

Seeing the Invisible

Teaching about Social Injustice in India: Caste, Color, and Literature

“Algorithm for converting a Shudra into a Brahmin” by Meena Kandasamy

Algorithm for converting a Shudra into a Brahmin

Begin.

Step 1: Take a beautiful Shudra girl.

Step 2: Make her marry a Brahmin.

Step 3: Let her give birth to his female child.

Step 4: Let this child marry a Brahmin.

Step 5: Repeat steps 3-4 six times.

Step 6: Display the end product. It is a Brahmin.

End.

Algorithm advocated by Father of the Nation at Tirupur.
Documented by Periyar on 20.09.1947.

Algorithm for converting a Pariah into a Brahmin

Awaiting another Father of the Nation
to produce this algorithm.

(Inconvenience caused due to inadvertent delay
is sincerely regretted.)

The Indian Caste System (Some background)



- Brahmins—mainly teachers and intellectuals (Brahma's head)
- Kshatriyas— the soldiers and rulers (Brahma's arms)
- Vaishyas—traders, merchants (Thighs)
- Shudras—unskilled laborers (Brahma's feet and did all the menial jobs)

"What Is India's Caste System?" BBC. BBC News System.
25 February 2016. Web

Scheduled Castes



Photo by Jorinde van den Berg

Dalits—those outside of the caste system and those in the lowest caste, who, historically, engaged in

- “taking life for a living, a category that included, for example, fishermen,
- killing or disposing of dead cattle or working with their hides for a living,
- pursuing activities that brought the participant into contact with emissions of the human body, such as feces, urine, sweat, and spittle...
- eating the flesh of cattle or of domestic pigs and chickens” (“Untouchables”).

“If I Was a Tree” by Mudnakudu Chinnaswamy

If I was a tree
the bird wouldn't ask me
before it built its nest
what caste I am.
When sunlight embraced me
my shadow wouldn't feel defiled.
My friendship with the cool breeze and the leaves
would be sweet.
Raindrops wouldn't turn back
taking me for a dog-eater.
When I branch out further from my roots
Mother Earth wouldn't flee shouting for a bath.
The sacred cow would scrape her body on my bark,
scratching wherever it itched
and the three hundred thousand gods sheltering inside her
would touch me.
Who knows,
at the end,
hacked into pieces of dry wood,
burning in the holy fire,
I might be made pure,
or becoming the bier for a sinless body
be borne on the shoulders of four good men.

