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FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

SCHOOL OF ECONOMIC SOCIAL AND POLITICAL SCIENCES

INSURGENT INDIA(S): UNRULY BODIES, FUGITIVE EXPERIENCE AND DEMOCRATIC POSSIBILITY

by

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Abstract

Faculty of Social Sciences

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Doctor of Philosophy

Insurgent India(s): unruly bodies, fugitive experience and democratic possibility

by

Tanay Milind Gandhi

This thesis is an exploration of unruly practice as a medium of radical democratic politics in postcolonial India. The postcolonial transition in India, I argue, institutes a distinct order of the postcolonial subject: seemingly extricated from colonialism's civilising mission, yet embedded simultaneously into a postcolonial developmentalism. Against the operations of postcolonial order – and the boundaries it establishes of the subject proper to it – this thesis draws attention to moments of disorder occurring in its surround, where insurgent and unruly practice puts into question its organising of life. This thesis aims to mark the multiplicity of ways in which such unruly practices occupy the building, caring for, sharing, and sustaining of plural imaginaries of subjectivity around, outside and underneath an image of the proper subject of postcolonial order.

Bringing Indian radical democratic thought (principally through Gandhi and Ambedkar) into dialogue with (European) post-foundational political theory (principally through the work of Rancière and Tully), the thesis works its way through a series of three critical scenographies – sites where the unruly surrounds of postcolonial order become active as interventions. An indigenous resistance movement against dams and 'development' projects in central India's Narmada Valley, the literary politics of an art of Dalit writing emerging in Bombay in response to the persistence of caste, and the performances of care and sociality in working-class housing estates in Bombay as they resist a neoliberal reconfiguration of the city; each scene stages a three-way encounter between a practice of unruliness, a system of thinking democratic politics, and a subjective schema proper to postcolonial order which it interrupts. Crucially, rather than presupposing the 'applicability' of a given theoretical apparatus to a particular practice, I argue that the interruptions unruly practice makes in postcolonial order go hand-in-hand with an intervention in the ways in which such practices are read and understood – they introduce their own augment.

This thesis does not claim to articulate, in this sense, a genre of unruly practice in terms of presupposing some proper form, or mode of appearance. Instead, building on Cavell's work, it argues for thinking such a genre as a medium in and through which each performance emphasises and foregrounds its differing aspects. Unruly practices, and the scenographies through which they are encountered, each point up features that supplement and augment that which has already come before, transforming given modes of perception and interpretation, action and response. Ultimately, this thesis aims to draw attention to the transformations such performances make. It demands we look differently at those sites where the surround interjects, and those practices of listening and interpretation by which such interventions are heard and understood. It thus aims toto underscore the salience and import of unruly practices for the possibilities of unruly visions of democratic subjectivity, not only in contemporary India, but across the terrain of contemporary radical democratic theory more broadly.

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Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

Print name: TANAY MILIND GANDHI

Title of thesis: INSURGENT INDIA(S): UNRULY BODIES, FUGITIVE EXPERIENCE AND DEMOCRATIC POSSIBILITY

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission

Signature: .... Date: 29 July 2025

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Emerging from the voluntary seclusion of the final run-in to submission, a doctoral project can seem a lonely affair. It is between me, my notebooks, and the frustrations of word processing software. But, as much as this project is a product of my research – as much as it is an object, an entity to be owned and shared as uniquely mine, as my contribution and distinctive insight, and all those other words the Academy implores us to use – it is hardly mine alone. Enumerating all who have shared in this journey, and who have allowed me to share in theirs, is too long for one page. But I will start.

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And to Charley, for patience, warmth and showing me that there is a whole world out there; and for every TVD.

hum ladenge sathi

udaas mausam ke khilaaf

ghulam icchha ke liye

hum chunenge sathi, zindagi ke tukde.

hathauda abh bhi chalta hai, udaas nihai par

hal ki leekein abh bhi banti hai cheekhti dharti par.

ye kaam humara nahi banta

sawaal nachta rehta hai.

sawaal ke kandhon pe sawaar ho-kar

qatl hue jazbaat ki kasam kha-kar

bujhi hui nazron ki kasam kha-kar

hum ladenge sathi

we will fight, comrade

against this season of sorrows

to free enslaved desire

to gather the pieces of shattered life.

hammer-blows on the anvils of despair

plough-lines scour this screaming earth.

this is not our lot, comrade

the question persists, unanswered

rising on its wings, our cry

in the name of murdered passions

in the name of dulled visions

we will fight, comrade

– Paash

Chapter 1 Insurgent India(s), Unruly Politics

Of Palanquin-bearers

Dissident Dalit artist Sambhaji Bhagat's song *Palkhiche Bhoi* (2015) stages the scene of a complaint. Dalit palanquin-bearers (*palkhiche bhoi*, in Marathi) protest their invisibility before those travelling in the comfort of the palanquin's drawn curtains.[1] Singing in his native Marathi, Bhagat's music blends folk traditions from the Marathi-speaking regions of western India, Dalit literary and poetic styles, and visions of freedom and emancipation as they emerge in Dalit politics into a singular, incisive critique of the aesthetic-political orders of upper-caste India. In his inimical syncopated style – interspersed with long interludes of noisy interruptions, jokes, exegesis, and commentary – Bhagat sings,

> *Mubarak tula, beimaani tujhi*;
>
> *Pangati-la tujhya mi, basaave kase*
>
> (Congratulations on your treachery;
>
> How can I now take a seat at your feast)

And later,

> *disey Chandra, Dev Indra*;
>
> *Aamchi vasti nahi lihuli*;
>
> *disey Paan, hirve Raan*;
>
> *taapti Oon nahi lihuli*
>
> *tujhi rangavali duniyaat*;
>
> *aamcha rang nahi*

---

[1] The word Dalit, literally 'broken, or ground-down', refers to members of the untouchable castes in India's system of caste-based hierarchy (Sadangi 2008, 60). By the mid-20th Century, and principally as a result of the term's adoption by radical Dalit authors in Bombay, it transformed into a political articulation that resists both the obfuscation of the centrality of violence in the colonial term 'Scheduled Castes', and upper caste patronisation internal to the word 'Harijan' (God's People) (Zelliot 2001). Dalit marks both the brutalisation of bodies at the hands of an order of caste, and the ultimate resistance of broken bodies to eradication or silencing. As Guru notes, "They view it as a revolutionary category for its hermeneutic ability to recover the revolutionary meaning of the historical past of the Dalit…" (Guru 2005, 67).

(Visions of a resplendent Moon, of Divine Grace;

But you never wrote of our bastis (slums).

Flowing rivers, verdant forests;

No word of the searing midday sun.

In your technicolour world;

We cannot find our own.)

At the heart of the palanquin-bearers' complaint, in Bhagat's rendition of it, is a certain partitioning of the visible – in their technicolour world, we cannot find our own. Where some are seen and recognised, riding in their palanquin as it is carried down a busy market, and others disappear beyond the ornate weave of its curtains – their shadows, even, too polluting to be seen. But, this matter of visibility and invisibility is intimately linked, for Bhagat, to an aesthetic proscription. The policing of what counts as beautiful, therefore appropriate and worthy of being seen, and what lies in its surround. Romantic visions of a clear sky on a full moon night and grand myths of the gods, the fluvial wealth of perennially flowing rivers winding their way through dense woodland and Elysian meadows – these are all properly beautiful. Not the asphyxiating, overcrowded slums sprawled across India's metropolises, the unbearable heat as it scorches the skin. These upper-caste rules of composition, of proper subjects and subject-matter, of figure, gesture, and metaphor thus stake out the limits of an order of aesthetic experience. For Bhagat, this is nothing other than the institution of an order of speech, action, and appearance. Rules that determine what is worthy of aesthetic contemplation or reflection that simultaneously also determine forms of proper speaking, proper action, and proper appearance – of who can say or do what, when, where, and how. The aesthetic proscription, then, institutes a distribution or allocation of the capacities of different bodies to partake in aesthetic activity, to partake – more generally – in a particular form of subjectivity that is proper to such activity. This is the treachery Bhagat sings of – one that makes it impossible to share in the same feast.

In one of his many interruptions, Bhagat declares: 'We are not here to entertain you, we are not entertainers. We are here to disturb you!'.[2] That is what his songs are for – to create a disturbance. And in singing the palanquin-bearers' complaint, Bhagat performs his disturbance by making visible that elemental treachery. He brings to light those limit-moments where the givenness and naturalness of upper-caste aesthetic-political orderliness is interrupted by the very utterances

[2] I return to this declaration in the third chapter, reading it alongside the literary-politics of an art of Dalit writing that is deeply influenced by the art form Bhagat exemplifies.

and enactments that don't make their way through the palanquin's curtains. Bhagat's disturbance is in the fact that his song makes us reckon with this interruption, this process of accounting that is now laid bare. H draws our attention to the subjective presupposition where it is proper only to some to build or rebuild this world, to act on it and transform it – it is *their* technicolour world, after all. In doing so, Bhagat points to what is in the surround of these counts. In staging this complaint, *Palkhiche Bhoi* constructs a scenography in which an order grounding what is worthy of being sung, seen, heard, and played, and by whom, is problematized by that which lies beyond it, by the unruliness that is out on the streets, beyond the curtain.

This thesis is an exploration into such unruly surrounds. Working its way through similar scenographies across the life of postcolonial India, it locates those sites where insurgent and unruly practice puts into question a certain organisation of life. What Rancière calls ways of seeing, doing, and being, that presuppose a shape of the subject and order the movements, utterances, and places proper to it (Rancière 1999). It aims to draw out the political force of such insurgent practices, of the radical democratic possibility of that which is told it does not belong. Of all the inflections and interruptive interjections in their performances of resistance and refusal. Of their recalcitrance. Of a moment where they exemplify the possibility of a different way. Of the lesson these exemplars carry for us – for contemporary radical democratic practice, and for the forms of thought and interpretation through which we read such practice.

Because the political order internal to the aesthetic orderliness that Bhagat problematizes in *Palkhiche Bhoi* is not specific to the system of caste that generates it. *Palkhiche Bhoi* is one particularly salient point at which a more dispersed subjective order is problematized. And such points are myriad in postcolonial India. The putting into question of a certain orderly vision of the postcolonial subject is to be found as much in Bhagat's songs as it is in Dalit art and literature more generally, in indigenous resistance against dams and 'development' projects in the Narmada valley (and elsewhere), and in the forms of communal life and care that emerge in Bombay's working-class neighbourhoods as they resist and navigate the collapse of industry in a city undergoing a fundamental reconfiguration. The three chapters of this thesis take up each of these three sites of resistance and refusal in turn. But there are also many other sites. In protests and social movements across the country against discriminatory citizenship laws, against the brutalisation of Muslims and Dalits and women; against the dehumanisation in Kashmir. In university campuses, on the streets, and in theatres – in all those places where chants of *inquilab* (revolution) and *azaadi* (freedom) ring out. At all these points, what is put into question is that order in which it is the entitlement of some to know, to speak, and to act, while others – Muslims, Dalits, Indigenous people, women, working-class people and the urban poor – find their place at the periphery, neither to be seen nor heard.

That these practices of resistance are dispersed geographically and temporally across postcolonial India suggests the pervasiveness of postcolonial order and its proper subject. Recent scholarship has sought to rethink the political history of postcolonial India, showing how foundational the institution and maintenance of such order was (and continues to be) to the life of the postcolony. It is not only a question of those who stand excluded from an imaginary of the postcolonial subject today, but of those whose exclusion, whose allocation of the part of no part, has been the condition of possibility of an orderliness constitutive of postcolonial India. What each of these analyses bring out – without seeking to reduce what are important differences between them – is the persistent fear (or at the very least, hesitation) of disorder and unruliness being right around the corner. An out-of-place appearance, an out-of-turn utterance, a gesture out of time, that threatens the neatness and civility of postcolonial order. In a word, the very disturbance that Bhagat has in mind. It is this long durée of postcolonial order that Dasgupta, Parasher and Sultan all bring to the fore in their work, that allows us to pose the central problematic animating this thesis, making it possible to construct the scenographies that follow in later chapters, and to note the democratic cadence of unruly performance as we encounter them across these scenes.

Anticolonial Revolution/Postcolonial Order

In contrast to the poetry of the moment of postcolonial transition in India – to the stroke of the midnight hour, and the soul of a nation long suppressed finding utterance – recent political theoretical works focused on the period point out how this was a time of hesitation, contestation, trepidation, even a certain sense of peril. Decades of anticolonial resistance leading up to that mid-August monsoon day when India became independent had given rise to a multiplicity of competing and contested visions of postcolonial India. At the cusp of independence, the Indian National Congress – the dominant anticolonial political force in India – found itself in the position of facilitating a process of postcolonial foundation that had to both draw its energy from these plural postcolonial imaginaries and harness them into a coherent and singular vision of the Indian nation-state (Dasgupta 2024, 5). As Dasgupta points out, the Congress could never hope to fully control these imaginaries and indeed, in the years around 1947, Communist uprisings in Bengal and the princely state of Hyderabad challenged the Congress' authority to act as a force of reconciliation and unification. But nonetheless, an attempt to exert such control, to make disparate and plural imaginaries of a postcolonial moment into a singular doctrine of the postcolonial state, was precisely the task put before the Constituent Assembly of independent India. In the chambers of the erstwhile Imperial Legislative Council – a building that would soon become India's Parliament House – members of the Constituent Assembly began a process of postcolonial foundation, debating and drafting the provisions of independent India's Constitution.[3]

Outside the red sandstone neoclassical building was a land in tumult. Partition meant millions of refugees from regions that had become part of the new nation of Pakistan poured into cities across India. The horrifying cycles of sectarian violence Partition set into motion spread throughout the country with riots breaking out across all major cities and towns. In this climate, the usurpation of the process of postcolonial transition from the Congress' stewardship by way of popular uprising and revolution was a threat felt acutely within the Constituent Assembly. While the Congress had been at the forefront of popular anticolonial resistance in the years leading up to independence, the shift in its role at the moment of postcolonial transition led to a transformation of its relation to these 'masses'.[4] Dasgupta argues that the Congress' relation to

---

[3] Nearly all the members of the Constituent Assembly were either members of the Congress party, or closely associated with it. Many of them were appointed as members to the Assembly. The elected members had won their elections on the basis of the limited franchise prescribed under the provisions of the colonial Government of India Act, 1935.

[4] I draw on the term 'masses', here and later, reflecting its use in the moment of postcolonial transition. More than a simple reference to the multitude, the term inscribes – as I point out more fully in the discussion that follows – a partition and arrogation. A division between the level-headed and rational leaders that know and understand the urgent crisis of the moment, and those unthinking, heaving crowds

the people had never been "one of representative conformity" but consisted instead "of a tense cohabitation of avowal and anxiety, glorification and suspicion." (Dasgupta 2024, 48). Within the Assembly chamber, then, faced with the masses in a moment of deep political uncertainty, glorification very quickly turned to suspicion. For the Constituent Assembly members, now that independence had arrived, popular resistance endangered a process of transition that it had been the condition of possibility for.

A stark example of this shift in the Congress' relationship to plural anticolonial imaginaries as well as to the masses that were their ground is a statement made in the Constituent Assembly by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel (a leading figure of the Congress and later Home Minister of India). Responding to a (largely administrative) question on tenurial and immunity guarantees made to members of the colonial civil services, Patel engages in a long discussion of the importance of the civil services and of a comprehensive administrative apparatus to the Constitution under consideration. In a winding commentary, Patel finally declares to his interlocutors, "If you do not adopt this course, then do not follow the present Constitution. Substitute something else... This Constitution is meant to be worked by a ring of Service [civil services] which will keep the country intact." (*The Constituent Assembly Debates* 2014 [1949]-a, 51). And a little later, he makes the stakes of this choice even clearer: "[W]e have difficult times ahead. We are talking here under security kept in very difficult circumstances. These people are the instruments. Remove them, and I see nothing but a picture of chaos all over the country." (*The Constituent Assembly Debates* 2014 [1949]-a, 51). I return to this question of the centrality of a robust administrative apparatus below, but what is more immediately pertinent is the choice facing the Assembly according to Patel. Either embrace the civil services and their administrative infrastructure and thus maintain control over the country, the path that the postcolonial transition takes, and the masses, or abandon the services and risk chaos. It is these boundaries between revolution and order, between the solemn composure of what is inside that chamber and the unrest of all that is in its surround that is of concern to me here. Because it is through them, through the institution of these limits, that the architects of the postcolonial transition – of the postcolonial Constitution – seek to draw in and simultaneously restrain, control, and master the plural forces of anticolonial resistance that led them to that Assembly in the first place.

Turning attention to the work of Parasher, Dasgupta, and Sultan at this juncture allows for recognising how these limits were operationalized in the process of formulating the Constitution and how they are embedded within the postcolonial imaginary of that founding charter. Their work

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that understand nothing of freedom even as they demand it. It is the claim of this thesis that unruly practice and unruly bodies work to disorder and disrupt the very partitions marked by the term masses. In my use here, I point to this dissensual force of the word.

brings to light some of the key features of postcolonial order instituted at the moment of postcolonial transition. Parasher's work, for instance, makes clear how the democratic promise of the anticolonial movement was reimagined (and constrained) in the postcolonial moment. In tracing the plural imaginaries of radical democratic politics emerging in the inter-war period – and their afterlives in the postcolony – to which I return below, Parasher's study also evidences how such plurality and alterity were clamped down on and replaced with a rigid, statist vision of representative politics. Gandhian democratic ideas of autonomous village councils rooted in his distinctive conceptualisation of *swaraj* (self-rule) - to which I return below – were, of course, the most prominent of these alternative imaginaries. In place of a powerful centralised state and administrative apparatus, these Gandhian projects (which were not limited to Gandhi's work but also developed in the work of other Gandhian thinkers such as JP Narayan and Shriman Narayan, among others) proposed the formation of village councils with legislative, administrative and judicial units, largely autonomous and elected through universal suffrage (Parasher 2023, 101). The resulting dispersion of sovereign power from a central state to a multiplicity of village assemblies and councils, they argued, would amount to a more robustly democratic postcolonial state; one in which there existed a "living union between the government and the people" (Parasher 2023, 106). And similar federalist ideas also emerged, Parasher points out, from outside the Gandhian fold across broader sections of the anticolonial movement (Parasher 2023). The common thread running through these approaches, regardless of their origin, is a critique of the link between political representation and parliamentary democracy. All of them saw, in the parliamentary and statist model of postcolonial government that was eventually adopted by India's Constitution, a concentration of political power in a group of elites, well-versed in navigating the intricacies of such a state apparatus. They argued that the "more transformative, more urgent and more democratic task was to find participatory mechanisms for popular rule which might make a people into agents rather than objects of government" (Parasher 2023, 3). Their demand was for a rejection of the parliamentary-representative model of government and a rejection of Patel's 'ring of Service' that kept such a model operational. In drawing attention to these alternative imaginaries, Parasher points to the elemental discord in the moment of postcolonial transition between the political thought and imaginaries of anticolonial protest and the political thought and imaginaries of postcolonial governance. In setting these radical democratic projects to one side, the architects of India's postcolonial transition perform a certain flattening out of anticolonial thought and politics. They reduce the multiplicity of democratic visions that "value[d] acts of collective self-assertion by the people" (Parasher 2023, 169) to the politics of state sovereignty and electoral representation.

One of the reasons why the Indian Constitution-makers resort to a statist and parliamentary-representative model of democratic governance can be surmised from Dasgupta's reading of the

moment of India's postcolonial transition. The postcolonial project in India, Dasgupta argues, was distinctive in the sense that it did not entail a revolutionary rupture from the colonial rule that preceded it. Indeed, the transfer of power that marked the end of colonial rule and the formation of the Constituent Assembly – the constituent moment of postcolonial India – were both products of legislative Acts of the British Parliament (Dasgupta 2024). For Dasgupta, this peculiar foundation for a new postcolonial nation-state had profound consequences for the debates in the Constituent Assembly and the Constitution-making exercise undertaken there. The absence of popular revolution as a foundation meant that the Constitution was not a formalization of the end of a revolutionary project but precisely the setting of a revolutionary agenda. The aim in drafting India's Constitution was not, as Dasgupta points out, to legitimize anticolonial revolution, but to set into motion a series of social and political transformations that would come to vindicate such a Constitution (Dasgupta 2024). Colonial domination had socio-economically pauperized and politically attenuated India, and now that its end was in sight, the task before the postcolonial nation-state was to enable a corrective that would realise "the path of modern progress" (Dasgupta 2014, 234).

Dasgupta calls this a project of 'transformational constitutionalism', where the state was not the result of revolutionary change – marking the end of a ruptural arc – but its principal site. Its central task was to "facilitate and mediate necessary revolutionary changes" in the postcolonial moment (Dasgupta 2024, 10). On the one hand, this meant a substitution; in place of an intensification and expansion of popular mobilisation, which would let loose all those "unruly aspirations of freedom, equality [and] democracy" (Dasgupta 2024, 143), members of the Constituent Assembly resorted instead to state control of the process of postcolonial transformation. For the Constituent Assembly, Dasgupta argues, there was both a need to institute a radical break from the colonial past and to manage and organise how that break came to be if, as Nehru argued, the situation had to be kept under control.[5] The pathways along which these 'necessary revolutionary changes' were to be instituted needed to be tightly controlled and minutely planned. A large state provided the institutional scaffolding for such a controlled revolution.

On the other hand, such control also meant a change of pace in the transformational constitutionalist project. Change was indeed the "orienting concept of the Indian constitution-making exercise" (Dasgupta 2024, 10), but this was a change carried out through an operation that aimed, as Nehru argued, "to rub out here and there, to write on it, gradually to replace the writing on the whole slate...not with a great measure of destruction and strain" (*The Constituent*

[5] Acknowledging the fundamental social and political tumult in India at the time, Nehru argued in the Constituent Assembly debates that "if law and parliament do not fit themselves into the changing picture, they cannot control the situation completely" (*The Constituent Assembly Debates* 2014 [1949]-b, 1197).

