively argues that ‘disgust creates hierarchical categories of a pure “us” and a rejected, less-than-human “them” through the discourses of filth and decay’.⁵⁰ In giving up their intimate relationship with animals, the Dalit groups in Una marked their distance from this animality – a thing that had traditionally been imposed upon them. But they did not do so on the grounds of a Gandhi-like demand of empathy from the upper-castes. In fact, by announcing ‘Your mother, you bury her’, the Dalit groups placed the burden of empathy on the latter – empathy which now had to transcend the death of this beloved animal. This moment is thus significantly different from the earlier public disavowals of these occupations, made in a bid for social mobility by the economically and socially dominant Jatavs through the 1930s and 1940s in Uttar Pradesh. The difference with the current politics of the leatherworking castes lies precisely in the possibility of politics that the staunch refusal to continue demeaning occupations and to claim upward social mobility brings to the discourse of caste. Significantly, the demand this time includes not just giving up leatherwork, but also a claim for land to provide sustenance.⁵¹

By making use of the idea of the animal as chaotic and disruptive, the Una protests introduced a malodorous, disgusting and, most importantly, a dead subject into the realm of politics. The simultaneous affection and disgust for the animal produced a certain ambiguity around the role of empathy in the politics of caste. This essay has examined the Hindu right’s affective politics, and the challenge of death and decay posited by the Dalit groups, to argue for imagining the caste-dominated public as a space devoid of empathy, occupied instead by the stench of the carcass.

50 Hostetter, ‘The Emotions of Racialization,’ 283–84.

51 In general, Dalits in India have been landless, relying on occupations such as leatherwork, scavenging and cleaning. They have also worked as landless labourers on farm lands belonging to the upper-castes.