Scheduled Caste/Dalits

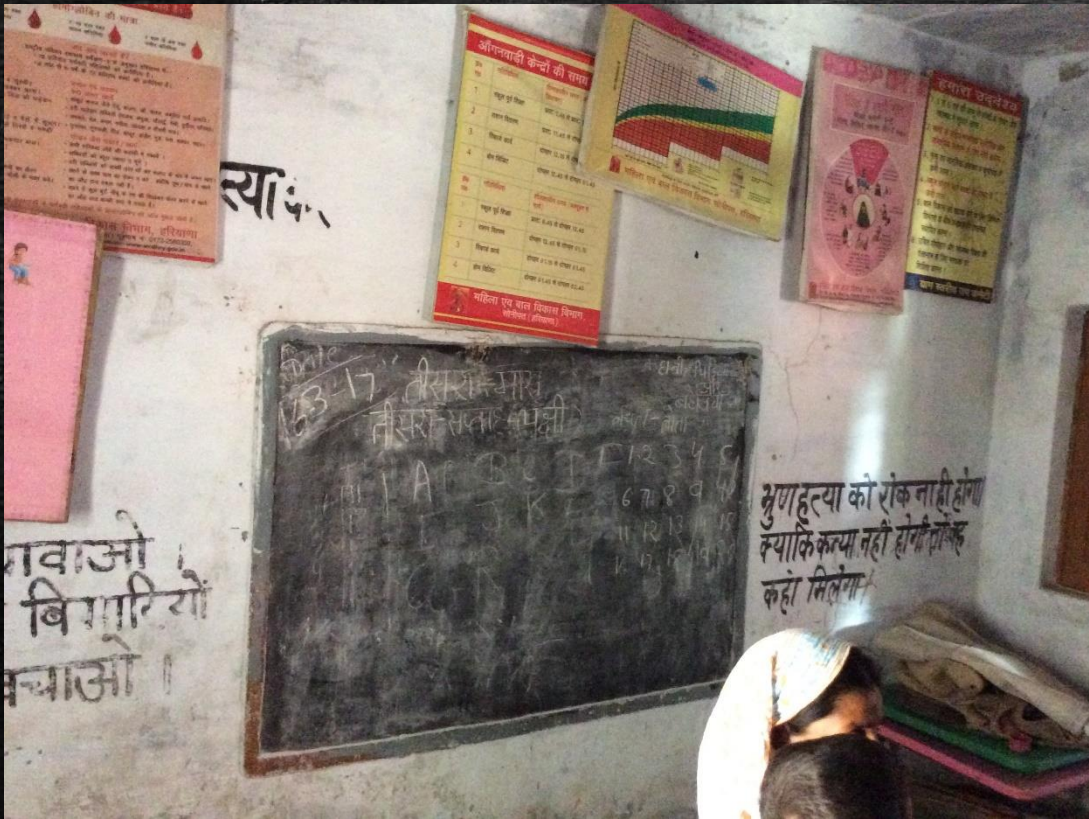


Photo by Leah Sneider

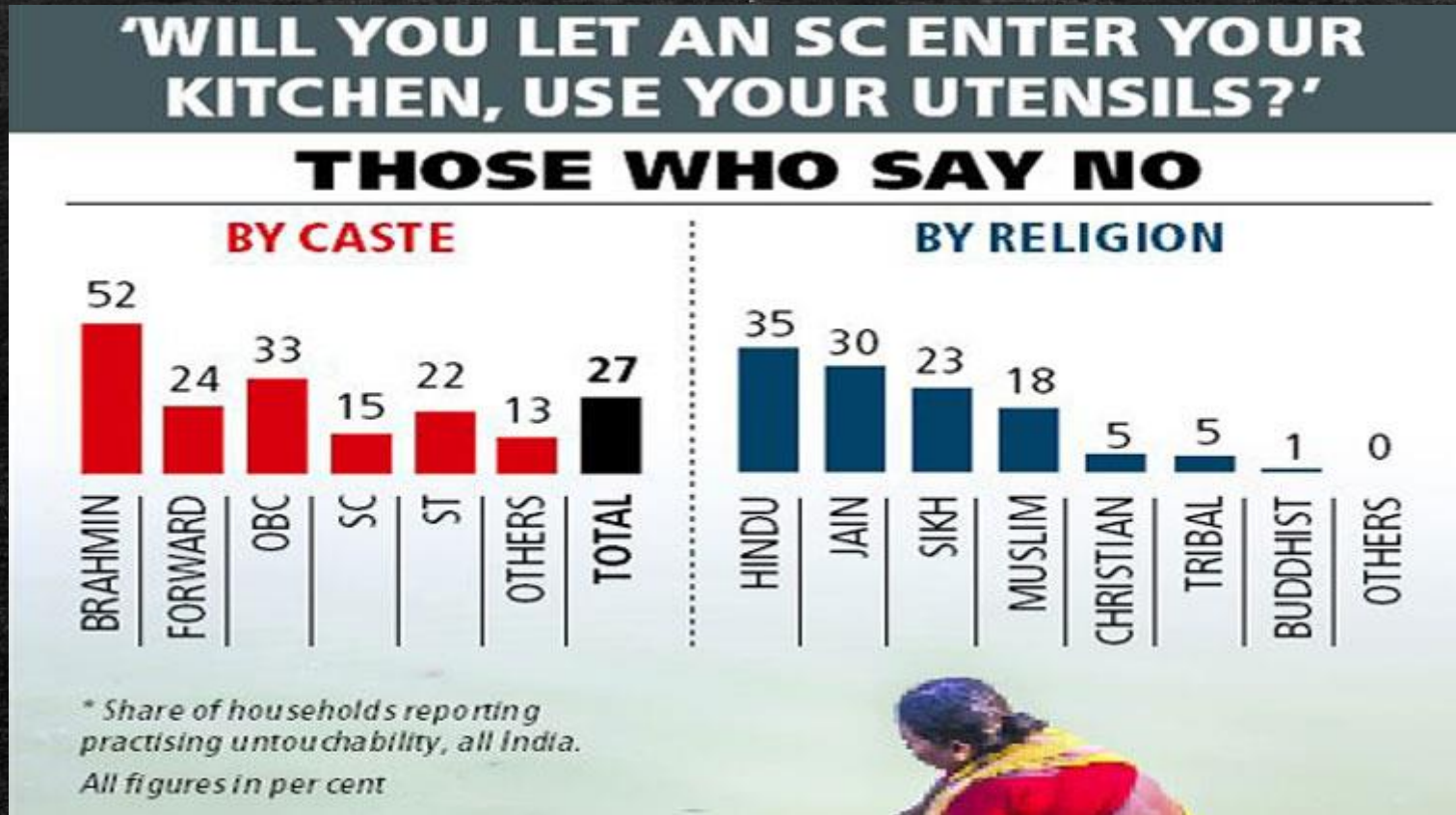
Until 1949, the untouchables were formally and legally