Assembly Debates 2014 [1948], 3418). The language of Nehru's statement to the Assembly – of which I have quoted only a small fragment here – is instructive in its meticulousness, its concern with minutiae. The change envisioned by the Constitution makers was not to be carried out through the "inspirational assertions of exemplary lawgivers" (Dasgupta 2024, 142) but through a scrupulous and exacting engagement with the intricacies of procedure and protocol. Vivid, aspirational articulations of freedom and democracy as they emerged from multiple corners of the anticolonial movement had – in this transformational project – to be condensed and reduced into "calculations of stability, management of dissensus, and relational equilibrium between different social interests" (Dasgupta 2024, 143). If social and political transformation was the goal of the postcolonial Constitution, then, gradualism supported and moderated by an administrative concern with procedure and protocol, was necessary to keep at bay the unruliness that threatened to disrupt this trajectory of progress.

What is equally interesting in Dasgupta's reading of the moment of postcolonial transition in India, however, is his account of the proper subject of the transformational constitutionalist project. A large state and its intricate administrative apparatus called for a distinct subject position, one that could carry out – or conduct – the necessary operations of control, stabilization, and organization by way of which revolutionary changes were to be instituted. Dasgupta calls this subject the constituent-administrator (Dasgupta 2024, 160). A subject who possesses or holds a certain mastery and expertise, and who can know, speak, and act on that basis. Much less than the People – in whose name the postcolonial Constitution is instituted – this is a subject constitutively opposed to them; created in response to the fear of chaos and unruliness that the masses represent. As Dasgupta points out, the administrator as constituent subject was "marked by anxiety, one that arose out of the unknowability of, and the potential dangers posed by, that vast alien population it was called on to govern." (Dasgupta 2014, 231). The people, in this sense, were not the originary subject of postcolonial foundation, but the object of a transformational operation to be carried out by the proper (constituent) subject of the postcolony, the administrator.

There is more than a hint of a logic of maturity at work in these debates of the Constituent Assembly and in its Constitutional project. It is, indeed, this very logic that becomes the central concern of India's postcolonial transition. Calling it developmentalism and drawing out its deep historical imbrication in colonial domination, Nazmul Sultan points out how such a logic was recast during the postcolonial transition to address the question of the 'people' as the legitimating ground of the postcolonial nation-state. In his view, the constitution of the people as the ground of postcolonial nationalism was and continues to be an enduring problem. Who were (and are), to put it plainly, the people of the 'We, the People' that began the Preamble to India's Constitution? Here, Sultan is echoing a problem first discussed by Sudipta Kaviraj. Kaviraj

suggests not only that “the responsibility...of nationalism emerges earlier in history than the community which will perform this responsibility; the responsibility is born before the agent”, but also that “what this community will be is a matter of some confusion and occasionally of dispute” (Kaviraj 2010, 177). Kaviraj underscores the anachronism of the postcolonial transition in India. The proper subject of this transition did not already exist but had to be created. It is this double gap between, on the one hand, the postcolonial nation-state and the popular subject proper to it, and on the other, the People as the proper subject of the postcolonial nation and the people as a concrete and material plurality of anticolonial resistances that becomes, for Sultan, the animating question of postcolonial India.

Now, while Kaviraj’s account suggests that nationalist ideology presupposes this popular constituent subject by way of a ‘narrativisation’ of the Indian people as a historic, civilisational force (Kaviraj 2010), Sultan draws our attention to the mechanisms through which the postcolonial nation set itself the task of constituting what it saw as its constituent subject. In other words, the very mechanisms grounding the transformative constitutionalist project that Dasgupta points out in his work. The postcolonial challenge, for Sultan, was to constitute a People from the masses (Sultan 2024). For those in the Constituent Assembly, the People as constituent subject, the proper orderly subject of this revolution without revolution, are thought not to exist. And in the mechanisms through which the postcolonial state carries out the task of constituting this constituent subject, Sultan identifies the shadows of a developmental logic grounded in the hierarchies that enabled and justified colonial domination (Sultan 2024). Such logics established anthropological orders defining and delimiting capacities for human speech, knowledge, and activity across coloniser subjects and their colonised objects. The colonial project, as Sultan suggests, echoing a broad swathe of postcolonial thinking, was conceived in this sense as a project of civilisation: to train the not-fully-human, the not-yet-subject. These very logics were then tweaked in the postcolonial transition, from a preoccupation with civilisation and humanity to one of self-rule (Sultan 2024). The developmentalist logic undergoes a shift, Sultan argues, in the postcolonial moment. From the development of the masses that are not-yet subject (not fully human, the colonial anthropological claims to developmentalism) to a developmentalism that was the vehicle that would propel the people to the future, transforming them into the founding agent of the postcolonial State (Sultan 2024, 27). In this sense, a similar presupposition is at work across colonial and postcolonial developmentalism: the inability or incapacity of the colonised (or erstwhile colonised) to speak, know and act, to decide and judge, to rule and govern.

Indeed, such ‘colonial continuities’ run deep. Dasgupta, too, argues how the Constituent Assembly turned – when faced with the uncertainty of the postcolonial moment – to the familiar

terrain of colonial government and its models (Dasgupta 2024, 157).[6] As Kaviraj also points out, the Constituent Assembly and the Congress left untouched what they had previously identified as the three central mechanisms of colonial domination: the police, the bureaucracy, and the educational system (Kaviraj 2010). But, the crucial axis of continuity between the Constituent Assembly and the administrators of the postcolonial state, and the imperial government that preceded them, was "not just a set of instruments or personnel, but a certain relationship to the populace: a distrusting distance" (Dasgupta 2024, 171). This, more than anything else, was at the foundation of postcolonial order. Because the principal concern is of the unruliness of disparate and incoherent masses, of their shepherding into a singular, unified People by the postcolonial state and its administrators. The Imperial Council House, even after 1947, continues to echo with claims of immaturity and unfitness; of the incapacity and inability of the masses to rule – their not-yetness, their unreadiness for the independence they have brought about.

A common thread running through each of these readings of the postcolonial transition in India is how an aversion, a distrust, an anxiety concerning the people – as the concrete multiplicities that were the masses, and the plural forces of anticolonial resistance they marked – was central to that whole process. Even as the anticolonial movement drew on these forces, come the moment of independence, the people as their repository became the source of instability, rebellion, and uncertainty, a dangerous supplement (Dasgupta 2024, 128). Having seen first-hand the power of popular mobilisation as it resisted colonial domination, the architects of postcolonial India now feared those very practices of popular resistance – general strikes, civil disobedience, rioting, and violence – being oriented against the postcolonial nation-state. Keeping them at bay, staving off the revolutionary energies they signified, was necessary if the transformational constitutionalist project was to be fulfilled (Dasgupta 2024). Anticolonial resistance may well have only been possible on the condition of popular mobilisation, but postcolonial order demanded a more sober environment.

Two movements are thus occurring in step here. One, to keep the masses distant and have the state remain at a certain remove from the people. A distance that was both physical and political. Throughout the Assembly's deliberations, we find references to what is happening 'out there', among the masses, far beyond the walls of the chamber. As Dasgupta suggests, "They [Constituent Assembly members] seldom highlighted their proximity to the multitude. Instead,

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[6] Familiar because several members of the Constituent Assembly had been part of the delegated imperial governments under the Government of India Act of 1935. In fact, Dasgupta points out how despite being vocal opponents of the repressive apparatuses of colonial government, these ministers (most from the Congress) underwent a quick perspectival shift, becoming incredibly adept at using the very mechanisms of repression that they had spent the previous decades resisting. Dasgupta sees in this the development of an appreciation for order that foreshadows the institution of postcolonial order a few years later (Dasgupta 2024, 72-73).

they talked about the value of 'quiet contemplation' away from the cacophony of popular political life" (Dasgupta 2024, 109). The people of the anticolonial movement were sought to be (had to be for the transformationalist project, as we have seen) contained and controlled at the periphery. The representative parliamentary model of democratic politics adopted in the postcolonial constitution reflects such distance, a disavowal of popular manifestation and mobilisation in favour of a thoroughly mediated relation between the people and democratic rule through which popular expressions are heard, but only as a distant din.

The second movement is in the arrogation from these masses of the claim to constituent power and democratic legitimacy. To arrogate, more broadly, the capacity to act, to know, and to think. Reinscribing the anthropological hierarchies grounding colonial domination, those in the Constituent Assembly see in the multiplicity of disparate popular imaginaries of postcolonial India a lack of a capacity to judge, to determine a course of action, and to follow through by acting on such determination. The people, the masses, need, therefore, an elite or a vanguard to be the custodians of the postcolonial transition, to act on their behalf and to decide for them. The masses, in this sense, require development, being shaped and moulded into a coherent People. As pointed out above, the transformational constitutionalist project sought to enact a corrective to the distortion that was colonial rule. One that would return and restore postcolonial India on the path of progress, of modernisation and modernity. The plural hopes and aspirations of the postcolonial moment need to be organised and streamlined; their disparate energies properly channelled to realise the modernising aims of the transformational project. The masses, quite simply, do not know what they want or what they do, and so it falls to the members of the Constituent Assembly – the leaders of postcolonial India – to guide them.

I argue that these two movements, emerging from Dasgupta, Sultan, and Parasher's works, constitute the core operations (or mechanisms) of postcolonial order in India. Not only at the moment of postcolonial transition but in how these movements are ossified in the postcolonial Constitution and the administrative apparatus of the state, throughout the subsequent life of the postcolony. An order that also generates a particular subjective imaginary: not only the administrator that Dasgupta has in mind – that is only one node – but an imaginary that is the end point of the revolution without revolution of which such administrator is facilitator. Which is to say, the image of the postcolonial subject proper to the project of postcolonial transformation. The chapters in this thesis each pick up on particular features or facets of this postcolonial subjective imaginary. From its disembodiment that allows it to stand in an instrumental relation to its world, to its modernist and modernising grounds that seek (and impose) fullness and stability, to its proprietary form as a subject that holds, owns, and possesses. They draw out how differing forms of this subjective imaginary are operationalised, policing that boundary between anticolonial resistance and postcolonial order. But, over the course of this thesis, we will also see

how such orderliness is problematised by the restless resistance of precisely those that it deems incapable of rule; those from whom the capacity to organise and reconfigure social and political life has been arrogated.

Speaking of the transformational project and its proper subject, of postcolonial order and the postcolonial subject, Dasgupta notes, "…its metaphor wasn't Fyodor Dostoyevsky's uncontrolled blaze, but the giant, controlled furnaces that became the talisman of industrialisation in the twentieth century" (Dasgupta 19). Internal to this metaphor of the furnace, as we will see in the chapters that follow, is the expression of a particular subjective order. A subject that can control the furnace, contain it, use it, that can take hold of it – that can corral it into the shaping of postcolonial India as a modern, industrial nation-state. That has something of the furnace's fire-hardened steel in its bones. One aim of this thesis is to turn our heads away from the furnace. To turn towards all that is not in this metaphor, concealed by its brilliant blaze. To those standing by the furnace, feeding the revolution (that is without revolution) with coal and iron, to the bodies outside the furnace, surrounding it, whose proper place is to endure the searing heat. To how their being there, their doing what they do, their chatter and clamour disturbs and problematises the imaginary of the postcolony reflected in the furnace's flames.

Insurgent India(s), Unruly Politics; Swaraj and Sociality

To turn our attention to such unruliness, to the disruptions, interjections, and interruptions it introduces to postcolonial orderliness demands, I suggest a theoretical and methodological reorientation. Theoretically (I turn to the methodological shifts in the following section), it requires tuning in to all those imaginaries of radical democratic politics emerging in India that get left by the wayside in the moment of postcolonial transition. Visions of democratic politics and postcolonial subjectivity thrown up by anticolonial resistance that consistently put into question the necessity and stability of the transformational constitutionalist project and its order.

Mahatma Gandhi's work is particularly salient here. Despite being the pre-eminent leader of the anticolonial movement in India, Gandhi and his political project were set to one side during the moment of postcolonial transition. In the debates at the Constituent Assembly, Gandhi's proposals were seen as hopelessly romantic, alluding to a past not worthy of resuscitating. Throughout the debates, the task facing the Constituent Assembly – of transforming a poor, diverse, and technologically backward country into a modern nation-state – was opposed starkly to the (reductive, as we will soon see) imaginary of Gandhian self-rule through autonomous village councils. This was in large part because at the core of Gandhi's political theory – and therefore at the core of his vision for postcolonial India – is a thorough rejection of the terms of discussion that ground the entire Constitution-making exercise. His work shifts attention away from the issue of the form and shape of the postcolonial State, its powers and objects, towards the form and shape that freedom takes in the postcolonial moment, its conditions and its practices. Gandhi's work recasts, in other words, the central question of the postcolonial transition from one of a transformational and developmental State that can constitute its People by controlling a series of social and political changes, to one of postcolonial freedom understood in terms of a certain repertoire of practices. In place of that dichotomy between the unruliness of anticolonial resistance and postcolonial order, Gandhi demands thinking about the meaning of postcolonial freedom – *swaraj* (self-rule) – in terms of a dialectic between inner and outer freedom; freedom of/within the self as the condition for more expansive visions of social and political freedom (Dalton 2023, 200-201; Gandhi 2010). Where those at the Constituent Assembly saw in postcolonial order and its developmental program the realisation of political and social freedom that colonial domination had denied, Gandhi argued that such freedom was premised on – and presupposed – freedom as a practice of subjectification.

Gandhi's vision for *swaraj*, at one level, calls for a radical democratic political project. As Kaviraj points out, Gandhi was among a miniscule minority of political leaders to demand the abolition

of the State as the figure of popular sovereignty and the singular model of democratic governance in postcolonial India (Kaviraj 2010). His 'constructive program' argues instead for a dispersion of sovereignty across a multiplicity of village councils, each having legislative, executive, and judicial jurisdiction over the local area and elected by adult suffrage (Parasher 2023). *Swaraj*, in this sense, meant a radical participatory democratic organisation of social and political life that began "in everyday activities in ashrams, cooperatives, community-based organisations and villages" (Tully 2022, 228)[7] Such dispersion would generate, in Gandhi's view, a "robustly active model of democratic citizenship leading to the creation of "a living union between the government and the people" (Parasher 2023, 105-106). The State as a generator and arbiter of necessary socioeconomic and political transformations (of which the masses were the object), is replaced here with a participatory democratic practice in which the masses themselves are the active agents of social and political change.

Internal to such a radical democratic form of postcolonial governance was a critique of the subjective order grounding the transformational constitutionalist project. At this second level, Gandhi's account of *swaraj* puts into question an image of the postcolonial subject as the end point of a certain developmental program that presupposes an unfitness to rule and takes as its aim the cultivation of this ability. Sultan suggests that Gandhi's work draws attention to the self-authorising nature of the postcolonial subject that "unexpectedly suspended the development-democracy nexus" (Sultan 2024, 20). Gandhi affirms, in other words, the postcolonial subject's always-already fitness and capacity to rule, rejecting entirely that imaginary of the postcolonial subject as the product of a steady progress that leads to a capacity for self-government that is currently absent.[8] But as much as Gandhi's is an affirmation of the equal capacity of anybody, it is a reimagination of the form that such rule takes. Where the subject of postcolonial order rules by way of control, mastery and domination, by standing above and removed from that which it

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[7] Gandhi's vision was not simply about participation. Political participation was one node of a more generalised assertion of the capacity to govern and organise one's life – a capacity that imperial domination had denied. And so, alongside political self-reliance, *swaraj* called also for economic autonomy through village industries using cyclical, human-scale and regenerative technologies (Gandhi 2010).

[8] This discussion of Gandhian *swaraj* in terms of a capacity to rule that is available to anyone and everyone shares some similarities to Rancière's discussion of the egalitarian presupposition grounding Jacotot's radical pedagogy (Ranciere 1991). Across both Gandhi and Rancière (or more accurately, Rancière's reading of Jacotot) there is a rejection of those partitions by which the abilities to know, speak, act and rule are determined and policed. It is the threads of resonances such as these that this thesis is committed to drawing out, locating those moments where radical democratic Indian political thought speaks with, to, and against contemporary western European postfoundational democratic theory. In the following section, I frame these dialogues in terms of an expansion of the vocabularies through which unruly practice in the postcolony is approached. This is not an expansion in terms of introducing to Gandhi or Indian radical democratic thought something alien or foreign, but to open up a space where – in the intermingling and sharing of words – it becomes possible to trace a radical democratic gesture that is internal to their work.

rules over, the postcolonial subject in Gandhi's formulation is first of all a subject of self-rule; a practice of the self that takes as its focal point conditioned and conventional forms of being, saying and doing, and makes them the subject of a critical inquiry or interrogation. As Dalton notes of Gandhi, his account of *swaraj* demanded "rigorous, sometimes agonising reappraisal… a search for truth through ceaseless experimentation." (Dalton 2023, 60). This is, after all, the principal meaning of *swaraj* as self-rule – "the governance of the conduct of oneself by oneself" (Tully 2022, 228). A practice of the self that cultivates a transformed relationship to oneself by questioning who one is, how one relates to others, and the modes of response to the world in which one is. The subject of *swaraj* is not defined by its accord with, or distance from, a subjective schema that is external to it – by its ability to bring itself (or be brought) into accord with such a schema – but by practices that take the self as the site of an inquiry, an experimentation and exploration.

Crucially for Gandhi, such a self-relation is the condition of possibility for an interconnectedness, a commonality and communality that forms the foundation for the radical democratic participatory forms of governance he argues for. It is, in other words, based on *swaraj* as a practice of the self that it becomes possible to think of *swaraj* as a participatory democratic political program. A critical inquiry into oneself as the practice of *swaraj*, suffused with an ethos of nonviolence (*ahimsa*), makes possible a transformed, more responsive, and affirming relation to others. Intersubjective responsiveness of this sort – what Tully calls "a spiritual relationship to oneself in one's relationships with others and the environing natural and spiritual worlds." (Tully 2008, Vol. 2, 309) – then makes possible a robustly participatory form of democratic politics. True *swaraj*, for Gandhi, is when "we learn to rule ourselves" (Gandhi 2010, 73). It is in this way that *swaraj* comes to embody the dialectical relationship between inner and outer freedom.

Yet, the intimate connection between these two senses – or dimensions – of freedom through the concept of *swaraj* is not only a feature of Gandhi's theorisation. We find a similar gesture at work across a broad range of Indian political thinking across the 19th and 20th Centuries.[9] A detailed engagement with the trajectories of this dialectical relationship in which *swaraj* emerges as "the governing concept of Indian democratic practice" (Parasher 2023, 166) is not intended here. But I will draw attention to two other thinkers that take up the dialectic of inner and outer freedom as a way to problematise postcolonial order and its proper subject: Dr. B. R.

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[9] For a comprehensive engagement with the ways in which Indian political thought develops a conceptualisation of the dialectic of inner and outer freedom, and how it is operationalised in the anticolonial project, see Dalton (2023), who identifies precisely this dialectic in the works of Vivekananda, Aurobindo, Gandhi, M. N. Roy, Ambedkar, and JP.

Ambedkar and Jayprakash Narayan (hereafter, JP). Where JP's account of *swaraj* reflects how Gandhian ideas of self-rule are taken up and supplemented in the life of the postcolony – at a period when the postcolonial developmental state and its proper subjective order are dominant – Ambedkar's work presents an alternative to the Gandhian fold in the radically different ground on which he situates his account of self-rule.

In the mid-1970s, JP's '*Sampoorna Kranti*' (Total Revolution) movement, launched in Bihar, presented perhaps one of the most sustained and significant challenges to the legitimacy of the postcolonial Indian State. Indeed, the movement ultimately led to JP's imprisonment and precipitated the desperate declaration of Emergency by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in June 1975. At the core of his call for total revolution was a critique of the postcolonial Indian nation-state. JP argued that this was, on the one hand, a state constituted by a process of '*swaraj* from above' and, on the other, sustained by practices of centralisation. The postcolonial transition and the Constitutional arrangement it gave rise to was carried out in the name of the people but ensured their absence. Resonating with what I described above as the distance and arrogance constitutive of postcolonial order, JP argues that popular sovereignty (what he called *loksatta*) in the postcolonial moment was mediated by a political elite that made up the leadership of the main political parties (Narayan 1964, 242). The result was a form of democratic governance and rule that was premised on centralisation and keeping the masses distant and removed (Narayan 1959, 70-71).

Total revolution, then, meant a process of engendering *swaraj* from below through decentralisation. JP called for the formation of *Janata Samitis* (Citizens' Assemblies) in each village, echoing Gandhi's vision of village councils (Narayan 1959, 89). The aim – like in Gandhi's account – is to cultivate a closer, more intimate relationship between the people as the figure of democratic sovereignty and the operations of democratic governance. As Dalton points out, JP saw his total revolution as fostering "interaction between leaders and led as cooperative and interdependent agents in the quest for *swaraj*." (Dalton 2023, 73). The condition of possibility for such interaction and interdependence – which in turn was the condition for total revolution – emerged from a return to that Gandhian meaning of *swaraj* as a practice of the self, as the practice of subjectivisation that proceeds from taking the self as the subject of a critical inquiry.[10]

Unlike both Gandhi and JP, Ambedkar's account of freedom (which he doesn't explicitly call *swaraj*) doesn't proceed from a thorough rejection of the transformational constitutionalist

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[10] Indeed, JP calls explicitly for such a 'return to Gandhi' in the quest for a meaning for the term '*swaraj*' (Narayan 1978, 177).

order of postcolonial India. Indeed, Ambedkar was – as chairman of the Drafting Committee – one of its chief architects. Throughout much of his writing, Ambedkar espouses a vision of postcolonial freedom rooted in the developmentalism that was at the core of the transformational Constitution. He speaks of freedom in terms of the liberal-democratic ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity that must be developed and inculcated in the Indian masses (Ambedkar 2020). It is only in one of his last works that Ambedkar, shifting focus from Western liberal-democratic models to Buddhist philosophy, reimagines what freedom – and specifically postcolonial freedom – could be (Dalton 2023). Even as he abjures the language of *swaraj*, Ambedkar draws close to precisely the kind of practices of the self that are constitutive of self-rule in Gandhi (and JP). He notes, for instance, "If one has self, let him practice self-conquest. Self is the lord of the Self…" (Ambedkar 2011, 191).[11] Resonating with Gandhi, such self-conquest is not conceived for Ambedkar in terms of mastery or control but as a practice that makes it possible to respond affirmingly to the other, to see one's capacity to be free as intimately tied to another's (Kadambi 2016). A care for the self necessitated a care for others, and it is through these networks or tapestries of care that we come to be free. While the basis for such interdependence rests, for Gandhi (as well as JP), in an ethos of nonviolence, for Ambedkar it is a result of the Buddhist ideal of *maitri* (love) and *karuna* (compassion). In these Buddhist ideals, embodied through cultivated practices of self-rule, Ambekar locates the articulation of a universal humanity that aligns with the promise of freedom as it emerges in anticolonial resistance (Ambedkar 2011).