- restricted from entering many temples and schools
- forced into segregated housing/water wells
- restricted from participating inaspects of public life
- restricted from certain career fields
- forbidden from moving to a different caste (upward mobility)
- forbidden from inter-caste marriages

Scheduled Caste and Tribes Today

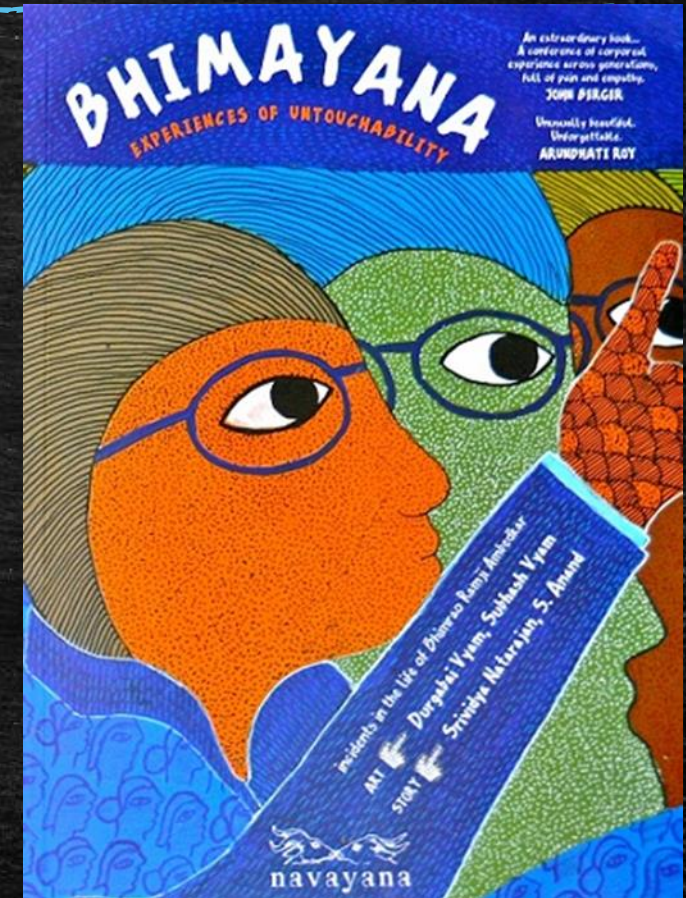
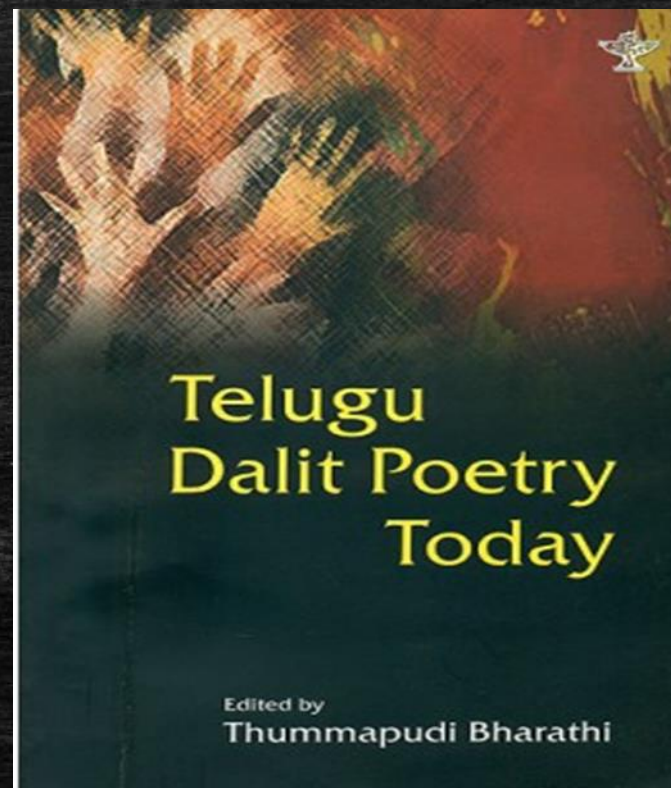
- Roughly 170 million belong to scheduled caste and 80 million belong to scheduled tribes (25% of the population as of the 2011 census)
- The Indian Constitution:
 - Bans untouchability
 - Provides special educational and vocational opportunities
 - Grants special representation in parliament
 - Penalizes attempts to prevent Scheduled caste members from enjoying equal rights ("Untouchable")