Where these three accounts align, in addition to their foundation in a dialectic of inner and outer freedom, is on the claim that inner freedom makes possible a certain intersubjectivity or relationality that is the condition of possibility for outer freedom.[12] This interstitial relational (or intersubjective) terrain mediating inner and outer freedom becomes for them all the ground on which to problematise postcolonial order and its proper subject. In place of that subjective imaginary's vision of control and mastery, of distance and arrogation (of disembeddedness),

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[11] In the chapter on Dalit literature later in this thesis, I point out how this account of self-rule in Ambedkar is both radicalised and resisted by Dalit poets and writers in Bombay in the 1970s.

[12] In drawing out these resonances between Gandhi, Ambedkar and JP I do not seek to elide what are significant differences across their accounts. For instance, reflecting what was a prolonged intellectual and political conflict, Ambedkar saw in the villages (and so, village councils) of Gandhi's constructive program the root of pervasive and violent practices of caste discrimination. For him, as I show more fully in the chapter on Dalit literature, the attainment of freedom was not in terms of a return to village *swaraj*, but in terms of an act of departure from that site so deeply imbricated in the violence of caste: to leave the fold (by way of mass conversion to Buddhism) and make possible a different world based in friendship (*maitri*) (Ambedkar 2011; Elam 2021). Yet, my aim is also not to try to reconcile these disparate democratic visions for postcolonial India. What I seek to draw attention to is how Gandhi, Ambedkar and JP in their own ways lay out a field of problematisations of the subjective order of postcolonial India. The point is not to pose one figure against another, but to suggest how each makes it possible to think anticolonial unruliness in the surround of the transformational constitutionalist project.

these radical democratic visions put forth the inescapably intertwined, situated condition of the postcolonial subject. The practices of subjectivisation in and through which such relationality is performed disrupts the neat linearity of the transformational constitutionalist project, because it disturbs the stability and orderliness of the image of the postcolonial subject proper to such a project. This relationality that Gandhi, Ambedkar, and JP variously call interconnectedness, interdependence, and friendship, I call sociality in the chapters that follow. A sociality that we will see performed in the villages of the Narmada Valley as they are submerged by a dam, performed in the streets and slums of Bombay, and in its *chawls* and textile mills. Such sociality is always unruly, I suggest, because what is at stake in its performance is not only its problematisation of the autonomy and self-possession of the postcolonial subject, but equally its refusal to adhere to that configuration of ways of speaking, doing, and being that is proper to such a subject. It appears out of place and speaks out of turn. Sociality in this sense resists postcolonial order, and it is the rhythms of such unruly sociality outside and in the surround that is the focus of this thesis.

But in doing so, my suggestion is not that the unruly practices that this thesis explores are simply instantiations of a Gandhian, Ambedkarite, or JP-ite political program or that they are somehow derivative of these visions of the postcolonial subject. They are, instead, interventions into the field of problematisations marked out by these Indian radical democratic imaginaries. The practices that are the subject of this thesis draw on such radical democratic visions, encounter their limits, and introduce to them their own augment. Through every such supplement, they broaden the repertoires of radical democratic practice in postcolonial India, extending the sites and spaces from which the postcolonial subjective order is interrupted and disturbed. At the same time, registering the dispersed and plural sites of these interventions, their unruly visions of the postcolonial subject, and their democratic force calls for a corresponding expansion of the vocabularies through which such interventions are read and thought. It calls, I argue, for an opening up of the dialogue, turning the field of problematisations of postcolonial order that we find across Gandhi, Ambedkar, and JP into the site of a larger conversation. One where radical democratic imaginary from post/colonial India are placed alongside contemporary radical democratic thought emerging in a western European theoretical apparatus.

A Broadened Vocabulary – Rancière and Tully on unruliness and democracy

In particular, I want to turn our attention to the work of Jacques Rancière and James Tully. In their respective accounts of democratic politics, they traverse boundaries between order and unruliness that are analogous to those between postcolonial order and anticolonial resistance at work in postcolonial India. In Rancière's work, for instance, democratic politics is the site of a tense disjunct between two competing senses of democracy, what he calls 'appropriate' and 'too much' democracy; good and bad democracy (Rancière 2009b). His ironic use of these labels designed to draw attention to what he argues is a dissonance between democratic government and democratic life, rooted in his broader account of politics and its relation to police.

Politics, for Rancière, is an intervention into an order or arrangement of bodies, of their capacities to speak, to act, and be heard. This order, that Rancière calls police, is a particular distribution or partition of modes of perception and forms of appearance that present themselves as given or natural. More pointedly, a police order is a distribution of bodies and an allocation of functions and capacities for speech and action. Such a 'distribution of the sensible' defines and delimits what is visible and sayable (Rancière 1999, 29). The police order in this sense determines the legibility and intelligibility of particular utterances and actions, prescribing what counts and what does not, instituting a hierarchy that determines who counts and who does not. Who is allocated a place in this distribution of bodies, and who is left out, who is fit to govern and to rule, and who must simply follow orders. Importantly, for Rancière, such a distribution is rooted in a logic of totality or saturation (Rancière 2001, 8; Rancière and Panagia 2000, 124). Its allocation of roles, functions, and places institutes a social wholeness without any gaps or absences. There is, in other words, no remainder – a police order not only allocates places but also decides those without a proper place. Those who fit in the given distribution, precisely in terms of being unfit – those who are made invisible, not discounted or ignored, but accorded the place of no place; who fit into such a totality precisely in the sense that do not fit.

Politics intervenes in such an order by disturbing this foundational logic of saturation or totality. Which is to say, politics is an interruption of such totality by pointing up that which is left out; those that do not count, or who are accounted for precisely as not counting. In this sense, politics is the staging of an impropriety where those who do not belong – who have no business to know, act, and speak – claim precisely the capacity(ies) denied them (Panagia 2009, 300). Against the hierarchies internal to a police order, politics proceeds from an affirmation of the "equal capacity of anybody" (Rancière 2009a, 120). It points up the contingency of police and its organisation of modes of perception and expression by presupposing, and acting on, an equality that such order denies. As Rancière argues, politics is "always a mode of expression that undoes the perceptible

divisions of the police order by implementing a basically heterogenous assumption, that of a part of those who have no part, an assumption that, at the end of the day, itself demonstrates the sheer contingency of the order, the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being." (Rancière 1999, 30). Politics, then, is a break or interruption of the logic of distribution that is constitutive of police order (Rancière 2001) It is in this sense that Rancière speaks of politics as the staging of a dissensus. The police order and its distribution claim a totality, but the interruption of politics shows how such totality - the common whole that it seeks to 'be' - is internally split. That is, it is the site of a contestation - between two visions of such totality, between two visions of the whole, the common. And insofar as it marks such a dissensual break, upending a given organisation or configuration of modes of being, saying and doing based on an egalitarian principle, politics is intrinsically democratic.

In this light, democratic government means, for Rancière, a Statist and representative paradigm operationalised through a network of institutions and bureaucratic procedures (Rancière 2009b, 72). Which is to say, democratic government is nothing other than an order of democratic police. An arrangement of democratic rule that institutes (and preserves) a distribution of the capacities to rule and govern. Indeed, he makes this clear when he suggests that what we identify as democratic government is not democratic at all but simply a state of oligarchic rule (Rancière 2009b, 73). What is at stake in democratic government is not a democratic egalitarian principle, but the creation and sustaining of limits, of criteria and categories that reinforce the principle of hierarchy that is its ground.

Democratic government insists on such orderliness in the conduct of democracy to keep at bay the chaotic unruliness of too much democracy. This 'too much' democracy, counter-posed to the propriety of democratic government, is what Rancière identifies as democratic life. Contrary to the limits and hierarchies grounding democratic government, Rancière sees in democratic life the marker of a limitlessness. Where democratic government insists on a principle that accords to some the capacity to rule and govern, democratic life, in its limitlessness, affirms that equal capacity of anybody. Democratic life is nothing other than an egalitarian interjection – the performance of the 'scandal' at the heart of democratic politics (Rancière 2009b, 41) – disrupting an orderliness that allocates places and attributes forms of speech, action and appearance proper to each, limiting what can be said or done by whom, where and when. In this sense, democratic politics is not "a form of society or government" (Rancière 2009b, 52) but an unruliness that is always threatening to set the cat amongst the pigeons because it is constitutively the rejection of any exclusive or limited claim to (or legitimacy of) rule by the absolute capacity of anybody at all. Democratic life, then, is the performance of politics (Rancière 2007, 94; 2001). It is the verification, enactment, and practice of the egalitarian presupposition upon which it acts (Rancière 1991, 137-138).

On the other hand, James Tully's theorisation of democratic politics renders these boundaries between rule and unruliness in terms of two competing visions of democratic citizenship. Starting from a problematisation of modern constitutionalism and its organisation of democratic politics, extending in his later work to questions of global citizenship, Tully argues that we are faced with two disparate and dissonant conceptions of the democratic subject: what he calls the civil and civic models of citizenship. The civil model conceives of citizenship as a product of an institutional and legal architecture that ascribes to it a set of rights, duties, roles, and functions, as well as prescribing its limits. (Tully 2008, Vol. 2, 269). As Tully argues, this civil model "focuses on citizenship as a universalizable legal status underpinned by institutions and processes of rationalisation that enable and constrain the possibility of civil activity…" (Tully 2008, Vol. 2, 248). Its formality means that citizenship under such a model is understood in terms of an office that an individual can aspire to, attain, and own. This is a subject that is proper to its office, and in its propriety exercises mastery over such office. The civil citizen is autonomous in this sense, enjoying a capacity to be and act and speak freely. But such autonomy also means a necessary removal or distance from that which makes such a subject possible in the first place. That is, civil citizenship establishes its model by disembedding its proper subject from the plural democratic terrain from which it emerges and upon which it acts. Which is to say, the civil model of citizenship, for Tully, extricates the civil citizen from the democratic life that is the condition of possibility of such a citizen.

In contrast to such extrication, models of civic citizenship de-formalise and de-institutionalise the democratic subject. Civic citizenship proceeds from a rejection of the institutional/legal orientation that is constitutive of civil models, locating democratic subjectivity in the multiplicity of practices through which citizenship is negotiated and enacted. Tully's account of civic citizenship draws out how, much less than an office, subjectivity is an ongoing practice – plural and heterogenous, dialogic and relational (Tully 2014). It calls attention to the singular enactments and performances of subjects as they participate in practices of reimagination and transformation that take institutional contexts and practices of governance and control as their object (Tully 2008, Vol. 2, 248). Such a mode of conceiving the democratic subject puts into question the autonomy of civil subjectivity, pointing up the irreducibility and ineradicability of embodied performance, of gestures and movements, of utterances, noises, and speech that are not necessarily consonant with the formal strictures of a civil model and its propriety. Instead of distance, the civic model privileges participation. Civic freedom (emerging from practices of civic citizenship) is not so much a property or capacity to be owned and held, as it is an experience that derives from participation (Tully 2008, Vol. 2, 269). From that is, an engagement with others in these practices of transformation that proceed from the embeddedness (the political, social, and cultural situatedness) of such a citizen. Practices of civic citizenship call for listening as a

responsiveness to the speech, gestures and actions of others – operating in the surround of dominant frameworks of legibility – as the condition of possibility for shared existence. Engaging in these practices is an exemplification of democratic citizenship, of the possibilities of democratic subjectification that are responsive to - that listen to - forms of speaking and acting that have been rendered invisible or unintelligible. These are practices that reject the reduction of democratic citizenship to a list of possessions, offices, and procedures linked to a particular institutional form. In its place, it proposes a vision of democratic subjectivity as an ongoing, dialogic practice of performing and transforming what it means to be such a subject. There are deep resonances here with the practices of the self that Gandhi saw as constitutive of *swaraj*. Indeed, Tully identifies Gandhi's work as one exemplar of civic citizenship and freedom. *Swaraj* as a way to set to work on oneself, to engage in a practice of discovery and experimentation is analogous to the kind of practices Tully has in mind.

The resonances with Gandhi also point to the distinctly practical character of Tully's account. Civil or civic citizenship can only be understood in terms of the practices through which each is enacted. But it is not so much the practices themselves that distinguish the two models, but the spirit or attitude with which subjects partake in them. In other words, there are no practices proper to either civil or civic citizenship models, only a mode of relating or responsiveness, an attitude or orientation, through which they are approached. That Tully places particular import on this question of attitude or orientation in conceiving of forms of democratic citizenship is made clear in his suggestion that civic freedom is constituted by the development of a critical attitude. One "[where] subjects not only act in accord with the rules but also stand back and try to call a rule into question and negotiate its modification" (Tully 2008, Vol. 1, 25). Civic freedom is this critical activity that problematises citizens' given, situated positions – as crisscrossed by relations of governance and embedded in its practices – transforming it into a site of negotiation and reimagination. It reorients citizens' approaches to such practices, making possible forms of acting differently (in disorderly ways), resisting, or refusing. It makes possible, in this way, the transformation of practices of governance into practices of freedom (Tully 2008, Vol. 1, 23). In this sense, practices of civic freedom, in all their plurality, are distinguished by a critical attitude or orientation that seeks to transform sites of civil subjectivation into spaces for/of the civic exploration of democratic subjectification.

In their own ways, then, both Tully and Rancière identify a tension between two visions or schemas of democratic subjectivity. Rancière in terms of a dissensus that manifests the opposed logics of police and politics, and Tully in terms of a dissonance between two orientations to democratic citizenship. Democratic politics, for both, is a matter of practice and performance, of intervention and transformation, of enactment and manifestation. In the interventions and practices they each identify as constitutive of democratic politics, however, note also how they

draw attention to that boundary between order and chaos – between a stable, universalizing image of the proper democratic subject and that which is in its surround. The very boundary that, in a different register and in a different vocabulary, is drawn in radical democratic Indian theory, in the debates of the Constituent Assembly that institute postcolonial orderliness, and in Bhagat's songs.

Of course, this is not to suggest that there is a straightforward consonance between Tully's and Rancière's work – much less that a similar consonance can be readily identified in their relation to the work of Gandhi, Ambedkar, or JP. Across these works, there are important divergences on the nature of democratic politics that it is not my aim to elide. Instead, I want to suggest that in reading across them – across these differences – it becomes possible to expand the vocabularies and repertoires through which unruly practice is thought and written about; and, as I say more fully below, expand the repertoires into which such practices make their vernacular intervention. Over the course of the chapters of this thesis, it is these expansions and augmentations that are staged. To note, for instance, how Tully's account of civic freedom and its practices enrich Gandhian, Ambedkarite, and JP-ite visions of *swaraj* as self-mastery and a practice of the self; drawing attention to how practices of civic citizenship, and analogous practices of *swaraj*, make possible radical and plural visions of democratic subjectification. Or equally, to note how Rancière' work not only allows for speaking of postcolonial order in terms of an arrangement or distribution of bodies, of their modes of perception, forms of legibility and capacities for speech and action, but also how it emphasises the disruptive egalitarian presupposition internal to practices of *swaraj* and anticolonial unruliness.[13]

Noting such resonances may ostensibly seem at a certain remove from Rancière's thinking of politics, insofar as speaking of such practices of the self appears to presuppose a commitment to an ethical orientation that Tully, Gandhi, JP, and Ambedkar all share. Rancière, however, stresses that democratic life has nothing to do with an ethics or a way of being (Rancière 1999, 101). Instead, democracy is precisely a break away from such a way of being and its dispositional distribution. Norval, however, suggests there is more shared across Rancière's account and those that locate an ethical orientation at the core of practices of democratic subjectification. She argues that Rancière's rejection of ethics is, in part, a result of his particular conception of a democratic ethos. Framing it as a set of principles that guide and govern democratic action in general precludes any possibility of thinking of it as part of what Rancière understands as

[13] Postcolonial order, then, is as much a question of Constitutional arrangements as it is an aesthetic question. It concerns the appearance and manifestation of the proper subject of the transformational constitutional project. Or conversely, the invisibility and illegibility of the unruly masses. The unruly performances that are the subject of this thesis can thus be read in terms of their interruptions of a distribution of the sensible.

democratic life. Yet, by reconceiving such an ethics in terms of practices of 'critical subjectification' rather than governance of the conduct of a "given and pure conception of identity", Norval argues, allows us to rethink the terms of Rancière's rejection (Norval 2012, 819). Because at stake now is not a given way of being, or disposition, but precisely its interrogation. At stake is the critical activity of problematising a given subjective order and its modes of action and speech, experimenting with it, calling it into question, and playing with it in ways that bring forth novel possibilities of subjectification. Such an ethics is nothing more than a responsiveness to what is given and the possibilities of difference.

But, as Woodford points out, even this minimal ethical requirement that Norval's aversive account of democratic subjectification suggests is compatible with Rancière's thinking of democratic politics imposes an injunction to respond that constrains the possibilities of political action (Woodford 2021, 96-101). Of course, politics is, for Rancière, utterly bound to the logics of police (Rancière 2009a, 118). The disruptions or interruptions of politics do not emerge from nowhere, but from a periphery that is the product of a given configuration of forms of speech and action. Politics is always an intervention into this order and takes as its materials the elements of such a police order, reconfiguring them. And in this sense, it is attentive to the world as it is, and the perceptive givens that sustain it; taking this givenness as the site of a practice of disruption. Indeed, for Rancière, the process of subjectification entails a "reconfiguration of the field of experience" even as it enacts "a body and a capacity [not] previously identifiable" within this field (Rancière 1999, 35). Gauny took over the evenings that the life of labour had allocated to him as rest, Blanqui took up the proletarian profession that is not a profession.[14] But such attention is not responsiveness. It is an attentiveness that attests to the possibility of difference, of more than critical subjectification, of performing an unruliness unbound to any injunction to respond or any constraint such an injunction imposes. In each case (and Rancière's repertoire has many others), the intervention performed – the political interruption – is the product of a particular attention to the givenness of distribution of the sensible they found themselves in.

In staging this dialogue, then, it becomes possible to see how Rancière's work pushes practices of civic citizenship and practices of *swaraj* beyond any ethical mooring. Beyond what Woodford calls "the logic of the archipolitical ethical community" (Woodford 2021, 102), to pay attention to its surrounds, to what is taking place beyond and from the outside, in a language foreign to such

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[14] As Rancière notes in his discussion of Blanqui's utterance, what is at stake is the way he reconfigures the profession he is asked to state. Importantly for the argument I make here, Blanqui transforms the magistrate's question into a scene of dissensus. His response does not accord to any ethical commitment or orientation, but simply an attentiveness to this presence of two worlds in one. As he points out, "For the prosecutor, embodying police logic, profession means job, trade: the activity that puts a body in its place and function...Blanqui gives the same word a different meaning: [a] profession of faith, a declaration of a membership of a collective." (Ranciere 1999, 38-39).

community. But all the same, even as Rancière's work refuses to be situated within the parameters of an ethical injunction, and even as it stretches and pushes practices of *swaraj* and critical subjectification beyond those ethical anchor points, these practices still draw attention to that which Rancière's work elides. In reading Rancière, Tully and radical democratic Indian thought across their differences, in other words, it becomes possible to not only think practices of *swaraj* and critical subjectification as operating in the surround of any presupposed ethical community, but also to locate how such practices point to the grounds for the disruptive interjection of democratic life. Not ethical grounds but, I suggest, the processes that create the conditions in which the aesthetic work that Rancière discusses might first become possible.[15]

My intent is not to subsume one into the other but to hold these apparatuses of thought in a productive tension in which it becomes possible to register tentative complementarities and productive dissonances. Ones that help expand and augment the vocabularies and repertoires of democratic politics in and through which unruly practice in postcolonial India is seen and heard, and to which such practice introduces an augment. As I point out above, with Gandhi, Ambedkar and JP, my aim is not to resolve differences and provide a coherent and unified theoretical framework. Instead, I aim to sketch out this field into which the practices I engage in the following chapters make their intervention, registering how the performances of unruly bodies enact novel visions of radical democratic politics and subjectivity in the surround of postcolonial order.

The discussion is composed of a double movement, then. On the one hand, a widening of our vocabularies and repertoires of democratic politics makes possible a richer translation of unruly practice and its democratic force. On the other, such widening also makes it possible to register the dents, bends, infiltrations, improvisations, and disruptions carried out by unruly practice on these very vocabularies, and the modes of thought through which unruliness is apprehended or read. In marking these indents, the discussion in this thesis registers how, for instance, an art of

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[15] Owen (2023b) argues that Tully's work introduces a similar supplement to Rancière's theorisation. While Rancière can provide a powerful account of the ways in which democratic life disrupts an inegalitarian logic and thus makes visible the part of no part, he does not "engage in the aesthetic work required to address specific problems of invisibility" (p. 366). Owen suggests Tully's work is far more productive in this regard – participating in processes of reciprocal elucidation that amount to doing the 'hard aesthetic labour of making visible the part of no part'. The point being made here, and throughout this thesis, however, is not that Rancière does not carry out the aesthetic labour of showing how the part of no part manifests. Instead, it is that his work elides a consideration of the processes that create the conditions in which such labour might become possible. It is precisely these processes that Tully, Gandhi, Ambedkar and JP provide a way to think and see, as practices of *swaraj* and critical subjectification. I agree with Owen that reading across Tully and Rancière allows us to register the supplements Tully's work introduces to Rancière's in novel and productive ways, yet I differ in what such a supplement consists of.
My gratitude to Clare Woodford for drawing my attention to this point.

Dalit writing both draws on Rancière's thinking of democratic excess and simultaneously renders it in a different key – away from appearance or manifestation, towards a fugitive in/visibility. Or how performances of indigenous resistance against the construction of a dam, both build on a Gandhian (and Tully-ian) vision of *swaraj* and generate ripples within practices of the self constitutive of such a vision. Or, indeed, how practices of care in working class housing estates in Bombay both draw on a (Gandhian) repertoire of sociality and introduce to it an improper augment. The point is to mark that dialogic process in which neither is left untouched – where a philosophical apparatus is as much elucidating as elucidated.

This is a question not only of these performances – and of the insurgent India(s) they instance – but of their salience for radical democratic thought and practice more broadly. As Parasher and Dalton both note, the postcolonial moment in India birthed imaginaries of radical democratic politics that make an original contribution to our thinking of democratic politics. The central argument of this thesis is that in the extensions, augmentations, and reimaginations of these imaginaries, practices of resistance and refusal in the postcolony become exemplars of radical democratic politics and its possibilities. It is to these augments that this project is committed. It is an inquiry into the democratic potency of such insurgent actions. Of how they make possible – how they perform and exemplify – thinking and acting differently. An inquiry into how unruly practice opens a break or rupture from which a radical divergence from orderly visions of the subject is made apparent.[16] And equally, it is an inquiry into the ways in which democratic possibility can be understood by drawing attention to practices of unruliness and the forms of writing and thought that they encounter.

[16] This is not to romanticise unruliness, but to broaden its repertoire, to go looking after all those performances, but also sense or perceive their limits as they are put to work. In this sense, my point is not to valorise disorder, but to pluralise the terms on which it is interpreted, spoken about, listened to and read. There is something inescapably democratic about this – putting into question an organisation of life and the configuration of its forms by suggesting another way, many other ways, opening up the rigidity and hardness of an orderly vision of the subject to such plurality. And this means, affirming what Rancière calls the equal capacity of anybody. To refuse and to undo boundaries that prescribe whose place it is to know, to think, and to act.

Scenes of unruliness – rejecting arrogation

But this still leaves open the question of how such an inquiry can be carried out, what methods it draws on, and how it goes about registering and marking the unruly interjections of unruly practice. Above, I pointed to a certain arrogance, or arrogation, as a constitutive feature of postcolonial order. Internal to the transformational constitutionalist project was the presupposition of a distribution or partition in which it fell to some to know, to think and to act, and to others to simply follow. The leaders of the postcolonial transition – in the Constituent Assembly as well as the Congress – accorded to themselves a specialised knowledge, insight, and mastery, which was then brought to bear on the masses in terms of a developmental project. The masses and their 'unruly aspirations of freedom, equality and democracy', on the other hand, are allocated the position of ignorance – unable to grasp the meaning of their actions, their utterances, incapable of the 'quiet contemplation' necessary to the task of postcolonial transition. Postcolonial order is the orderly process by which these masses are "taken out of their ignorance and shown what they don't see" (Rancière 2016, 86). The unruly practices that are the focus of this thesis take as their point of departure a rejection of the terms of such arrogation. The preceding section discussed the theoretical reorientation called for by such a rejection, and I now want to draw attention to the necessity of a similar methodological reorientation.

For, if the aim is to register the interruptions and distensions of postcolonial order by unruly practice carried out based on a rejection of the arrogation internal to such an order, then a similar rejection must be the point of departure for how these practices are read and thought. A shift by which dominant hierarchies of theory and practice are untangled and reimagined. The reorientation called for here recasts the relationship between a theoretical apparatus and the forms of legibility and intelligibility that it prescribes, and modes of enactment that are seen as more or less in accord with such forms, and thus more or less visible or sensible. My aim is not, as Tully notes, to work from a "horizon of political theory that frames the exchange and places the theorist above the demos" (Tully 2008, Vol. 1, 4). Instead, the chapters of this thesis proceed from a flattening out, or horizontalization of the relationship between forms of practice and inscription, and forms of thought and legibility. In the discussion that follows, the rejection and refusal of postcolonial order is tied to a refusal of a hierarchy between unruly practice and how it is thought about. The interruptions unruly practice makes in postcolonial order go hand-in-hand, in this sense, with an intervention in the ways in which such practice is read and understood.

Practices of unruliness claim for themselves a certain primacy by which they no longer remain material for theoretical reflection or explication but demand to be seen as "historically situated

practices of practical reasoning." (Tully 2008, Vol. 1, 28-29). The approach here, in reading and thinking unruliness, stops being one of theory informing practice – of an epistemic and hermeneutic privilege it enjoys and with which it can make visible what others cannot see. Instead, dialogues and conversations are set up through which the stakes of unruly practice are elucidated reciprocally in the encounters with apparatuses of intelligibility. Seen this way, the point also stops being about such practices as some sort of instantiation of theory or so many examples of a generalised theoretical gesture. A recognition of the primacy of practice amounts to a recognition of the singularity and irreducibility of unruly practices and their democratic force. In their distinctive performances of an unruly subjectivity, spoken in an improper vernacular from the surround of postcolonial order, it is not possible to locate a general theory, template, or rule of democratic practice or imagination. Instead, the focus is to get drawn into the singularly democratic gesture and potency of each such performance.

The primacy demanded by unruly practice, then, enacts a displacement of the dominant relation between theory and practice. For Tully, that dominant relation is organised around four principal assumptions that arrogate to the theorist a unique insight and mastery. The theorist possesses, on this account, the capacity to discern processes of historical development, articulate universal normative principles, identify immanent constraints to democratic activity, and explicate the institutional conditions of possibility of political action (Tully 2008, Vol. 1, 3-11). A commitment to the primacy of practice displaces these assumptions by undoing that expository role of political theory; from seeing the role of a given theoretical apparatus as providing the modes of explanation and interpretation that first make it possible to understand political activity.[17] The primacy of practice calls attention to scenes or situations that compel a certain reorganisation of ways of 'seeing', of how particular enactments have been read, heard and seen up to this point, and of the generalised system of seeing, hearing and reading in which they are embedded (Rancière 2009a, 115). Interventions that can be read not so much through the strictures of intelligibility such a field presupposes, but through the ripples emerging from the point of their encounter. In this sense, there is no explanation at work in the chapters that follow, at least in terms of uncovering something hidden or somehow invisible and unavailable to those participating in practices that resist postcolonial order. Rancière, Tully, Gandhi, Ambedkar or JP – or indeed, any of the other theoretical apparatuses gathered here - do not accord or attribute to unruly practice some political valence it did not know it had. On the

[17] As Rancière also points out in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, inherent in the role of theory and theorist in such an explanatory model is a reinforcement of an inegalitarian logic in which the knowledge-provider asserts their superiority. The act of explanation – in the sense of that activity that accords meaning to practice, to performance – is, on this view, much less a transmission of knowledge than a stultification, a perpetuation of a hierarchy between explainer and explained (Ranciere 1991). I return to Jacotot's lesson, and Rancière's reading of it later in this introduction and again at the end of this thesis.

contrary, in these conversations it becomes possible to engage in a process of translation and reassembly and paraphrasing by which the singularly democratic force of unruly practice becomes palpable.

At the same time, a commitment to the primacy of practice also demands a reconfiguration of the sites of democratic possibility. Which is to say a primacy of practice necessitates bringing together that which, in the order of police, does not belong together. It entails a levelling by way of which that which must not meet is put to the site of direct meeting. Rancière calls these limit-moments where a scene is staged that dismantles the hierarchies "between different levels of reality, and discourses and their usual methods for judging whether a phenomenon is significant" (Rancière 2016, 67). Against that tendency to divide words from chatter – quiet contemplation from the cacophony of the masses – Rancière's discussion of limit-moments shows us how "words are still words, arguments are still arguments, narration is still narration." (Rancière 2009a, 117). And insofar as these limit-moments call into question those hierarchies that order forms of speech and action, they are moments that manifest what is to the outside of such orderliness. In the surround of that arrangement and spoken in a vernacular utterly improper to it. Limit-moments stage the unruliness of the direct meetings and encounters between what cannot come together, holding them there and enabling a dialogue that is otherwise precluded.

Moments where an Adivasi farmer narrates histories of land, earth, and community. Where a Gujarati woman in Bombay (Mumbai) shares stories of her *chawl* with her grandson. When a Dalit taxi driver sitting in his cab in the narrow lanes of Kamathipura scribbles on a scrap of newspaper, 'O Death! My sweet kinsman/ be careful/ lest you die in this rabble of decent folk'. And where they each meet the words of a certain theoretical apparatus. Across its chapters, this thesis stages these limit-moments, the scenographies from where it becomes possible to register the interruptions of postcolonial order performed by unruly practice. If this appears improper, then that is at least partly the point. The rhythms of unruly practice cannot be sensed or felt except by way of a certain unruliness that is introduced – at their insistence – to theory. A reading of unruly practice demands an unruliness in the methods of reading and thinking – unruly practice compels unruly theory compels unruly thought.

This thesis works its way through three distinct scenographies, elements of which I have already prefigured in the preceding discussion. Each stages a three-way encounter between a practice of unruliness, a system of thinking democratic politics into which it intervenes, and a subjective schema proper to postcolonial order which it interrupts. In the second chapter, a protest movement (the *Narmada Bachao Andolan*, lit. Save Narmada Movement) against the construction of a dam on the Narmada river in Central India becomes the site for an encounter

between communal practices of bund-building, singing and dance, a Gandhian imaginary of *swaraj* embodied by protesters, and an order of the proper subject of postcolonial development. Building on a phenomenological contrast between an encounter with the dam and participation in practices of bund-building, I suggest how each generates a distinct subjective imaginary, schematising and moulding bodies in particular ways. The dam institutes an order of the proper subject of the postcolonial developmental state. As a defining infrastructural feature of such a state, an encounter with it from the specially-built viewing galleries contorts forms of speech, action, and appearance in terms of distance and arrogation; visuality and mastery, disembeddedness and domination. This subjective imaginary reinforces the partitions between those who can speak, act and decide, and those who must follow; partitions that the dam instantiates in steel and concrete, in controlling who has access to its waters and viewing galleries, in the evictions of indigenous communities from their land, and in the submergence it causes. In building a bund, however, the distance and disembeddedness constitutive of an encounter with the dam give way to proximity, sociality, and touch. Drawing on Fanon's critique of the proper subject of phenomenology in *Black Skin, White Masks*, and the decentring of visuality as the ground for phenomenological experience internal to that critique, I suggest how practices of bund-building problematise the imaginary of the dam's proper subject. I emphasise touch as a mode of phenomenological experience that disorders the partitions instituted in the dam in terms of an intersubjectivity that extends outwards to the other, the community, the village, the forests, the river, the valley. Suggesting that it is precisely such sociality in the surround of the dam's subjective order that energises the *Narmada Bachao Andolan*'s resistance to the dam, I draw attention to how it is performed by the *Andolan* in villages across the valley. Turning to oral histories, films, and ethnographic studies of the *Andolan*, I point to how the Narmada Movement builds on a Gandhian repertoire of practices of *swaraj* while simultaneously introducing an augment to such a repertoire. These are gestures of unruliness, enunciated in an improper vernacular – one that emerges in the valley, from living in it.

In the third chapter, the first Dalit literary conference in Bombay in 1958 becomes the site of a dialogue between upper-caste literary orders, a Rancièrean account of literary politics, and the inscriptions of a fugitive literarity in the works of Dalit writers Namdeo Dhasal and Baburao Bagul. My discussion there begins by identifying how the strictures and rules of realist, upper-caste Indian writing – a form of writing that emerges hand-in-hand with the transformational constitutionalist project – precluded the possibilities of Dalit subjectivity, with Dalit bodies relegated to silence and inaction. The Conference of 1958, however, sets into motion an arc of Dalit writing that resists and refuses the partitions constitutive of realist Indian literature. Building on the premise that the inscriptions of such resistance can be read productively through Rancière's work on the politics of literature, I point out how Dhasal and Bagul's works

dismantle literary orderliness. What their art of writing intervenes in and disrupts are all those linkages that tie bodies to words and meanings, subject-positions to their appropriate forms of representation and expression, letting loose a (democratic) muteness of the letter. Some extant readings of Dalit literature through a Rancièrean lens locate in this literary-political gesture of disidentification the work of articulating a new vision of Dalit subjectivity, a new collective enunciated by an art of Dalit writing against literary propriety. Yet, I suggest, this is precisely what Rancière thinks literature cannot do. The excess – of words, of signs, of meanings unbound to any proper place – that literature puts into circulation precludes any return to the kind of coalescing, subjectivising operation that would make possible the inscription of a novel subject. But in returning to Dhasal and Bagul's works, I argue that it becomes possible to register how the dismantling work of literature can be the performance of an unruly subjective imaginary. Dhasal and Bagul's works inscribe improper, fugitive visions of Dalit manhood as suspension, caught in the break between taking shape, locating a form of appearance and speech, and dissolving into noise. Dalit manhood becomes the inscription of invisibility and refusal, evading capture within a given arrangement of forms of speech, appearance, and action in the interest of words, gestures, and noise in the surround of such arrangements. In this they introduce an augment not only to Rancière's account of literary politics but also, I argue, to Ambedkarite visions of Dalit subjectivity and Dalit politics. For Dhasal and Bagul, the inscriptions of an unruly Dalit manhood become a refusal to partake as much in the terms offered by postcolonial literary orderliness as in those offered by postcolonial subjectivity.

In the fourth chapter, a protest by workers at the New Great Eastern Textile Mills in Bombay stages an encounter between an order of property and its proper subject brought to bear on the city, a reconfiguration of urban space and the movement and appearance of bodies across it, and practices of care and sociality in forms of communal living in working-class housing estates called *chawls*. As the Bombay Municipal Corporation (BMC) undertakes a large project of urban renewal and beautification – which, I suggest, is nothing other than a neoliberal reconfiguration of the city – textile mills (once the industrial core of the city) are closed, and the housing estates where mill-workers and their families lived are sold to property developers to 'redevelop' into luxury, high-rise apartments. In this context, as the city closes its doors to working-class communities – withdrawing public services, dismantling public infrastructures, and enclosing communities into its new spatial order – the *chawls* become vital sites of solidarity and sociality that make life in the neoliberal, beautified city possible for those that are told they do not belong. Moreover, I argue that the complexity of *chawl* life, the overlaying and contingency of claims to ownership, property, and exclusion, disrupt the neatness of the city's proprietary order. Against the project of beautification rooted in a logic of privation and exclusion, of carving up the city into discrete zones and orchestrating the movements of bodies between them, *chawl*

life draws attention to the unruly surrounds of the beautified city and its proper subject. Turning to Honig's account of public things, I show how the *chawl* becomes a vital site for the practice of solidarity, sociality and care and the imagination of novel, disorderly visions of subjectivity. Yet, in staging this dialogue, I also mark how the *chawls* speak back to Honig's account: the complexity and impropriety of *chawl* life suggests a necessary impropriety of public things. In being sites of democratic imagination and subjectification, public things must be sites of refusal of proprietary order. The striking workers at the New Great Eastern textile mill transform the mill compound into an improper and unruly place, a public thing, a site for the performance of a radical vision of the subject of the city.

A genre of unruliness

Taken together, these distinct limit-moments and scenographies evince, I suggest, a genre of unruly practice that, in its reconfigurations and arrangements, makes possible the realisation of their singular democratising gesture. Genre, for Cavell in his reading of film, has two forms: as cycle and as medium (Cavell 1979). 'Conventional' understandings of cinematic genre, as instances of an ideal type or derivates of a particular template, are what Cavell identifies as genre-as-cycle. Here, an entity belongs to a given genre if it meets the necessary criteria for inclusion – criteria that are independent of and external to any particular instantiation of the genre. On the other hand, understood as medium, Cavell reimagines the relationship between a genre and its members. Conceived in this way, there is no essential list or set of conventions, formulas, or forms of enactments and modes of speech and action that define a given genre (Cavell 1979). As medium, genre is the condition of possibility of film. Genre is known only through the ways a film develops and deploys the conventions, formulas, motifs and figures, and utterances and enactments of a given genre – the ways it takes up and uses, rather than accords with, such features (Cavell 1979, 31-32). In other words, Cavell's point is that it is only in the performance of – and so claiming membership of – a genre that we can identify and make sense of the essential criteria or conventions of such a genre. But this also means that each such performance brings to light different aspects of the conventions that organize a genre, introducing a supplement to everything that has come before. Each performance of a genre, on this account, interrogates the conditions of its own possibility and sheds light on elements of the genre that were until then hidden or concealed (Havercroft 2023, 176). In this sense, genre-as-medium is a disruption of the hierarchical arrangement between a practice and the forms of legibility and intelligibility that accord to it its meaning and significance. In the context of my discussion here, I want to suggest that the unruly genre evinced through this thesis is precisely such a medium. It carries no presupposition of its proper form or modes of appearance and enactment, and neither does it have any necessary consistency or homogeneity. Instead, each performance of unruliness that I discuss brings to light a particular aspect of a genre of unruliness that was earlier hidden and invisible. They each point up features of such a genre, not as meeting a list of criteria, but as supplements to other similar performances.

Despite their differences, Cavell points out, members of a genre do share some commonalities. As he argues, "the idea is that the members of a genre share the inheritance of certain conditions, procedures and subjects, and goals of composition, and [each] member of such a genre represents a study of these conditions, something I think of as bearing the responsibility of the inheritance." (Cavell 1981, 28). Even as each member brings to light a different facet of the genre, that process is the result of an interrogation of the conditions, procedures, and

subjects of such a genre that are nonetheless common to all members. Again, this is not to suggest that each member of a genre shares in an elemental commonality that is external to them all. What they do share is the modes of interrogation, the procedures and operations by which they explore the conventions of a genre. Procedures and operations that can only be known and understood in their performance. The shared inheritance of members of a genre is, for Cavell, the ground on which each member is able to draw out their own supplement to it. It is not only what links the members together, identifying them as members of a genre, but also what makes possible the augmentation of the genre that they each enact.

This thesis tells three different stories, yet they all share a commonality – an inheritance: postcolonial order. Each of the performances of unruliness discussed in this thesis is an interruption into a postcolonial orderliness defined by a shape of the postcolonial subject and an arrangement or organization bodies, their forms of visibility, enunciation, and enactment. Each scene draws out the unruly performances of restive and recalcitrant bodies refusing to fall into line, to disappear (or to appear), and to be situated within an order that distributes possibilities for speech and action. Each is an interrogation of the forms that such unruliness takes – of the myriad forms it takes and can take – as bodies evade capture, stake claim, and undo and reshape the corporeal orders they find themselves in.

In their explorations of democratic subjectivity, these members of a genre of unruliness do not conform to an ideal form or type of which they are imitations. Instead, each member presents an exemplification of the genre's features, conventions, and motifs precisely in their singularity. As such exemplars, unruly practices open up horizons by performing or instancing the possibility of being and acting in a way that is in disjunct with established forms of speech and action. In other words, exemplars and their exemplary gestures are not instances to imitate but practices to follow (Owen 2023a).[18] They manifest a different way, in other words, staging or performing the possibility of another world in this one. Consider, for instance, an art of Dalit writing that reimagines Dalit manhood in terms of a sociality in the surround of demands for subjectivisation, refusing an order of bodies and of literary form that is inescapably rooted in an order of caste. A literary unruliness that – to borrow from Cavell's discussion of Ibsen's *A Doll's*

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[18] Equally, Owen points out, it is not possible to identify or make sense of the exemplary character of a given practice outside of its enactment (Owen 2023a). On the one hand, this means exemplary practices are situated and specific, bound to a particular historical and political context. On the other, it means that discerning an exemplary practice's manifestation of a different way requires an attentiveness to the sites of its performance. Exemplars then, do not provide a template or model that can be readily imitated at other times and in other spaces. The insight or guidance exemplars offer is in the sense of drawing attention to what they make visible to us (Owen 2023a). How they compel us to see differently, to look at what is given in a new light.

House – "puts the social order as such on notice", calling on us to rethink the forms of democratic subjectivisation (Cavell 1990, 109). Or consider the everyday practices of care and sociality in the *chawls* of Bombay, that in their performance draw us to reimagine given forms of subjectivity rooted in propriety, privation and exclusion. Exemplars work, in Cavell's view, by making visible what a given perceptual organization makes invisible, accentuating aspects or facets that were until then ignored or concealed. Exemplars bring these hidden elements to light, and in so doing allow us to locate the possibilities of transformation. They provoke by unsettling what we take as a given and natural arrangement of forms of speech and action, to "open up horizons of imagination not previously available to us" (Norval 2012, 820). In this sense, exemplars work to disturb in the same way that Bhagat's songs seek to disturb.

Ultimately, this is the pedagogical task at the heart of Cavell's discussion of genre and exemplarity. A genre is a means of political and philosophical education for Cavell, teaching us to see differently, augmenting and transforming given modes of perception and interpretation, action, and response. A genre of unruliness constituted through such exemplars teaches us something of democratic possibility, of the different ways of conceiving democratic subjectivity in the surround of postcolonial order. It casts in a new light, drawing us to look differently at those sites and situations in which the surround interrupts and interjects orderliness; those limit-moments where these inflections are performed; and those practices of listening and attentiveness by which such interventions are read and heard. In the conclusion to this thesis, I return to this pedagogical operation of a genre of unruliness, drawing out the salience and import of these exemplary unruly practices for the possibilities of unruly visions of democratic subjectivity in contemporary India. There, I ask what is at stake in this pedagogical activity, suggesting that it is a practice of provocation. A rearrangement of what is already here, of what we always knew was already here, but is now seen differently. But to do that without first acquainting ourselves with the performances of which we speak misses the point entirely.

Chapter 2 Dammed Bodies: postcolonial development and performances of ecosociality in the shadow of the Sardar Sarovar dam

Introduction

On the 25th of December 1990, nearly 5000 people began a protest march against the construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam in Gujarat in western India under the banner of the *Jan Vikas Sangharsh Yatra* (trans. People's Development Struggle March). The dam was being built across the Narmada River, one of central and western India's largest waterways. In the arid, basalt-black hills that accompany the river for most of its course, the Narmada is (and has been for millennia) not only an essential drinking water and irrigation source but is also deeply embedded in indigenous cosmologies and forms of life. At the same time, the river's size and economic importance meant it was also the focus of the postcolonial Indian state's development agenda. Not only did damming the river promise economic prosperity through improved irrigation and hydroelectric power, these dams became the figure of postcolonial modernisation; the 'temples of modern India' (Marino 2012) that reinforced, in steel and concrete, a developmental vision – socioeconomic, material, and subjective – for the postcolony.[19]

A product of this vision, the Narmada Valley Development Project, first articulated in the 1960s and refined over the next decades, called for damming rivers and streams across the entire Narmada watershed, a region spanning most of central India. Thirty large dams were to be built, in addition to one hundred and thirty small and medium dams and seventy-five thousand kilometres of irrigation canals throughout the Narmada Valley (Brieger and Sauer 2000; Kothari and Bhartari 1984). The Sardar Sarovar dam, against which the 1990 protest march was organised, was only one part of this larger project, but a crucial one. At nearly a hundred and fifty metres tall, it was planned to be the largest of the dams on the Narmada. Its reservoir, once filled, would submerge vast tracts of land, and a network of canals would channel the Narmada's water to other, drier regions of Gujarat hundreds of miles away. The postcolonial state promoted – and continues to promote – the kind of mechanised, intensive agriculture

[19] Nehru famously described dams and similar large infrastructure projects as the foundations of a new, modern India; foundations that were, as the metaphor suggests, as much economic and material as spiritual and ethical (Marino 2012).

practiced in the arid plains of Gujarat. These plains, moreover, are also home to large industrial and manufacturing centres. Both of these depended on an uninterrupted supply of water and electricity from the Sardar Sarovar dam. In contrast to these demands, those made by communities – largely indigenous communities – in the mountainous regions of the Narmada Valley, demands for access to communal forest lands, to sacred groves, and traditional rights over the river and its valley, were considered superfluous and irrelevant: a hindrance to the development process (Roy 1999; Patwardhan and Dhuru 1995; Baviskar 1991). Indeed, it was these very communities that disproportionately faced the consequences of the dam's construction: the destruction of their villages and forests, the loss of traditional knowledge systems and cultural practices, the ecological collapse brought by a sudden drop in biodiversity, the forced eviction into resettlement camps, the erasure of forms of life in ways of speaking, doing and being. In a word: submergence.