However,



Dalits Fight Back with Literature

- Dalit lit includes all literary forms
 - The purpose of Dalit lit is to
 - offer “criticism of the caste system and all kinds of discrimination,”
 - “call for destroying social hierarchies,”
 - challenge “the status quo,”
 - “promote equality and human dignity,”
 - “bring about social change.”



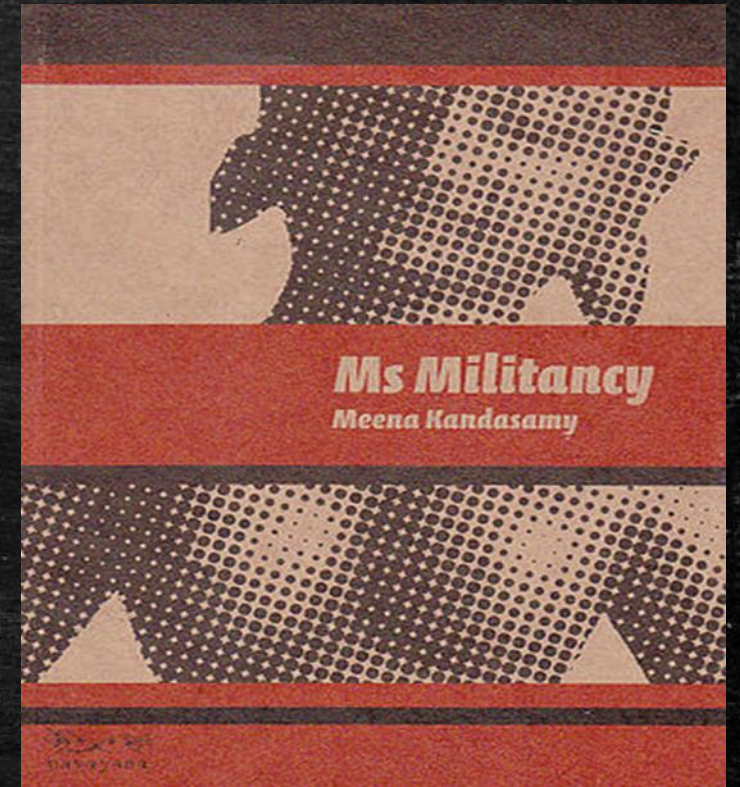
Characteristics

Darshini Dadawala and Maharaja Sayjirao, authors of "Dalit Literature—Concept, Origin and Features," assert that Dalit literature is characterized by

- Realism
- Portrayal of discrimination and exploitation
- Criticism of silence of mainstream literature about social realities of Indian society.