The protesters gathered at the Gujarat border voiced their resistance to the dam in terms of these disastrous consequences for indigenous communities in the Narmada Valley. For the discussion that follows here, however, what is equally significant is the state's response. Repeatedly, while camped on the border, the protesters – under the leadership of Baba Amte and Medha Patkar – made speeches and wrote letters addressed to state authorities, overtures seeking dialogue, communication, and a deliberated end to the stand-off (Kazimi 1994; Baviskar 1991). But the state responded with silence. There was no possibility of discussion; the demands of the protesters, their requests and implorations even, could simply not be registered. From the perspective of the State, the protesters had no voice, incapable of articulating their demand; to respond would amount to a recognition of their capacity for speech in the same register as that of the state – a recognition, that is, of their legitimacy. They spoke, in other words, in a vernacular unfamiliar to – and improper to – the dialect of postcolonial India, the language of the postcolonial transition. A language that had its proper subject and its proper modes of address, its appropriate forms of reason. In protesting the dam – which, as I will show more fully below, is a figure of the proper subject of postcolonial order – those at the border articulated a noise that found no place within such order.[20] In the media, in press conferences,

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[20] The deep resonances between what happens at the border in Gujarat in 1990, and Rancière's discussion of the case of the plebeians on Aventine hill are striking (Ranciere 1999). Across both, what is at stake is a division or partition of the common – a distribution of the capacities for speech and action that polices what counts as speech and what is merely noise. That the patricians debate the fact that they cannot possibly respond to the plebeian demands, that the Gujarat government refuses to respond to the protesters' demands, is the staging of this partition. But, as Rancière points out in his case, these partitions are premised on the presupposition of an equality that undercuts them. To reject the plebeians' demands, the patricians must presuppose their capacity to articulate them – a capacity that is precisely what is denied to them. To reject, in parallel terms, the protesters' demands, the Gujarat government must presuppose their capacity – their legitimacy – to make them. The encounter – across Rancière and Gujarat – stages, in this sense, not only the institution of an order of speech and action but its

and speeches at the border, ministers and senior party leaders attempted to reinscribe the protesters' demands – enunciated in a vernacular that spoke of participation, equality, justice and freedom – in terms of the incoherent, violent ramblings of an extremist cabal (Baviskar 1991, 477). These were not citizens – indeed, human beings – in the same sense as the people of Gujarat (or the rest of India). They were "wood poachers and drug runners whose livelihood was threatened by the dam" and were selfishly attempting to preserve their criminal ways of life at the cost of the nation (Baviskar 1991, 477). Their savagery and violence precluded any understanding of the dam and its many benefits – to them and the postcolonial nation as a whole. Echoing the arrogance of postcolonial order, Sundarlal Patwa, then Chief Minister of the state of Madhya Pradesh, responded to the protesters: "What do they know about the project? The matter should be left in the hands of the experts." (Baviskar 1991, 478).

On Baviskar's account, the state's response to the protesters is telling of the nature of the postcolonial Indian state and its "fear of people's movements" (Baviskar 1991, 477). Indeed, the aggression and violence with which the state meets the protesters camped at the border reflects more than simple consternation at demands for a more participatory approach to development, fair compensation for acquired land, or ceasing construction on the dam. It reflects the realisation that internal to these demands is a more fundamental claim to speak and be heard, to appear and be visible – there, at the site of the dam's construction. This is a challenge – as my discussion in this chapter goes on to argue – to a whole organisation of life in the postcolony. A threat to the distribution of capacities for speech, action, knowledge, and appearance that grounds what I have called postcolonial order. The protesters disrupt this orderly image by appearing out of place (at the border) and speaking out of turn. In his speech inaugurating the large Hirakud dam on the Mahanadi river in eastern India, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru declared, "If you are to suffer, you should suffer in the interest of the country." (Roy 1999). In their march against this other large dam, the Sardar Sarovar, the protesters put into question this very order of bodies that allocates to some the place of sacrifice, whose lot it is to give up and move away.

But the subjective imaginaries of postcolonial order and the central place of large infrastructure projects such as dams to the developmental logic that is their ground, figures not only in the state's response to the protesters on its border. The Sardar Sarovar dam is itself a concrete embodiment and material figuration of such orderliness. Certainly, in the straightforward sense

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contestation. In drawing out these resonances here, I want to call attention to how at stake in the Narmada movement and its resistance to the dam is a question of the partitioning of ways of being, saying and doing, and the performances by which such partitions are interjected and disordered by an unruly surround – unruly performances and unruly words.

of the dam being a product and symbol of the quest for modernisation, efficiency and industrial progress as markers of the developmental trajectory of the postcolony. High above the riverbed, the dam allowed for a commanding grasp of the commanding heights of the economy that promised – in the minds of a few – postcolonial prosperity. But also, in what the dam's walls do. Behind its concrete curtain, the dam conceals in submergence over a million people – most from indigenous communities – forcibly evicted from their lands and their homes. Its walls hide the hundreds of thousands of hectares of ancient teak forests, insect, plant, and animal life lost to the rising water. Thousands of sites of communal religious and cultural significance, sacred groves and community forests. More than simply a symbol or product of postcolonial order, I will argue, the dam is one of its central mechanisms or operators, partitioning and separating. The dam controls access. To the river, to its water, determining who can be where, when and how; who can draw water from the river and drink it. And in the same breath, it regulates access to the processes by which, and in which, these decisions about damming and submergence get made. It institutes and reinforces, in this sense, an order of the postcolonial subject, establishing its borders, determining and delimiting its proper place/s, its possibilities of movement, and its forms of appearance.

The protest march of 1990 was part of a collective of organisations and activist groups called the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* (NBA, Narmada movement; trans. Save Narmada Movement). The NBA formed as a collective of grassroots organisations in the mid-1980s, just as plans for the construction of the Sardar Sarovar were being operationalised. Responding to widespread evictions and land acquisition – routinely without due process – the NBA soon came to be at the forefront of the struggle against the Sardar Sarovar dam. Identifying the disastrous consequences of the dam's construction on local communities, biodiversity, and ecology, the Movement demanded construction on the dam cease entirely, the plans be scrapped and – more broadly – the approach to development that the dam symbolised be put into question. Building on situated, grassroots practices of resistance that I discuss in more depth below, the NBA articulates its resistance to the dam in terms of a rejection of the developmental logic of which it is a product; the developmental logic, that is, of the postcolonial state. The NBA's resistance proceeds, I argue here, from a rejection and refusal to fall into line, to take up a place within the partitions of postcolonial order. It resists giving up and moving away, saying to the state, '*koi nahi hatega, bandh nahi banega!*' (None of us will move; the dam will not be built!) (Kazimi 1994).

My argument below is that the NBA's resistance to the dam, and the subjective order it is a figure of, is energised by smaller, community-based mechanisms of watershed management. Called *bunds*, these are small, stone and mud structures that slow or temporarily hold up the flow of water through a small stream and are a common presence across the Narmada Valley.

In paying attention to how bunds are built, repaired, and sustained, it becomes possible to register how they disorder and decentre the dam and its proper subject. Bund-building is a communal, ecologically and socially situated practice. It constitutively rejects, I suggest below, the distanced, disembodied subjective imaginary of the dam, counterposing to it an improper, intercorporeal – dusty and muddy – sociality. A sociality spoken and performed in a vernacular that undoes the authority of the dam, its articulations of development and modernity, and the forms of speech and appearance – rules of enunciation – that allow them in the first place. Against the demands of development, of national progress and eminent domain seeking disembedded mastery and control, the NBA asks the palindromic question borne of the bund – *ye konin che?* (to whom does this belong/who belongs to this?) to which it responds, '*amra se*' (us).

The claim I aim to make in the following discussion, at its broadest, is that the NBA's resistance to the dam and its subjectivising operation is rooted in a distinct subjective imaginary that can be traced back to the bund. Against the subject of postcolonial order, the NBA counterposes an unruly and improper subjectivity in terms of a sociality postcolonial order denies. Phenomenological experience – the phenomenological contrast between an encounter with the dam and an encounter with the bund – is central to the argument I advance here. Across the first two sections below, I stage this contrast by drawing on my experience, on the one hand of standing on one of the viewing platforms looking up at the dam, and on the other, of participating in communal practices of bund-building. The subjectivising operations of the dam and the bund are situated in these encounters and thus can be grasped by drawing attention to the ways in which the body – my body – is stylised and shaped there. These are operations set into motion through contortions, through modes of speech, movement, and performance, and in tracing the corporeal marks they inscribe, I aim to trace the contours of the disjunct between dam and bund: between the steel and concrete of the dam, and the stones and soil of the bund. A disjunct that becomes, for the NBA, the locus and wellspring of resistance. And the role of touch is elemental to following these lines of dissonance. I argue that the discord between subjective imaginaries of dam and bund is most stark in the ways the phenomenological schematisations they each give rise to organise touch – its possibility, availability, and reciprocity. My turn to touch, and its import to the discussion here, builds on Fanon's work to decentre the subject of phenomenological experience. As contemporary readings of Fanon's relation to the phenomenological method – and in particular, readings that aim to draw out from Fanon an anticolonial phenomenology – point out, his work aims to undo the universality of the phenomenological subject and its corporeal schema. Uncovering the racial-epidermal schema grounding such universality, Fanon draws attention to forms of affect and experience conventional phenomenology elides in its emphasis on visuality. My argument below – drawing

on Al-Saji's (2024) critical phenomenological reading of Fanon but diverging from it – develops this Fanonian insight to suggest that the experience of touch makes possible the articulation of a sociality in the surround of the proper subject of phenomenology. Bund-building, and the ways touch operates within its practices, perform precisely such sociality: dwelling in an intersubjectivity stretching not only between those building the bund but through them, to the forests, streams, stones, and soil with which they work. Deepening the resonances between Fanon and bund-building in the final section of this chapter, I point out how the Narmada movement builds on such sociality, extending it outwards from bund to village to valley, as the ground for its resistance to the dam. Using oral histories, ethnographic research and grey literatures, I suggest how these are extensions carried out in terms of a Gandhian ethos of nonviolence and its repertoire of corporeal practices. But in doing so, I argue, the NBA introduces to such a repertoire its own augment. In the intertwining of practices of bund-building and Gandhian practices of nonviolence, the NBA performs an interruption of the dam's subjective imaginary in favour of an unruly and improper sociality in the surround. It is towards an exploration of the contours of this improper sociality, spoken in an unruly vernacular emerging in the valley, that this chapter is committed.

I

From Kevadia, a small town in western Gujarat, the road winds along steep mountain faces, making its way deeper into the Narmada Valley. Every kilometre, the mountains seem to get steeper, the road narrower, the drop to the river below more ominous. Then, for a brief moment, the valley opens up, and the road widens. The mountains that initially seemed so daunting wither away as the car I am in traverses the shadow of the behemoth that now dominates everything. At a hundred and eighty-two metres tall, the bronze-clad statue of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel – called the Statue of Unity – is the tallest in the world. In the confines of the Narmada Valley, it is completely overwhelming. Patel was postcolonial India's first Home Minister and an ardent advocate of a strong, interventionist Indian state. This is also how he is remembered in the popular postcolonial imaginary – a figure of authority, order, and discipline – as if he was always a hundred and eighty-two metres tall and unmoving in his bronze armour. At the foot of this statue is a vast complex of museums, art galleries, souvenir shops, and viewing platforms with 'selfie points' promising a sweeping panorama of the valley. Museums carry exhibits and tableaus from Patel's life and India's freedom struggle. A sizeable section is dedicated to India's postcolonial journey of social and economic transformation and development – and, crucially, to locating Patel's instrumental role in setting the postcolony on that trajectory. Alongside images of development projects – under construction, completed, lit up for inauguration, with the Prime Minister of the day in the foreground cutting a ribbon – are elaborate passages of text extolling the many benefits they have brought to local communities and the nation as a whole. A few short sentences quickly address the tireless work done by the state to rehabilitate those whose land was acquired and whose villages were lost to these projects.

Walking around the complex, bustling with late spring tourist traffic – everyone here to enjoy one last outing before the stifling heat of summer sets in – I can't help but wonder why all of this is here. Who decided on this place to build a statue to Patel? In a small gallery, I am shown images and video clips of cheery, smiling indigenous people talking about how the statue and everything it has brought has been a blessing. Another building in the complex – called the 'tribal museum' – houses tableaux of 'traditional lifestyles' of the region's indigenous communities; interpretation boards telling visitors of the idyllic primitivity of these people, how they eked out a living in harmony with the forest and its animals, completely ignorant of prosperity and wealth until the postcolonial state reached them with its promises of development and modernity. Dams, mines, roads, statues, tourist sites, all of these have served to bring progress to these dark places and these dark hamlets. They may never know or realise it – my informal enquiries with the security staff at the venue suggest locals from the indigenous villages in the

surrounding area are usually not allowed in – but the postcolonial state has put great emphasis on their upliftment. It was while walking through these galleries and museums – coursing past exhibit after exhibit about development projects old and new – that I began to get some sense of why all of this was here in the Narmada Valley. Only a few kilometres upstream, in the direction that Patel's statue looks out over the valley, is the large dam that also bears his name: the Sardar Sarovar. On the road that leads from the Statue of Unity to the dam, tourists are offered the opportunity to stop at viewing platforms, suspended above the valley, from where they can take in the dam and its enormous size – visualising in steel and concrete what was on plexiglass information boards and gypsum plaster exhibits in the museums and galleries they have just come from. Between the viewing platforms looking upriver to the dam, the museums and galleries at the foot of the Statue of Unity, and the statue itself, a story of the postcolonial nation-state was being told.

A story of progress as the postcolony leaves behind the shackles of imperial domination to fulfil its social and economic promise. The dam and everything downstream from it are part of this developmental trajectory on which the nation is set at the moment of its postcolonial transition. They are the visible, palpable and verifiable markers of that journey, instancing in steel and concrete and bronze this elemental transformation of the postcolony (Luxion 2017). Alongside the economic prosperity the dam was designed to bring – enhanced irrigation, water security, industrialisation, electricity generation, and of course, tourism – it aimed to effect a profound social transformation, too. Dams like the Sardar Sarovar, these temples of modern India as Nehru called them, were seen as the keystone to a process of rapid social development.[21] The developmental logic, proffered repetitively at the viewing platforms and the museums, and grounded in this drive towards modernisation and rationalisation has as its point of departure "a scientific rationalism [for] social and economic development" that seeks to rend itself apart from "the ignorant brutality and inefficiencies of peasant society." (Scriver and Srivastava 2015, 144). Against imperially enforced impoverishment and destitution, the plunder of resources natural and human, the drain that colonial domination had effected over two centuries, the postcolonial moment posed the urgent tasks of bringing to India's masses the benefits of urbanisation and industrialisation hitherto denied. In the design, engineering, and construction of large dams, the leaders of the postcolony saw the carrying out of such tasks; the

[21] Nehru's famous dictum is an articulation of precisely such a transformation. In calling them temples, Nehru not only draws out a continuity between the modernist project of postcolonial nation-building and a spiritual imaginary with much deeper roots, but in establishing this continuity emphasises the transformation of the one to the other. The postcolonial transition marks, in all its large infrastructure projects, this transition from spirituality and myth and superstition to modernity and reason. Postcolonial India's Constitution codifies this transition in its 'Directive Principles of State Policy' (*The Constitution of India* 2024 [1950]).

transformation from rural to urban and from agrarian to industrial (or industrial agrarian)(Escobar 2012). As Khilnani (2012) points out, dam-building was an elemental part of the symbolic and substantive shift towards a project of nation-building in the aftermath of the postcolonial transition. Dams came to be one of the central symbols and mechanisms of industrial modernity and progress, and insofar as the postcolonial state's central mission was social and economic development that ushered in such modernity, large dams found themselves at the core of the postcolonial state – its raison d'être (Chatterjee 1993). On my way back from the dam, I stop once more at the Statue of Unity to watch the daily 'sound and light' show. Projected onto the Statue of Unity, a dazzling array of lasers and neon-coloured lights is accompanied by brief clips of archival footage from India's freedom struggle and the Sardar Sarovar dam's construction. Loudspeakers narrate the story of India gaining freedom from British rule, of that stroke of the midnight hour, before seamlessly shifting attention to the Sardar Sarovar. Images of jubilant crowds in the streets of Bombay and Madras and Delhi in 1947 shape-shift into footage of controlled explosions, cement mixers, industrial cranes, and thousands of workers in the searing summer heat. At the viewing platforms, the museums and the statue, dam and nation, the imaginaries of a postcolonial nation-state and the concrete immensity of that vision seemed to blur to indistinction.

The dam and all the infrastructural paraphernalia surrounding it are, in this sense, an entrenchment of the postcolonial state's developmental logic (D'Souza 2002). Not only in the sense that it is that logic's visible and material product, but also in the way that it exemplifies a way of thinking proper to such a logic. In other words, beyond the enunciation of the benefits of the dam and its potential for social and economic transformation, the fact of its being there is a marker of a particular approach to the question of development, a mode of envisioning postcolonial progress, a way of speaking about modernisation and industrialisation (Swayamprakash 2013, 154). To think of the dam as exemplifying a mode of thought, or a way of speaking, is to recognise the terms it offers to the transformation it promises – the distances it sets up, the borders it polices, the affinities it proclaims. The point, then, is as much what the dam will do as what it seeks to leave behind. Set against the rural backwardness of the postcolony, the dam is a figure of modernisation in the radical departure it marks from primitivity. A time and place of darkness, of poverty and ignorance, beholden to the whim of feudal or colonial overlord, and to the forces of the natural world – to drought and flood and storm. Improper to the postcolonial nation-state, this vision of primitive life had to be transcended and done away with. Its remnants, left over from colonial domination's imposed anthropological, socio-economic and political primitivity, erased by the grand projects of dam-building; projects that would evidence technological advancement and ecological mastery. The dam is what reaches over and pulls forward primitive life into the light of postcolonial

modernity. It matters little if what preceded the dam was in fact darkness and ignorance. Primitivity, as that against which the tenuous claims of postcolonial development are made, enabled the articulation of a fundamental rupture and dissonance between what was before the dam and what comes after it (Rajagopalan and Desai 2021, 8).[22] The dam maintains and reinforces this separation between the two. Between that which is in front of it – the viewing platforms and museums, the Statue of Unity, and visions of postcolonial progress – and what is behind its concrete curtain – forests, deep ravines, indigenous people, their villages and ways of living. A fundamental reordering of postcolonial social, economic and political life (Thakur 2024). In policing the break it marks between the primitive and the modern, the dam is a figure for the institution of a series of partitions that allocate, and differentiate between, subjective capacities for thought, action, and speech. A capacity to know and to decide not only how the dam is to be built, but that it must be built in the first place. An arrogation of the ability to determine – couched in terms of technical expertise – where the dam ought to be built, how and using what materials. The ability, moreover, to determine where the benefits (electricity, irrigation, etc.) are channelled, whose villages are submerged, who prospers and who is to pay what price for the project of postcolonial development. The dam in this sense is a figure of that process of ordering – or reordering – that assigns parts and places, roles and functions. That institutes and regulates an order of the postcolony and its developmental logic; an order of movement and speech, of thought and action, of those who count and those left behind.

Standing on one of the viewing platforms – specially designed so visitors like me can look up at the dam in its most imposing aspect – it becomes clear that the dam does some of the work of instituting and regulating the subjective order of which it is figure and exemplar. The dam is not, from the platform, only a vision of the postcolonial state, its developmental logic and its proper subject, made real in gigantic concrete pillars and endless grey walls. It is, I argue, shaping – schematising – those of us who stand on these platforms, constituting us as subjects proper to postcolonial order. Nearly a hundred and fifty metres tall, the dam is quite simply overwhelming in size and scale. An imposing structure, with deep, straight lines plunging from great heights to the riverbed. Each set of lines is perfectly measured, spaced out, and ordered so that the result is a great symmetric totality. Within the dam, millions of tiny elements – steel bars, concrete blocks, and iron rivets are all fused together so that nothing is independently discernible. The grey concrete walls conceal and enclose these differences, presenting a sort of unity, even

[22] Rajagopal and Desai point out more broadly how large infrastructure projects and the arts of architecture were legislated in the service of a modernist program deeply rooted in colonial imaginaries of technology and progress. As they point out, these visions of architecture constituted the imperial metropole, as well as the postcolonial nation-state, as singular and universalising entities, with architecture "often [serving] as the tectonic scaffolding upon which these projects of modernity could be displayed." (Rajagopalan and Desai 2021, 11).

universality. Thousands of rectangular concrete blocks transformed into smooth, curved slopes. No cracks, no interstices, no outlines; no fissures or ruptures, only smooth, limitless concrete walls stretching out seemingly endlessly. Its gargantuan dimension dominates and tames everything in its surroundings – not only those on the viewing platforms, but the mountains either side of it too. No longer vast basalt pillars buttressing the river, they are now a dark unruliness at the fringes of this concrete monolith. The river, too, is dwarfed – only a tiny stream emerging fitfully from one of the many sluice gates.

But every few hours, when the drier regions of Gujarat further east demand more water for their crops and industries, other sluice gates of the Sardar Sarovar dam are opened. Immense columns of white water burst forth accompanied by a booming noise that breaks the serene monotony of the dam's concrete walls. These columns shoot down the dam's face and crash into the valley floor several hundred feet below the feet of those standing on the viewing gallery. It is a spectacular moment, almost orchestrated to inspire awe and incredulity: the incredible force and power unleashed by the opening gates as unfathomable volumes of water burst forth. At the viewing gallery, the water appears to close in and carry away all of us on the platform. However, as the thunderclaps of white water hitting barren rock echo up from the valley floor, a gentle breeze and a refreshing drizzle of the river's water carried on it meet us on the viewing platform. Whatever sense of fear or hesitation I had felt as the sluice gates opened – grip on shiny steel banisters slightly tightened, posture more rigid than usual – quickly gave way to a comfortable repose. Almost casual; as if those violent bursts of water had no effect. As if I had never been gripped by that sense of fear. And the viewing platform allows for such relaxed looseness – for the chatter and exclamations of the grandeur of the event that had caused the momentary silence. Because from the platform, I immediately judge myself to be safe. The stability of the viewing platform, the reassuring rigidity of the shiny, steel banisters, and the hardness of the reinforced concrete floor all contributing to my feeling of reassurance. It is a safety felt in the remoteness from the columns of water even as they appear to be nearing. In looking at the water coursing down the dam's walls, and recognising the ways in which it is controlled and ordered by this structure that can master and organise how the river flows. Just as the sluice gates had been opened, they can be closed. These gates can command the river to flow down certain lines or paths and not others. The river and its unruly waters – their erratic seasonal changes and unpredictability – are organised and regulated by the dam and its gates. Its orderly concrete counterposed to the remote and threatening wildernesses of the mountains and forests of the Narmada Valley.

Two operations – both enacted on the bodies of those of us on the viewing platforms – are occurring in step here, schematising us in particular ways. On the one hand, standing on the viewing platform watching this spectacle unfold before me is an experience of being and feeling

distant. I am closer to the dam than I have ever been, but despite my physical proximity and the immediacy of the threat that proximity ought to bring, the frothing towers of unruly water do not really disturb me. Because I know that the viewing platforms will never be threatened by the river emerging from behind the dam's wall. Its position – its distance from the dam, its height above the valley floor – has been carefully calculated to ensure that it always remains above, and removed from, the water. Regardless of whether I hold on to the banisters or ground my feet more firmly on the concrete floor, the platform will always be safe. And the dam is perceived in this way, too. Looking up at how it controls the river's flow and dominates its surroundings, I recognise it as a structure that, in both scale and strength, is built to withstand and master these forces. The dam is the product of a precise and intricate design or plan that ensures its dominance. But as much as this distance is felt in terms of the physical separation of the river from where I stand – through planning and design – it is one that is also felt in terms of the dam keeping unruliness and chaos at bay. When the gates open, what emerges are the violent bursts of a river in spate, fits of rage frothing and frenzied. And when they close, the serene smoothness of the dam brings them to heel, restoring calm and order, taming that roaring current. Mastering it, that is, in the interest of putting its energies to good use – to power homes, to put food on tables, to beautify far-away cities.[23]

On the other hand, looking up at the serene walls once the gates close, I do not feel myself returning to this place so proximate to the dam, the river, the valley. Despite all the looking around and awkward smiles, I feel myself remain in a position of some distance. Not the same sort of distance and remove, but a certain disembeddedness. Physically and materially, the dam is removed from the context of its situation. Its concrete and steel is out of touch and out of place amongst the arid mountains and sparse forests of the Narmada Valley. Its perfectly organised and levelled lines stand apart from the chaotic crookedness of the mountain ridges along its fringe. The dam does not attempt to bridge this discord between it and what is in its surround, insisting on that difference. The grey concrete of the dam – in stark contrast to the black and brown hues of the surrounding valley – does not only drive home the fact of this difference, but makes palpable how it was made and continues to be maintained: by the import of thousands of tonnes of concrete and steel from far-off places, by the use of modern construction techniques that allowed moulding these materials to the task at hand. The dam arrives from far beyond the valley and imposes itself, remaining extricated but still controlling

[23] Water from the Narmada canal in Gujarat, drawn from the reservoir of the Sardar Sarovar is directed to another, smaller river in central Gujarat – the Sabarmati. The resulting increase in the Sabarmati's volume – an otherwise seasonal river that is ecologically dead due to industrial pollution – gives it the impression of a large river as it flows through the city of Ahmedabad, beautifying the riverfront development in the city.

and organising. Looking up at the dam, in its unfathomable size, everything else seems to disappear. The mountains, the river, the forests, all fall away as the dam dominates the entirety of my perceptual field. The viewing platform where I stand was once part of an indigenous community's sacred grove. The large parking lot where I left the car to walk up to the platform stands on the ground where part of a small hamlet once was. The museums and exhibition galleries are on land that used to farm millets using water from the Narmada. The dam itself is also a figure of submergence; the water it holds back – or releases in controlled ways – is water that has drowned entire forests, communities, and ways of life. In standing on the viewing platform, all of this – the practical situation and embeddedness of my encounter with the dam, an embeddedness in social, historical, cultural, and ecological processes that make it possible in the first place – becomes in some sense invisible and insensible. The dam contorts one's capacities of perception in ways that make it impossible (or certainly very difficult) to register this emplacement. All that matters, all that can be sensed and felt, is the dam itself in its enormity and its engineering brilliance.

The exhibits and interpretation boards in the museums, galleries, and viewing platforms at both the Statue of Unity and further upstream, closer to the dam, are central to this experience of disembedded-distance. Not only do their images and short passages of text reinforce the fact of the dam's disembeddedness, they also point to the ways in which it was arranged and organised. Through them, I am told of how the dam and the viewing platform are the results of detailed processes of engineering and expertise. The dam was constructed using the newest technologies drawing on the most advanced and modern engineering knowledge. Knowledge deployed not only in the ordering and taming of the river, but in the identification and use of the most appropriate materials for such a task. The hundreds of engineers, civil planners, and technicians from universities and research institutes in postcolonial India's large metropolises bring to the Narmada Valley a specialised knowledge and expertise in the design of the dam and the manufacture and use of materials appropriate to the project. It is this engineering precision and technological capacity that ensures material and structural stability to the dam (and the viewing platforms). This expertise, in other words, that makes possible the experience of distance and remove felt at the platforms. Imposed on the valley, these are forms of engineering and technical knowledge that set themselves apart from forms of design, knowledge of materials and modes of construction that are embedded in the ecological, social, cultural and historical situation of the Narmada Valley and its villages.[24] It is not only that the dam's

[24] A key aspect of critique of the Sardar Sarovar has focused on precisely this point – the dam's construction has been carried out without adequate environmental or social impact assessments. Moreover, there has been little consultation and dialogue with local communities in the planning and decision-making process (Dharmadhikary 2006; Brieger and Sauer 2000; Dreze, Samson, and Singh 1997;

construction ignores or dismisses traditional knowledge systems and the use of materials in an ecologically and socially responsible manner, it is that in such dismissal is an arrogation of the capacity for knowledge and technical expertise; a capacity to think, plan, design and organise, to articulate that organisation, and to execute it. An arrogation that is an elemental part of what allows for the dam's disembedded-distance. Its distant and disembedded character – and so its mastery and control of the river and the valley – is marked as much by the materials used in its construction as by a form of thinking, knowing, and acting (a whole technical apparatus) that it brings to bear.

The experience, then, of looking up at the dam – its size, its capacity to control, the precision of its construction, and its material dissonance from what is in its surround – has corporeal and perceptual effects. It shapes the ways in which visitors like me apprehend and respond to the structure: the momentary fright, subsequent reassurance, the awe felt at gazing upon its immense size, the inspiration and pride felt at learning of the complex and advanced engineering expertise it is the product of. The encounter from the viewing platform schematises the body in particular ways, cultivating modes of speaking, interpreting, acting, moving, and appearing that are proper to the subjective imaginary internal to the dam. A vision of the subject that proceeds from a disembedded-distance, an extrication from its immediate practical situation – social, ecological and corporeal – elevated far above the valley floor. And through this, it is a schematisation that underscores the nature of that extrication: a subjective schematisation that reinforces the departure from primitivity and backwardness in the interest of modernity and progress. One that aims to dominate: bringing to the river and the valley and everything else a mastery that tames and orders all that is unruly. The arrogation of a knowledge and expertise that is then deployed to control and order. Standing at the viewing platform is an experience of disembedded-distance that renders imperceptible, that ignores and erases, all those markers of primitivity – indigenous villages, millet fields, community forest lands and sacred groves, indigenous knowledge systems and cultural practices – that must be transcended if the developmental promise of the postcolonial state is to be met. Those viewing platforms are as much places for these subjects of the postcolony to encounter the material verification of a vision of development as they are to carry out that developmental program; schematising the body and its forms of speech, thought, and action in line with the demands of a postcolonial subjective order.

Kothari and Bhartari 1984). As I point out later, many who were to lose their homes and fields to the dam only found out about the project when mysterious government officials began placing concrete pillars in their fields. The pillars marked the dam's submergence zone, officially called the 'command area'.

But, as I point out above, in these subjective operations the dam also reinforces partitions of place and appearance. Around me at the viewing platforms and museums, I hear Gujarati, Marathi, Hindi, and many other languages, but none of the languages spoken by indigenous communities in the Narmada Valley. None of us are from the local area. Access to these sites is now strictly controlled. A ticket – expensive and often block-booked online well in advance by travel agencies – is mandatory. What used to be community forest lands, fields, villages is now this tightly policed complex of industrial and tourist sites. With the dam's construction, a new set of rules on access and appearance – of who can be where, when, and for what purpose – is instituted. Its viewing platforms are not available to anyone: some are denied entry, refused the opportunity to experience that disembedded-distance. To the protesters from the NBA at the Gujarat border in 1990, police barricades and baton charges deny access to the dam. The dam's walls not only institute and secure an imaginary of the postcolonial subject, they institute a distribution of bodies and their capacities for speech and action. The dam, in this sense, is a limit, perpetually distinguishing, separating and delimiting the proper subject of postcolonial order from the primitive backwardness in its surround. Keeping bodies firmly in their place, compartmentalising not only the river and its valley but also those living in, moving through, or looking out over them.

There is an essential violence to this reordering and reconfiguration – spatial, corporeal, and subjective – that the dam puts into motion. It is an order policed and regulated as much at the viewing platforms and museums in front of the dam as it is in police and paramilitary operations that brutalise and tear down everything that is behind the dam's walls. Across the Narmada Valley, and particularly in the mountainous regions where the Sardar Sarovar is built, communities learnt of the dam only when they began to find concrete pillars erected in their fields and forests (Baviskar 1995). As resistance to the dam from indigenous communities who faced submergence grew, they faced an intensification of violence from the postcolonial state. Police and forest department raids on villages and farmlands – called clearing operations – arbitrarily destroyed crops and homes. Community forests were enclosed in barbed wire fences, denying access to indigenous communities who exercised traditional tenurial rights over them. Illegal arrests of activists and community members were followed by custodial violence and threats of more brutal reprisals met any attempt to challenge or stop these raids. Pillars, barbed wires, barricades, batons and beatings – and ultimately, submergence – these processes by which the dam carries out what Thakur (2024) calls a reordering of society are operationalised through "boundaries and hierarchies, zones and enclaves; the subversion of existing property arrangements; the classification of people according to different categories…" (Mbembe 2003, 26). The dam grounds a spatial and corporeal order that enables particular

modes of being, speaking, activity, and sociality while blocking and inhibiting others (Muller 2020).

Across the Narmada Valley, practices of violence and brutalisation worked to sediment an order of the postcolonial subject in close step with practices of policing that organised and regulated access to, and an encounter with, the dam from downriver. This regime of violence, hidden behind the dam's walls, made invisible to those of us standing on the viewing platforms is a central part of the process of subjectification proper to postcolonial orderliness. The identification of the primitive, the savage, and backward that must be expunged and sacrificed – done away with, one way or another – as a condition for postcolonial development was carried out in the valley through lines of police officers with rifles, batons, and riot-gear. The dam marks the boundary between these worlds, this "world cut in two…inhabited by two different species" (Fanon 1965, 32). And the indigenous body is the surface of terrorisation on which these cuts are instituted. The moment of transformation the dam is a figure of – that break away from the primitive towards the modernising and rationalising project of postcolonial nationhood – is a transformation that is carried out in and through a subjective order that proceeds from a foreclosure of the indigenous body. Within the distributions of capacities for speech, action, and thought that ground such a subjective order, indigenous communities find themselves obscured behind the dam, barred access to it, allocated – as in Nehru's appeal – to the place of sacrifice: submergence.

II

In the villages the dam obscures, practices of bund-building have been underway for generations; from long before the first concrete pillars and fence posts were erected in farms and forests. Bunds – small check-dams made of rocks and soil – work to improve irrigation, recharge groundwater aquifers, stem soil erosion, and increase the availability of drinking water in the drier seasons. In many respects, these bunds are just like dams – doing on a smaller, more local scale what the dam promises to do for the whole region, indeed the whole nation. But the register on which these ostensibly similar activities are carried out differs markedly. Because, as my argument above suggests, underlying the articulation of the benefits the dam brings is a particular ordering of parts and places, the institution and maintenance of a schema of the dam's proper subject. It is here, underneath superficial similarities – similarities that the postcolonial state tries to emphasise – that I argue we can locate a series of divergences or differences that rend the bund and dam apart. The bund is constituted differently, not only spatially and materially and not only in the scale on which it works, but precisely in being so, in the ways it configures or reconfigures an arrangement of parts and places. The ways, that is, it makes possible forms of action, speech, and performance inhibited by the dam's subjective order. And just as the encounter with the dam from the viewing platforms makes clear the ways in which it schematises its proper subject, turning a similar phenomenological orientation to practices of bund-building allows for a grasp of the ways in which they become the site for a subjectivising operation counterposed to the dam.

Leaving behind the mountains near the Sardar Sarovar for gentler hills deeper into central India, in the state of Madhya Pradesh, I want to draw attention to another part of the Narmada Valley. In a village close to the river – close also to another large dam on the Narmada River, the Narmada Sagar – my colleague and I sat in a corner during a traditional village meeting, called a *sabha*. As grassroots human rights lawyers, we were on a week-long visit to this and nearby villages to raise awareness (on laws relating to forest land rights, freedom of information, rights to education and employment, and rights against police abuse), provide legal aid, and facilitate communal conversations aimed at social and political consciousness-raising. At that particular meeting, the main topic of discussion was the construction of new bunds. The village as a whole would benefit from them, and every household would be expected to contribute to their building – with labour, food, or other support – so there needed to be consensus on where to build, when, and how. Towards the end of the meeting – everything else being agreed – the search for volunteers began. My colleague and I offered to help. Two weeks later, we returned to the village and got permission from the community to camp out in the compound of the village school

while we worked on the bund. The next day, the both of us made our way along with other volunteers from the village – there were 12 of us in all – towards the bund site.

Walking through the community forest lands, we crossed several older bunds – walking along them, or often on them, using them as a bridge of sorts to cross shallow streambeds that were completely dry in the most intense heat that precedes the coming of the monsoon. These bunds we cross are unassuming. We are scarcely aware of walking on it. Looking more intently, there are no neat, straight lines or smooth surfaces that so dominate the dam's wall. Only curves and gentle ridges. The bund is not stretched out across the entire valley, it is pressed up against a shallow depression, hugging its contours, twisting and bending with it. There aren't any of the deep, plunging lines that frame the dam – the bund's lines are short. Interrupted; starting and stopping abruptly. I try and fail to follow one that takes me from end to end, top to bottom, or side to side. These short, jagged lines fold back onto themselves, merge into larger fissures, or dissipate into cracks till they are no longer visible. These bunds do not have large, sweeping faces. Or even small, sweeping faces. Not homogenised monoliths, but a coming-together of disparate elements. Each rock that has gone into its construction is not perfectly shaped and cut – precision-engineered. They are what is locally available. In the larger gaps, bits of soil – hardened and mortar-like as it bakes in the sunlight – hold the structure together. But there are also other cracks, smaller ones, in which a small plant grows, into which a lizard scurries away as it feels our footsteps approaching. In the monsoon and the months following it, the bund's water-rich environment will make it fertile ground for such plants and animals.

The late-May heat is tortuous. Each of us wraps our *gamchas* around our heads, trying to find some protection from the searing sun as we get to work.[25] Over the course of days, the bund slowly starts to take shape, and our working patterns fall into a routine. First, walking around identifying suitable rocks, which are collected next to a tree near where the bund will be built. Then, some discussions on where to start building from, what kind of rocks to use for the foundation, and how they should be placed. We all agree on a suitable design and arrangement. Forming a chain between the bottom of the depression marking the stream's course and the tree where our rocks are, we begin passing them along. Two of us are at the bottom, finding suitable places for each rock. Now and then, someone further up the chain shouts a suggestion down. From the higher vantage point, they can see a gap missed by those at the bottom or a space perfectly matching the awkwardly shaped stone they are holding. Often, this leads to arguments. Someone is passing the rocks along too quickly; another is not fast enough. The rocks collected are not suitable – they're too brittle, or too heavy, or too misshapen. The heat

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[25] A thin, cotton towel common across rural India.

makes tempers flare, and arguments grow in intensity quickly – many of us want to have our say. The stones are fine, it is really a problem with the person whose job it is to find a place for them in the bund. Some just keep working through the shouting and quarrelling, hoping the rhythmicity of rocks moving along a human chain will simmer things down. Within minutes, the conflagration is moved on from, and the chain moves with renewed efficiency. When the rocks at the tree start to run out, some of us leave the chain to start replenishing the pile. By the end of the week, the bund was almost complete. Our chain still going as the last few rocks move down it – passed from hand to hand – before finding their place in the structure. Three of us then carry wicker baskets full of wet mud, filling large gaps on the bund's surface – the others get the tea ready.

These practices of bund-building stand in stark contrast to those that make the construction of the dam possible. All of the work at the bund is done by hand (handling stones to find the right ones, carrying them by hand, handing them over to the next person in the chain). The bund uses stones and soil that is locally available, and is not so much the product of a master-plan or design as it is the result of a process in which any design is consistently altered, augmented, and reconfigured through discussion and argument.[26] It does not impose itself on the stream or depression on which it is built. It is a product of its place, its situation: the rocks are what are locally available – from as far away as we could go looking, as we could carry them in our hands. Equally, where to build it, how to go about it, and when – indeed, whether a bund is needed at all – are decisions arrived at communally through the *sabhas*. Not the product of bringing to bear on misshapen rock and loose soil a technical apparatus that is external to its place but situated practices of knowing and doing that draw on traditional knowledge systems and techniques.

In participating in these practices, my encounter with the bund also stands in stark contrast to the encounter with the dam from the viewing platform. There, from the platforms, my experience was one of disembedded-distance. Even in my proximity to the dam, I felt removed from it, and removed from its (and my own) social, ecological, and political situation. Here, the bund erases that distance – the greyness of steel and concrete, the inaccessibility of that wall – in the red soil and black basalt, in running my hands along its surface, feeling the roughness of weathered stone. In the proximity, moreover, of those of us building the bund. As we go about building it,

[26] The difference in building practices here reflects deeper differences between dam and bund and the architectural and design imaginaries they emerge from. Forman thinks this in terms of the shift from formal to informal, with a corresponding shift from top-down to bottom-up approaches to the design and development of (public) infrastructures. In Chapter 3, in a context completely removed from the Narmada Valley, I return to this relation between formal and informal procedures of architectural organisation. In the argument there, rooted in the informal augments introduced by working-class housing to processes of top-down urban beautification, is the performance of a resistance that resonates with the way the bund poses itself against the dam.

we are touching and being touched by each other. In the chain passing stones down, our hands touch every time a heavy stone passes from one person to another. We are standing almost shoulder-to-shoulder, bumping into each other and crossing paths with every movement. When a stone throws one of us off balance, arms reach out to grab the person next to us just as their arms reach out to hold the fall. And this proximity is felt not only to each other, but through us – through our hands and our work – to the materials we work with and everything around us from where we collect them. To the stones and the soil, in the way they feel in our hands, and underfoot – their weight, their density, their shape and their edges. Proximity also, to the forest around us, in walking through it as we search for suitable rocks. The practice of bund-building proceeds from this closeness, involving a near-constant touching: holding, grabbing, pulling, twisting and turning, handing over, collecting, and so much more. I argue that it is in such proximity marked by touch – touching each other, touching the ground, the bund, the stones, the trees – that it becomes possible to sense the disordering of the dam's subjective order performed in practices of bund-building.

Turning to Fanon, in particular to his critique of phenomenological method and the lived experience that grounds its subject, allows for a deeper exploration of the ways in which proximity and touch problematise the dam's proper subject. At the centre of Fanon's critique is a decentring of the universalised subject of phenomenological experience and its modes of perception. Fanon's argument in *Black Skin, White Masks*, is that the lived experience of Blackness is a collapse of the corporeal schema – that phenomenology takes as its point of departure – into a racial-epidermal schema (Fanon 2008, 90-91). Black life is structured and contorted by the historical and social constructions and stereotypes of an anti-Black world such that the very corporeal basis for lived experience – presupposed in the phenomenological method as what Merleau-Ponty calls the 'résumé of our bodily experience' (Merleau-Ponty 2002) – is constitutively denied (Macey 1999, 11). On the one hand, a racial schema alienates and disfigures Black bodies, reducing them to nothing but epidermal matter. On the other, such a schema works to hypervisibilise Black bodies precisely in terms of that epidermal matter (Fanon 2008, 86). The collapse of a corporeal schema into a racial one thus situates Black bodies, Fanon suggests, within a spatial and corporeal order. The mechanisms of racialisation determine and ascribe the proper forms of appearance and speech, the appropriate rules of interpretation and apperception, within which Black bodies can be seen and heard. Across these partitions, Black bodies are fixed and assigned to the place of no place (Fanon 1988). Relegated, as Karrera (Karrera 2020, 289-290) points out, to "the realm of mere things that occupy space differently than a body-subject would...". In this sense, the ostensibly universal body-schema of the phenomenological subject – the ostensibly universal perceptive capacities

of such a subject – conceals behind it a racial schema that in fact conditions the possibilities of phenomenological experience (Ward 2023).[27]

A central mechanism of the seeming universality of the phenomenological subject is, for Fanon, located in the methodological privileging and prioritisation of the visual (Al-Saji 2024). Visuality works to elide, on the one hand, forms of experience and perception that extend beyond the visual register, and on the other, reduces such experience to something visually available to interpretation and analysis. As Al-Saji points out, this is problematic for Fanon precisely because as visuality translates affect into spectacle, it reproduces the disfiguration of Black bodies in a racialised world (Al-Saji 2024). That is, it collapses the density of experience and affectivity into a flattened surface of visual expression mirroring the collapse of Black life in a racial schema to the flattened superficiality of epidermal matter. In the making visible of the experience of racialised subjects, phenomenology works to fix and reify that experience, making it available as a snapshot or image that objectifies such experience and the bodies that are its ground. Fanon's response, then, draws attention to the depth and density of affect elided by conventional phenomenology. The decentring of the phenomenological subject he aims to carry out proceeds, then, from this juncture, from this disordering of the visual order of such a subject.