In "Subaltern Experimental Writing: Dalit Literature in Dialogue with the World," the author, Nicole Thiara sees contemporary Dalit literature, particularly novels as:

"[violating] the conventions of mainstream literature...being rooted in local Indian realities, subaltern vernacular traditions" (Thiara).



Teaching Dalit literature: Literary Theories and Approaches

Formalist Criticism

Formalism attempts to treat each work as its own distinct piece, free from its environment, era, and even author. This point of view developed in reaction to "...forms of 'extrinsic' criticism that viewed the text as either the product of social and historical forces or a document making an ethical statement" (699). Formalists assume that the keys to understanding a text exist within "the text itself," (... "the battle cry of the New Critical effort..." and thus focus a great deal on, you guessed it, form (Tyson 118).

Typical questions:

- How does the work use imagery to develop its own symbols? (i.e. making a certain road stand for death by constant association)
- What is the quality of the work's organic unity "...the working together of all the parts to make an inseparable whole..." (Tyson 121)? In other words, does how the work is put together reflect what it is?
- How are the various parts of the work interconnected?
- How do paradox, irony, ambiguity, and tension work in the text?
- How do these parts and their collective whole contribute to or not contribute to the aesthetic quality of the work?
- How does the author resolve apparent contradictions within the work?
- What does the form of the work say about its content?
- Is there a central or focal passage that can be said to sum up the entirety of the work?
- How do the rhythms and/or rhyme schemes of a poem contribute to the meaning or effect of the piece?

New Historicism/Cultural Criticism

This school... seeks to reconnect a work with the time period in which it was produced and identify it with the cultural and political movements of the time ...
New Historicism assumes that every work is a product of the historic moment that created it.

Typical questions:

- What language/characters/events present in the work reflect the current events of the author's day?
- Are there words in the text that have changed their meaning from the time of the writing?
- How are such events interpreted and presented?
- How are events' interpretation and presentation a product of the culture of the author?
- Does the work's presentation support or condemn the event?
- Can it be seen to do both?
- How does this portrayal criticize the leading political figures or movements of the day?
- How does the literary text function as part of a continuum with other historical/cultural texts from the same period...?
- How can we use a literary work to "map" the interplay of both traditional and subversive discourses circulating in the culture in which that work emerged and/or the cultures in which the work has been interpreted?
- How does the work consider traditionally marginalized populations?

An Assignment

Literary Analysis (1000-1200 words)

Using **MLA formatting and citation styles** for parenthetical citations and a works cited list; **standard essay conventions** including engaging **introduction** with an explicitly stated thesis; **body paragraphs** with topic sentences, transitions, analysis, and textual support; and a **conclusion** that offers a restatement of the thesis and a bigger picture and greater perspective of the relevance of the literary work, write a critical essay that examines at least one piece of Dalit literature. Use no more than two of the following literary theories to make your case:

- Formalist Approach (literary element(s))
- Historical/Cultural Approach
- Biographical Approach
- Gender/feminist Approach
- Mythological/Archetypal Approach
- Psychoanalytic Approach
- Marxist Approach
- Critical Race Theory

Literary Comparisons

Putting Literature in Perspective

Why compare literature?

- See context
- Make connections between/among items
- Make use of an important rhetorical mode
- Broaden scope/depth of understanding

Next step

- Compare literature to film/music/art
- Compare to other forms of writing
- Compare to real world

Comparison/Contrast: A Review

- Grounds (basis)
- Points of analysis
- Thesis/purpose
- structure

Literary Comparisons

- Shows similarities (that we may not have seen because of differences)
- Shows differences (in that which seems very similar)
- Argumentative/persuasive

Basis of Comparisons

- Two works
- Basis
- Points of analysis

elements

themes

authors

Structure

- Introduction/thesis
- Point by point
- Subject by subject
- Conclusion

Finding themes

- Ask the question

What are the works about/what are the subjects? (one or two word answer)

What do the authors say about the subjects? (insight into the human condition)