Here, the resonances between Fanon's work to decentre the subject of phenomenology and the practices of bund-building opposed to the dam and its subjective order become clearer. Because touch occupies a central place across both. Fanon's allusion to the finger that reaches out and touches becomes the point of departure for thinking what is in the surround of the subject of phenomenology and its visual orderliness (Fanon 2008, 151). Touch shifts the ground from the flattening and making available of experience universally that is the work of the phenomenological method, towards the situated affectivity of such experience – of what is in that moment, in that place, in that encounter. It shifts, in other words, from looking – looking at, looking out over, looking up towards – to doing, handing, collecting, placing, holding, and sharing. At the same time, touch, in the way Fanon speaks of it, is more than simply the haptic, more than just the act of touching. It is being proximate or near, accompanying or dwelling with (Al-Saji 2024, 8). For Fanon, the absence of touch, its proscription, marks the experience of dehumanisation and objectification of Black bodies as part of a racial schema (Fanon 2008,

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[27] From the viewing platforms at the Sardar Sarovar, it is precisely such an elision of what lies behind the dam's wall, of what is in the surround of the subjective imaginary grounding its claims to postcolonial order, that is at work. Submergence, and the many practices of violence that precede and follow it, marks this reduction and disfiguration of the indigenous body to the primitivity postcolonial development must transcend: constitutively denied the possibility of subjectivisation through disembedded-distance; the possibility, that is, of partaking in a vision of the subject proper to the postcolony.

106). To reach out and touch – to touch with the finger, as an attempt to reach and feel the other, to accompany and dwell with – becomes, then, the response of racialised subjects to that racial schema; a path to think past the partitions within which Black bodies find themselves fixed (Fanon 2008, 151). It becomes the way in which Fanon can carry out a decentring of the phenomenological subject (Al-Saji 2024, 10). Against that subjective order's privileging of the visual – a privileging that is central to the objectification of Black bodies – touch allows for situating the lived experience of Black bodies within the affective terrain of racialisation (Al-Saji 2024, 16). On Al-Saji's reading, touch thus enables dwelling in the durationality of the wounds of colonial brutalisation. Resisting the reduction of those wounds to spectacle, to their visual flattening and presentation, touch allows for an accounting of colonial dehumanisation and objectification that retains their affective relief as "feelings that are flesh" (Al-Saji 2024, 8-9). Which is to say, touch allows for situating lived experience in an affective register that disrupts the partitions of subjective capacities and forms of appearance that give to the proper subject of phenomenology its stability.

These disruptions performed by touch also draw out its necessarily sociogenic grounds. The instability it introduces to the proper subject of phenomenology is not only in putting into question its universality, but also in the intersubjectivity that is the condition of possibility of its experience. As Renault points out, Fanon's argument proceeds from a shift in speaking about the body always in the plural – always bodies, with each other, in relation to the other, alongside and confronting (Renault 2011, 51). In the closing passages of *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon draws out the importance of touch to the sociality that is so central to this argument, speaking of the possibilities of "[recapturing] the self" and "the ideal conditions [for] a human world", he gestures towards a response, "Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself?" (Fanon 2008, 181). Touch makes possible a radical intersubjectivity – reaching out and feeling the other – that is the ground for the performance of a radical and novel sociality, which is in turn a response to the objectification and disfiguration of Black bodies. To resist the dehumanisation imposed by a racial schema demands for Fanon a turn to lived experience in terms of what is shared and common, what extends between bodies. Touch enables dwelling in such sociality as it moves beyond the racial schema that allocates to Black bodies their proper place and reconfigures the partitions that determine how such bodies are seen and heard. Yet, the sociality Fanon gestures towards is not reducible to the intersubjectivity in which the subject of phenomenology is embedded. The ontological reversibility and reciprocity internal to the subject of, for instance, Merleau-Ponty's chiasmatic intertwining of the visible and invisible – that results in a necessary intercorporeality, one's corporeal being as it emerges from and dissolves into a flesh of the world – still presupposes a universal corporeal schema that is a product of such intertwining (Merleau-Ponty 1968). But it is

precisely the partitioning of bodies concealed behind this claim to universality that Fanon underscores throughout his work, calling into question the constitution of the 'all' that are embedded in chiasmatic relations of being and becoming within Merleau-Ponty's argument. Fanon's sociality is rooted not in these tenuous claims to universality but in existential conditions that are common and shared, yet not shared by all, in relation to a racial schema (Pitts 2022, 304-305). Against an intersubjectivity that proceeds from the stability of the proper subject of phenomenology and its universality, Fanon gestures towards a sociality that is in its surround: proceeding precisely from what such universality disavows, from what is shared and common in the embodied and embedded situation of a racialised corporeal schema. This is a sociality that gestures towards a collective that is here and now, in this moment, and this place – in a village on a hill.

It is precisely such sociality that is emphasised in the resonances between Fanon's work and practices of bund-building. A sociality felt in the laughter and chatter and arguments, the care taken in picking up and placing each rock, in layering wet soil on the larger gaps in the bund. To touch not only draws attention to the brushing of fingers as stones pass from one person to the next in the chain, or the hand running across the surface of rock, but to that whole constellation of practices of bund-building.[28] To sharing tea and rotis, quarrelling and joking, chatting and standing shoulder-to-shoulder; to being proximate to each other. And alongside these resonances, practices of bund-building expand on what such sociality can be. Because through the proximity to each other, we sense ourselves to be alongside and accompanying the forest and stones and soil – the dry stream-bed and the small plants and animals quickly inhabiting the new bund. Touch makes it possible to dwell in this closeness and in the sociality that emerges from that embedded situation. It enables dwelling in this sociality that extends between those of us building the bund, those at the *sabha*, and through us all – through touching fingers and touching words – to trees and stones and earth, to the vast ecological systems in which the building of a bund is situated. One that locates our bodies as imbricated within their world, dwelling in it, as part of larger tapestries of ecosociality.[29]

[28] This is not only a question of one or the other. The visual register is not substituted by the haptic. For at the dam too, I am constantly touching and being touched. Holding onto tickets, brushing shoulders as I jostle through the crowded exhibition galleries, pushing my way past a large group of tourists in the museum, grasping the steel banisters. What is at work in the decentring pointed to here is a reconfiguration of the relation between them, a reordering (or disordering) of the priority and primacy accorded to each. In my encounter with the dam, the haptic register is elided in the interest of distant visuality, and it is this that bund-building puts into question.

[29] My discussion of ecosociality here draws on Tully's recent theorisation of the centrality of a cultivated responsiveness to the embedding of social and political practice within their ecological and planetary conditions of possibility (Tully 2020a).

Popular slogans of the NBA elicit this sociality performed in practices of bund-building, drawing on it to articulate their resistance to the dam. On their march to the site of the dam's construction in 1990, members of the Movement would point to trees, rivers, forests, villages, and mountains and ask, *ye konin che?* (Who does this belong to?), to which the whole group would respond, *amra se!* (Us!) (Bhatnagar). In asking after belonging, in asking who the forests and the Narmada belong to, the slogan expresses commonality, something shared: not simply common ownership, but common belonging; a being in common. The collective given voice to in these slogans extends outwards from those participating in the march, drawing in not only those in villages across the Narmada Valley that could not be there, but also the trees and rivers and mountains of which the question is asked. Because asking the question of belonging in this context is to simultaneously ask the reverse: who belongs to these? A reversibility that is borne of dwelling in the Valley. Of that collective's embedded situation as it emerges from the constellations of ecosocial relations that are particular to those at the march and to their villages. The sociality announced in the NBA's slogan is one that is grounded in this shared and common experience of living in the Valley; of the affective terrain of a particular organisation of life, its violent subjugation in the reconfigurations enacted by postcolonial order, and its refusal to fall into line with such order. The 'Us!' of the slogan is thus rooted to the Valley, to being in it, dwelling in it. And it is in these practices of dwelling and the ecosociality performed there, of which bund-building is exemplary, that the Movement locates the performance of an unruliness that disrupts the dam and its proper subject – destabilises the subjective schematisation it enacts and the partitions it polices.

III

Drawing on practices of bund-building and the ecosociality performed there, the Narmada movement extends these unruly imaginaries outwards – from the bund to the village and from the village to the Valley. It situates these performances in new places and contexts through a repertoire of corporeal practices that supplement what takes place at the bund. Tracing the contours of these extensions, it becomes possible to register how the Movement takes up and augments the unruliness of an ecosociality exemplified in the bund. At one level, the supplements it introduces can be read through the distinctly Gandhian character of the Movement. Its resistance to the dam not only used Gandhian approaches but drew its energy from both a rich legacy of Gandhian social movements in the Indian public imaginary and – much more importantly – from the embodiment of a Gandhian ethos or ethical comportment. The involvement within the NBA of renowned Gandhian figures – most notably, Baba Amte – established for participants a relation to, and embedding within, this broader genealogy of Gandhian movements throughout Indian history, calling on them to embody a Gandhian ethics of nonviolence – *ahimsa* – entailing cultivated practices of 'truth-seeking' (*satyagraha*).

Ahimsa, in the way Gandhi (and the NBA) understands it, is not simply abstaining from violence or harm (Livingston 2018, 528; Godrej 2006, 295). Instead, it refers to a cultivated responsiveness and openness to the world, to all life in the world in all its forms – a "willingness to treat all being as one's self, a complete absence of ill-will and good-will towards all life" (Livingston 2018, 516). Grasped in this way, *ahimsa* is an opening of oneself to the world in terms of the interdependencies and interrelations between human beings, between the human and non-human, and between life in all its forms. Tully suggests this life-affirming and care-oriented vision of *ahimsa* (in terms of a Gaia ethic) as a mode of responsiveness in which "the world begins to show up for us as not only valuable, but the condition of all value: as a living system that sustains all life" (Tully 2020a). In the openness to all life, to the interdependencies that tie the human to each other and the multiplicity of forms of life, is a simultaneous disclosure of the conditions of life. Recognising and cultivating a sensitivity towards the imbrications of human and non-human life points up how these life-systems – as relations of symbiosis and symbiogenesis (Tully 2020b) – are the conditions of possibility of human life itself. Rather than conceiving of the self as an independent and autonomous entity, *ahimsa* is its opening up to a heterogenous terrain that is its ground, that sustains it, and to which it is inescapably tied. A terrain of the complex assemblages of ecological, cultural, and socio-political systems into which the human collapses as one node or intensity, embedding itself into these life-sustaining networks.

Gandhi's account of *ahimsa* builds on a particular understanding of the existential situation of the human body. For him, the body is constitutively vulnerable, beset by an insatiable corporeal hunger, impatience to consume and satisfy it (by dominating the world), and fear at the prospect of death (as succumbing to the world) (Gandhi 1999, 10:259-261). One response to such vulnerability is to intensify domination and control in the attempt to bring the world to heel. To order and organise it such that the satiation of corporeal hunger, of the drive to produce and consume, is secured. Since the conditions of hunger and vulnerability emerge from the body's practical situation within its world – that it is a product of a set of ecological and social processes, and is bound to those very processes – a response that seeks to control and master such vulnerability seeks simultaneously to step away from that embedded corporeal position. It is only through this distance, and through this disembedding, that the body can return to its world unbound to cycles of hunger, fear and impatience (Gandhi 1999, 24:85). Separated from its own conditions of possibility in this way, the body comes to exercise a violent domination of those very conditions. At the dam, a separation from corporeal vulnerability – from the embedded situation of bodies that is then inscribed as primitivity – is what enables, in this Gandhian register, the violent imposition of submergence as part of a process of postcolonial order.[30] Against attempts to master and order, *ahimsa* – and *satyagraha* more broadly as that constellation of practices of which *ahimsa* is a central part – demands a courageous facing up to corporeal vulnerability. That is, it demands a fearlessness that recognises and accepts the body's situation as embedded within social and ecological processes. The fearless embrace of the fragility of an image of the subject and the plural terrain that lies beneath its shattered surface.

Fearlessness and courage of this sort is cultivated through corporeal practices of responsiveness (to the body's embedded situation) that emerge from "daily sustaining practices of participation and engagement" (Tully 2020a). *Ahimsa*, then, is not an ethical command or set of rules but a processual, even open-ended cultivation of a way of life, an ethical self-formation through practices that take the body as their object. For, as discussed above, it is on the body that postcolonial order and the disorder in its surround are inscribed, and it is bodies that are partitioned in the attempts to distance postcolonial development from the primitivity that is all around it. Against the adherence to universal rules, *ahimsa* turns its focus inwards, to the body and its many (trans)formations. The embodied cultivation of ways of living, acting and thinking that are oriented towards caring and knowing oneself. Gandhi sees

[30] Note that in this very register, the subject of phenomenology that Fanon critiques is a result of a particular response to this very vulnerability. The impenetrability of experience, the depth of affect, the complex and uneven terrain, and its temporal relief are all responded to in the privileging of visuality and a universality of the phenomenological subject that Fanon resists.

these as daily practices of sacrifice and self-purification – humility, patience, fearlessness, chastity, poverty, suffering, and punishment – that enable a scrutinising of oneself (of one's subjective vulnerability) (Livingston 2018). Practices that attune the body in terms of particular modes of bodily comportment, movements, gestures, habits, and ways of being in/of the world (Havercroft and Owen 2016, 10). *Ahimsa*, as such practices of attunement, is precisely a forming of the body that makes it ready to respond affirmingly and with care and sensitivity towards its embedded and proximate situation in its world.

The NBA brings this Gandhian ethos to the Valley, articulating a critique of the dam rooted in *ahimsa*. Faced with the prospect of forced evictions from their villages, the Movement asked after the fate of the birds, insects and other small animals in the aftermath of submergence.[31] Those in the villages facing submergence would be 'rehabilitated' in resettlement camps, but what of the other forms of life in the forest? However inadequate and dismal the government-provided resettlement facilities may be, at least they were there – what was to become of the other forms of life of the forest? And in much the same way, faced with submergence, the Movement's practices of resistance drew on Gandhian practices of *satyagraha*: civil disobedience, courting arrest, fasting and hunger strikes, *jal-samadhis* (water-burials) (Mallick 2021, 66-67; Roy 1999; Baviskar 1995). Underlying them all was a critique of the postcolonial developmental logic articulated in terms of *ahimsa*. The developmental state and its proper subject embodied control and mastery as an attempt to bring order to the world. Its demands for industrialisation and rapid economic progress gestured to its insatiable hunger. What the *jal-samadhis* and fasts and disobedience stage is a rejection of this developmental logic and what is internal to it; a performance, that is, of the fearlessness *ahimsa* demands in the face of corporeal vulnerability. In pushing one's body to refuse food and nourishment, embrace hunger – and death – sitting cross-legged in the Narmada's waters waiting for the dam to drown the body, or at a hunger-strike on the Gujarat border, participants of the NBA not only resist the dam's construction, but through it, resist the subjective imaginary (of distance and disembeddedness) that is its ground.

Yet, even as it carried out these translocations of Gandhian practice to the Valley, the Movement introduced to them its own augment. The NBA goes on to render a Gandhian vision of *satyagraha* and non-violence in a pitch and hue that is rooted to the Narmada Valley, embedded in it; that comes from its villages, forests and bunds. And this is seen in the principal demand it makes of its participants: to live in the Valley. The demand that, to truly understand the Movement, to truly become a part of it, one must live in the Valley (Dharmadhikary 2006). At one

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[31] Ashish Kothari, interview with author, online, 10th December 2021.

level, the Movement makes this appeal to the many hundreds of urban environmentalists who sought to join it in the late 1980s and early 1990s. To them, the NBA said: you cannot speak of the river, the dam and the millions submerged by it from the far-flung cities of New Delhi, or Bombay, or Pune. It is only possible to grasp the Movement's resistance to the dam from within the Valley, from living in it. But, at the same time, this is not simply a call to be physically present in the Narmada Valley. For the millions who formed the core of the Movement, the Valley was their home, so the demand to live in the Valley – as a demand to situate oneself geographically – made no sense. To live in the Valley, then, also meant the cultivation of day-to-day routinised practices of eating and exercise, working, sociality, caring, praying, and thinking. Living in the Valley is to offer the first morsel of food to the ancestors and through them to the forest that is the source of all food and life. It is to recognise work as entailing endless days of patient waiting before sowing the crop – listening for the readiness of the soil, the rains, and the grain. To live in the Valley is to cultivate a certain humility in invoking and seeking the blessings of the forest spirits, the snakes and the tigers, before venturing into the forest to collect medicinal plants, or firewood, or nearly anything else. It is to suffer under the searing heat of the midday sun as you build a bund in preparation for the monsoon. It is also to cultivate a care for all life; to be mindful of where one steps on the forest floor; to embrace modes of sociality, through rituals and festivals, that tie the individual to the communal, and the community to vast tapestries of life in which the ancestors, the forests, the clouds, mountains, rivers, soils, animals, birds and humans are all brought together.

Living in the Valley, in this sense, is the cultivation of a sociality – an ecosociality – that is exemplified in practices of bund-building as it resonates with Gandhian practices of non-violence. In the relief of the intertwining of these repertoires, the NBA evinces a vernacular that both draws on a broader critique of the subject of postcolonial order, as well as performing and situating that critique within the Narmada Valley. A vernacular that first emerges in, and extends outwards from, the village *sabhas* organised to share information on the dam's construction as well as discuss collective responses and forms of resistance. Baviskar points out how the *sabha*, much more than a meeting, was a site where communal relations of kinship, care, and listening were performed, as community members narrated stories and sang songs "about powerful ancestors whose memorial stones are often still standing" (Baviskar 1995, 180). Legends and stories are exchanged, told and re-told, that elaborate the complex imbrication of the human in nature and the folding temporalities that bring the ancestors into the present. At the same time, it is through these collective practices of story-telling and narration that, Baviskar notes, communities engage in "discussions about the way *Adivasis* used to live before and the way they live now, analysing their present predicament [the dam] and the lines of action open before them" (Baviskar 1995, 181). These practices of listening and sharing bring forth

questions – what does the dam mean, how will it affect the village, who is the dam built for, where will the water go, who decided where to build it, when and how, where will those from the village and the region go, what is development and what does it mean to be indigenous – that are navigated communally, dwelling in this sociality – in the 'Us!' of the NBA's slogans – that makes it possible to imagine and enact forms of being, saying and doing that resist the dam, its corporeal schematisation and its order of bodies.

At the same time, Amit Bhatnagar, an activist in the Movement, notes how *sabhas* often transform into song and dance celebrations (Bhatnagar). The vibrations of the drum flow through the bodies of those present, and the body begins to dance almost entirely by itself. It is as though the music and the songs demand the body to shape itself, style itself as a flowing, dynamic intensity. The deep and metronomic bass of the drum draws out the feet to tap the earth underneath in perfect synchrony; feeling the vibrations seep into (or even rise up from; reversibility is crucial here) the soft grass, the dry red soil, and the rocks further below. The melody of the *rangaai* – an instrument made from a hollowed teak branch – courses through the body like a wave, generating a ripple that moves through the flesh, enlivening every muscle. The dancers' voices resonate in the still air, echoing off the hills, and in doing so generate relations to other bodies, the rhythms of their movements, performing their embedding in the world. Unfolding themselves in space, through their movements, releasing themselves into the spatiality of other bodies, of the earth and the forest and the river. Touch is at the core of these communal practices of dance. Gradually, almost without conscious willing, dancing bodies begin to reach out to each other as "people dance with their arms linked, holding each other close, moving back and forth in two arcs that face each other", responding to furthest horizons of the tapestries of ecological and social relations in which they are imbricated (Baviskar 1995, 183). A response to the arms that lock into each other, to the movements that carry them along. To peals of laughter as someone takes an unexpected turn, transforming the performance as a whole.

In the laughter and holding and sharing that is constitutive of these communal practices of dance is the performance of a sociality that contests the disembedded-distance constitutive of the dam and its proper subject. Dancing – the interlocking of arms, latching on to the other, the rhythmic synchrony of feet drifting across red soil, voices emanating from the village square and echoing off the mountains – sets into motion an intersubjectivity that stretches outwards from those in the village to those in other villages in the Valley, and the forests, streams, and hills that are in between. Building on the call to live in the Valley, on the Gandhian ethos internal to that demand, these practices of dance perform the sociality that results from such embeddedness: from the ways in which corporeal practices of farming, eating, walking, bund-building, and so many others, are situated within and among, alongside, the plants, animals, the earth and the

river, the stones and soil. An ecosociality that, as I point out above, is here and now, in the Valley, borne of living in it.

Conclusion

By the mid-2000s, however, these performances of sociality in the Narmada Valley became more muted. The NBA and its resistance to the dam was threatened by increasingly aggressive and vindictive state apparatuses. In 2000, moreover, the Movement was dealt a blow in its legal challenge to the Sardar Sarovar as the Indian Supreme Court held its construction (and so the processes of land acquisition and displacement that enabled it) to be legally sound (Narmada Bachao Andolan vs. Union of India and Ors. 2000). Indeed, over the course of the first decade and a half of the 21st Century, the dam's height has been raised multiple times, submerging even more areas of the Narmada Valley. Hundreds of thousands of displaced individuals have been shifted to resettlement camps, from where they provide a steady supply of low-wage labour to India's cities.[32] The hunger strikes, *jal-samadhis*, protest marches, and dances all cease – overpowered by the wall of water the dam brings to bear on them. The slogans and songs are drowned out by the rising waters. The forests, fields, villages, and bunds disappear under the reservoir. The question then is what the significance of the Narmada movement is in the contemporary period? On one register, it appears to have failed. Its radical resistance to the dam transforms into cooperation with the postcolonial state and its bureaucratic machine to ensure displaced communities are provided adequate resettlement. What, then, of the afterlives of that radical moment – of those performances of ecosociality that put into question not only the Sardar Sarovar but, through it, a whole organisation of life? As Nilsen asks in his account of the Narmada movement, 'Wither the rage?' (Nilsen 2010).

In my discussion here, I have drawn out how the NBA performs and figures an unruly subjectivity against the dam and its subjective order. This is an unruliness that emerges from dwelling in an ecosociality – exemplified in practices of bund-building – that puts into question the disembedded-distance of the dam's subjectivising operation. Building on Fanon's critique of the proper subject of phenomenological experience, I suggest how the experiences of such ecosociality, and the disruptions they introduce, proceed from the gesture of touch – to touch one another, to touch the stones, soil, and trees. The Narmada movement draws on this dwelling, extending it outwards from the practices of bund-building, bringing to it a Gandhian ethos of non-violence. In the repertoire of corporeal practices that the NBA develops at the point where these intertwine, and most pointedly in practices of dance that emerge from that intersection, the NBA introduces its own augment. An augment to a Gandhian ethics of non-violence and the subject constituted through its practices; situating such an ethos in the Valley,

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[32] The ways in which development-induced displacement contributes to internal urban migration among India's indigenous and rural poor communities, and their incorporation into exploitative flows of labour in urban India is well documented. See, for instance, Ramanathan (1996) and Nilsen (2010).

expanding its repertoire and supplementing its forms and sites of performance. And simultaneously, an augment to situated and embedded practices of bund-building drawing them out along an arc that stretches from the bund to the village, and then to the Valley. In its traversing of this arc, the Movement gestures towards an unruly subjectivity in the surround of postcolonial order.

My suggestion is that it is in these augments the NBA introduces, and the problematisations it enacts on their basis, that its contemporary salience can be located. In paying close attention, in other words, to the vernacular the Movement introduces from the dam's surround and the trajectories along which it travels beyond the Narmada Valley, it becomes possible to trace the afterlives of its unruly performance. Because these performances of an unruly sociality – of asking *ye konin che* – travel along an arc that, even as it closes in on itself in the Valley, propels itself along alternative paths, in other places, other Valleys. Indigenous people's movements across India in the late 20th and 21st Centuries have been deeply influenced by and draw on the NBA's repertoire of practices. Against the construction and expansion of a nuclear power plant at Kudankulam in southern India, for instance, protesters drew on Gandhian practices of non-violent civil disobedience alongside a critique of the developmental state echoing that articulated by the NBA (Kaur 2020). Similarly, in the hills of eastern India, in Niyamgiri, Kujanga and Khandadhar, indigenous communities have resisted the acquisition and destruction of community forest lands and sacred groves by multinational corporations such as Vedanta and POSCO for mining metals and other minerals (Dash 2015; Krishna 2015; Sahu 2008).

These practices of resistance have drawn on figurations of indigenous subjectivity that refuse the allocation of the place of no place – of the primitivity against which postcolonial development and postcolonial order set to work – that first emerge in the Narmada Valley. In my discussion above, the Narmada movement is not only a rejection of the Sardar Sarovar dam but a refusal of what the dam is a figure of (and what its subjectivising operation institutes): an order of the proper subject of postcolonial development. And as much as these movements taking place in the shadow of the NBA draw on its problematisation of development and the developmental state, they draw on a problematisation – internal to the NBA's resistance – of the subjective order proper to such a state. In this light, insofar as these movements following the NBA build on its repertoire of practices, speak in its vernacular, from kindred surrounds, they gesture towards a surround, towards what interrupts the neat and orderly image of the postcolonial subject from these disorderly surrounds. Because it is this surround – this vernacular – that the NBA draws attention to, that it speaks of and with, that it dwells in to situate its resistance to the dam, that persists even as the Valley is submerged. Away from its arid mountains, activists and participants who had lived in the Valley built on the ecosociality performed in the village meetings and marches. They draw out from these performances the

possibilities of continuing to speak in the Narmada's vernacular, continuing to dwell in the Valley even away from it. Which is to say, they draw out and carry forward the performances of an unruly sociality, the interruptions and disruptions it enacts on postcolonial order. One such collective, *Vikalp Sangam* (lit. Confluence of Alternatives) – a network of several community organisations, many of which have links to the Narmada movement – identifies its central task as carrying on the work of exploring and seeking out "grounded alternatives to the current model of development" (Vikalp Sangam 2024). To seek out, that is, against the striations and partitions instituted by the postcolonial developmental state, performances of unruliness along an arc that first emerges deep in the Valley, as five thousand people march against a dam.

Chapter 3 Dalit Manhood in the Break: fugitivity, refusal and literary politics in Namdeo Dhasal and Baburao Bagul

Beyond the walls of grammar

In 1958, a group of Dalit authors, critics, and activists met in Bombay for the first Dalit Literary Conference.[33] Against proscriptions on writing and reading – on participation in social, cultural, and political life as such – in accord with the ancient laws of Manu, this conference marked that rupture where it became possible to speak of Dalit writing and 'Dalit literature' as an established tradition. But it was also important for when it took place: two years after the death of Dalit leader Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar had not only been the leading figure in the struggle for Dalit emancipation but also the chairman of the Drafting Committee of India's postcolonial Constitution – which committed to law the eradication of caste.[34] Despite the promises of the new Constitution and freedom from colonial rule, however, Dalit life in the postcolony remained brutalised: segregated into unofficial urban ghettoes and rural hamlets.[35] Forced to carry out 'traditionally Dalit' occupations and precluded from access to education and employment, the orders of caste that partitioned and apportioned parts and places for all, in which the Dalit body had the place of the non-place (neither to be seen nor heard), remained unchanged. In 1942, recognising the need for Dalit political representation, Ambedkar had set up the Scheduled Castes Federation (SCF), a political party of and for Dalit communities. Yet, in 1956, this was dissolved, and plans to replace it with a new organisation, the Republican Party of India (RPI), were hindered by Ambedkar's death (Teltumbde 2017, 110). When it was eventually established, infighting and opportunism gutted the RPI almost from the outset. The concern for those at the Dalit Literary Conference, then, was how to reinvigorate Dalit politics and the Dalit 'movement' in the shadow of Ambedkar's death. Against the factional

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[33] As I note in the introductory chapter, the word Dalit is a political self-assertion by members of untouchable communities in India's system of caste-based hierarchy, and is a category marking both the persistent violence of caste and the equally persistent resistance to erasure.
[34] India's Constitution came into force on the 26th of January, 1950.
[35] See, for instance, Guru's discussion that identifies the multiple axes of Dalit oppression (2000, 2004)

'opportunism' of the RPI (Dangle 1994), the need of the hour was a new Dalit politics, a renewed and rejuvenated political movement that could once again take up – in its own way – the mantle of Ambedkar's vision.

Literature was central to this task. In his presidential address, Dalit poet Annabhau Sathe laid the groundwork for the political task awaiting Dalit writing. More than another genre, or style, Dalit literature was a particular relation between literary production and the demands of Dalit politics. Literature – *Sahitya*, in Marathi – was to be intimately connected to a vision of Dalit politics (*Chetna*, in Marathi). Sathe's articulation set the ground for three decades of Marathi Dalit writing in which that relation of literature and politics was reinforced, tested, critiqued, and developed in more radical directions. Many took Sathe's call as a demand for a more robust realism in Dalit writing. If the project of Dalit literature was to animate the project of Dalit politics first begun by Ambedkar, literature was thus a weapon for raising Dalit consciousness – bringing to light the realities of Dalit life and lived experience. Across his works, Ambedkar had identified the practice of untouchability as the cornerstone of caste violence, making emancipation from it the symbolic core of his political project (Rodrigues 2024; George and Anand 2020; Ambedkar 1970). In 1927, Ambedkar led Dalit communities in Mahad in western India to draw water from a well reserved for upper-caste Hindus, defying rules on untouchability. Three decades on, the task of Dalit literature was to engender such defiance by bringing to light the stark brutality of caste discrimination and its most insidious practice.

Others, however, took a different path, one that is the focus of my discussion here. On this approach, the emphasis was no longer on a realist literature bringing to light the injustice of social practice, but on a deeper interrogation of the relation between an art of writing and a political project. Untouchability and the brutality of caste remained elemental, but as we will see below, it now became the ground to step out beyond the banisters laid down by Ambedkar's vision and articulate a radical and unruly literary politics.

Members of the Dalit Panther Party – a group of young, radical Dalit writers who came together in the 1970s – were central to such a literary-political operation. Modelled on the Black Panther Party in the United States and deeply influenced by the poets and authors of the Black Arts Movement, the Dalit Panthers sought to become an organisation at the precise intersection that Sathe called forth; at the interlacings of politics and literature (Teltumbde 2017, 120; Panthers 2013). Seeking a reimagination of the Ambedkarite political movement, the formation of the Panthers marked a point of heightened intensity, as a whole arc of Marathi Dalit literature that

began with the 1958 Conference reached its zenith. The Panthers – and the focus in this chapter is on Namdeo Dhasal, a founding member of the DPP, and Baburao Bagul, who remained closely associated with the group – eschewed a straightforward realism in favour of an art of writing that generated unruly and novel visions of Dalit politics. Their art of writing problematised, I argue below, determinate relations between subjects, subject-matter, and forms of expression, thus putting into question an order that tied bodies – Dalit and Brahmin bodies – to a system of their apportioning, distributing capacities for writing, speaking, and living.

But these unruly visions always – certainly within the confines of this discussion, at the very least – corresponded to the Dalit male subject. In the works I discuss here, Dhasal and Bagul set into motion a restless and interruptive writing that, even as it announces a radical Dalit politics, remains confined to a distension or disruption of the orderly imaginary of the Dalit man. They do, of course, write the Dalit female subject or figure. But, across both is a tendency to reify and valorise Dalit womanhood. The Dalit female is everywhere in Dhasal and Bagul's work, but always along one of two axes: either the site or surface of the most brutal violence and abjection, of which the author himself is simply a voyeuristic recorder, or as the locus of an overabundant and ceaselessly loving maternity. More than this binary, the point is the implicit staticity and rigidity. The Dalit woman does not and cannot act; her actions, her movements, her speech and performance are given beforehand, written by him even before she appears. Dhasal and Bagul's works set up a regime where the Dalit female subject can only appear, speak, and act in particular, determinate ways: either adorned or naked; (Divine) Grace or the wail; loving or suffering (Gupta 2016).

Even as these male writers write, works by Dalit women authors problematise this whole imaginary, breaking down the striations in which Dalit womanhood is captured in Dhasal and Bagul. The work of Urmila Pawar and Shantabai Kamble – contemporaries of Dhasal and Bagul – is particularly illuminating in this respect. Much scholarship has focused on the ways in which Pawar, Kamble, and others (in particular, Tamil Dalit author Bama) write and re-write the Dalit female subject away from the reifying gaze of the male Dalit author.[36] So, to speak of Dalit life and Dalit subjectivity in this context, is really to speak of Dalit manhood. A radicalisation of Dalit politics internal to Dhasal and Bagul's work is a radicalisation of what it means to be a

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[36] See, for instance Hubel (2019), Festino (2015), and Chakravarti (2013).

Dalit man, of what Dalit manhood looks and feels like. Of what it can be in the intertwining of literature and politics first announced in Sathe's address. This is not an exhortation to ignore what are serious problems in these works by Dhasal and Bagul. Instead, in drawing attention to their radical literary politics - limited as it is to the Dalit male subject – I want to set the ground for a problematisation of their figurations of Dalit womanhood on precisely the terms that they problematise the inscription of Dalit manhood in upper-caste literature. I do not carry out this task here but hope such an inquiry is made possible by my reading of Dhasal and Bagul's radicalisation of Dalit politics.

With this in mind, one aim of my discussion is to explore the precise constellations of the intertwining of literature and politics in the work of Dhasal and Bagul, trying to locate in those interstices their radical vision of Dalit politics and Dalit manhood. Drawing on Ambedkar, but introducing to his work their own augment, I suggest that Dhasal and Bagul articulate and write Dalit manhood as fugitive – in the break, suspended between collapsing and forming. And from that surround, rising "beyond the walls of grammar"[37], they perform their resistance. A literary politics of refusal – of stopping and leaving. "Man, you should explode!" (Dhasal 2007a). Not in terms of escape, for there is no escape, but in terms of rejection and disavowal. Not only of the upper-caste (Brahminical) order in which the Dalit body is that liminal being, but of the very drive to mastery and totality that grounds any such Ordering. To enact this fugitive gesture is to engage in a performance to the side of the fully-formed subject of politics (Elam 2020, 115; Moten 2017, 227-228). In leaving with nowhere to go, into that very suspension, Dhasal and Bagul's literary politics writes a heteronomous and fugitive plurality of Dalit manhood. A vision of Dalit sociality in the surround of that whole game of appearance and manifestation. A collective that is always open-ended and plural. That does not claim in the name of the whole, but in the name of exactly that which the whole disavows.

Fully appreciating this shift, I will argue, requires a turn away from literature to traditions of Dalit performance more generally: to the way Marathi Dalit writing draws on, internalises, and grows out of Dalit performance – in particular, the *Tamasha*. *Tamasha*, a Dalit performance art, is a mix of singing, acting, dance, storytelling, and religious service. A unique style defines *Tamasha* – syncopation, disjunct and discord, cacophony and frequent interruptions – that, I will argue below, becomes central to Dhasal and Bagul's writing. The interjection of sounds and bodily

[37] Dhasal, *Cruelty*

gestures, of the distention these enact in and on the text, are central to the literary politics enacted here. This debt of Dalit writing from the mid-20th Century in Bombay, to a much older and geographically more dispersed tradition of Dalit performance is an aspect that – while explicitly recognised by Dalit authors themselves (see for instance, Dhasal's 2007 interview where he notes how his poetry emerges from and is deeply influenced by the *Tamasha*)[38] – finds almost no detailed attention in Dalit literary criticism. To be sure, the debt is noted, but what is left under-explored is precisely how performance lives on in text, how Dalit performance leaves or refuses to leave Dalit writing, and what the political consequences are of this moulding and augmenting of text by its outside.

At the same time, my discussion also aims to intervene in another debate: emerging from the relation between this art of Dalit writing and contemporary post-foundational theorisations of the politics of literature. I have in mind, here, specifically, the work of Rancière. My wager is that turning to Rancière's work allows for developing a distinctive reading of Dhasal and Bagul's works that makes it possible to mark the fugitivity they write in response to Sathe's call. Yet, I will argue, bringing Rancière into dialogue with these Dalit writers serves to point out how their works not only resonate with Rancière's but also speak back to it. How it introduces to Rancière's theorisation of literary politics a crucial augment.

For Rancière, literariness disrupts Orders of speech and action (Rancière 2011b). Literature – or literarity, more generally – is that condition that puts into erasure any necessary link between modes of address and forms of bodies (Murphet and Hellyer 2016). Between ways of being, saying and doing, and an orchestration of bodies, their capacities for speech, action, and appearance. Rancière locates the politics of literature precisely in its ability to undo these knots that hold together the partitions of who speaks when, how, and what (Rancière 2004, 19). Yet, here he notes a distinction between literary and political dissensus. Even as an inescapable knot ties them together, an unsurpassable gap divides literature and politics. Literature, Rancière suggests, has its own politics, its own modes of enacting dissensus, but it cannot do what politics does: it cannot name, invent words, constitute a collective subject – cannot that is, in Rancièrean terms, perform a practice of subjectivisation (Rancière 2011b). Yet, the Dalit writing we are concerned with here pushes back, I argue, against exactly this unsurpassable

[38] Note for instance, how Dhasal reiterates the debt owed by and in his writing to *Tamasha* and that tradition of Dalit performance (Dhasal 2008).

gap. Where Rancière locates the ultimate impossibility of literature to articulate a novel collective subject, I suggest Dhasal and Bagul's works provide us a way to yet think such subjectivisation in the fugitive suspensions and refusals they perform.

Before elaborating on these claims in the final section of this chapter, I trace the disruptions Dalit literature makes within the field of upper-caste Hindu writing and the literary orders internal to it, taking as my point of departure the early 20th Century Progressive Writers' Association and their turn toward social realism.[39] Writing on the cusp of Indian Independence – in the very moment of postcolonial transition – the writers of the PWA (and here I focus on Munshi Premchand as exemplary) found in the realist mode the possibility of literature informing and enlightening radical social and economic transformations. Even as the aim was thoroughly anticolonial and emancipatory, I show the realist reliance on the 'social type' as literary figure/subject silences and incapacitates the Dalit figure. The Dalit is not a social Type in the way the farmer or the landlord is – they cannot act, generate effects, cause or institute transformations, engender a revolution. The Dalit figure remains as it always has been in the orders of caste – inert and inactive; invisible.

It is against such a silencing of the Dalit figure that Dalit literature institutes its own rupture. Drawing on Rancière and a set of contemporary readings of Dalit literature embedded in his work, I explain the break Dalit literature institutes. I then go on to draw out the kind of literary politics contemporary readings of Dalit literature express through their turn to Rancière. I show how they misread his work at a crucial point – taking for granted a straightforward relation between literature and politics that Rancière problematises. Nonetheless, I suggest it is possible to rescue or recover the core impulse motivating their reading. This impulse or force draws us back to Sathe's call and to those demands to reimagine Dalit politics. Expressing a fidelity to that impulse draws us to move beyond, while speaking with and against, Rancière.

Working through close readings of Dhasal and Bagul's writing and drawing on Fred Moten's reflections on fugitivity, I suggest how a phonocorporeal distention generates a push or force that draws text and language to and beyond its limit – into a zone of indistinction. Building on

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[39] While this is where my discussion begins in this chapter – the concern with the aesthetic invisibility and incapacity of Dalit bodies runs far deeper. In Appendix A, I discuss in more depth how the Dalit body is accorded the place of no place in classical Indian aesthetics. The *Rasika* of that classical tradition of *Rasa*, I explain there, is a particular form of aesthetic subjectivity rooted to birth (and therefore, caste) and possessing characteristics (disembodied, transcendental) constitutively foreclosed to Dalits.

the centrality of *Tamasha* to their work, I show how Dhasal and Bagul write a fugitive Dalit manhood suspended in such a zone – in between, this some other place. In the final section, I pick up the question of fugitivity to ask, what is the resistance of these fugitive bodies. That is, what is the shape of their literary politics? What kind of political force or valence is set on its way by this stopping and leaving? What novel visions of Dalit manhood emerge here? And what consequences does this have for thinking Dalit politics – that is, what marks or twists or indentations does it leave?

The discussion in this chapter builds on translations of twelve pieces of short prose and poetry by Namdeo Dhasal and Baburao Bagul. Of these, nine have been translated into English for the first time: *Death is Becoming Cheap* and *Hard Labour* by Bagul; *Ambedkar 1981*, *A Lowly Thing*, *The Rigidly Bound Man*, *What Grade Are You In?*, *The Tale of a Dead Man* and *Sound*, all by Dhasal. The other pieces, Bagul's *Jevha Mi Jat Chorli Hoti* (When I Concealed My Caste) and *Bovhada*, and Dhasal's *Kraurya,* have been translated into English before, Bagul's works by Pinto (2018), and Dhasal's by Chitre (2007b). In my discussion here, I use these alongside the original translations of the new pieces.

The selection of these texts raises at least two questions. First, quite simply, why these works? The attempt in identifying suitable works from Dhasal and Bagul has been to draw from the two-decade period following the 1958 Conference, which is to say, to draw from their writing when they were deeply embedded in that whole radical tradition of literature set into motion in 1958. The works chosen here, thus, were all written between the early 1960s and the early 1980s. In no way a representation of that period of Dalit writing, they mark instead one of the many trajectories that followed Anna Sathe's call for Dalit writing. At the same time, the aim throughout this discussion is to note how the kind of fugitive aesthetic-political operation written by Dhasal and Bagul is not specific to a particular work or collection, but a gesture more broadly dispersed across their works. The selection thus also reflects this temporal breadth.

But the question of selection raises another: that of position. A question of what the relation is between the art of writing that Dhasal and Bagul develop, and the writing about such an art. In the gulf between these two practices, partitions are set up and policed. Distributions of what is available to whom and of the capacities for one or the other kind of writing are presupposed. More pointedly, what is the consequence, or what kind of literary critique is both made possible and foreclosed by the kind of reading an upper-caste man from Bombay (an utterly different Bombay to that of Dhasal and Bagul) engages in when encountering these texts. Can I hear its

syncope – the inscape of its experience? This is also a question of style – of the relation between what we could heuristically call literary and critical writing. In moving from one to the other, or in potentially bringing one to bear on the other, what erasures or oversights are committed?

On one account, my discussion here can be nothing more than an attempt to make sense of Dalit writing by the use of a particular repertoire of critical techniques and, in so doing, to extract from it some hidden or concealed political message. The discussion remains in this sense, extractive – failing to engage with these works on their terms. Failing, more importantly, to register the urgency or immediacy of Dalit politics and its project. Because ultimately, I remain outside the fold, dissociated from the political project that I discuss. But, of course, I am implicated. As Dhanda and Manoharan point out, caste affects us all and shapes us all (Dhanda and Manoharan 2022, 2; Dhanda and Jaoul 2021). So, to speak of any privileged position from which, or within which, caste (and equally, anti-caste thought) can be written fails to recognise its general dispersion. As they point out, "We do not think that this responsibility is only of those who by birth status are made direct victims of casteism." (Dhanda and Manoharan 2022, 2). In their view, the very question of positionality is blurred in questions of caste. Yet, the question of style is not so blurred. How to write about an art of writing that resists the very orders that my writing brings to it – this, in some ways, is the real question of positionality. And here, the response my discussion offers - or rather, proceeds from - which in no way aims to be conclusive, is to find an in-between, a middle ground navigating the interstices of literariness and critique. The premise here, following Rancière, is that literature sets to work on itself its own tools of critique. Tools that literary theory then uses to critique literary writing as though they are brought to bear externally. In this light, the aim here is to try and work from within that interstice of literary and critical writing in ways that do not bring to bear on an art of writing a whole conceptual apparatus but work from within, through the knots and binds in which literature and critique are interminably tied. The aim is not to say something in general of Dalit literature as genre, or to identify and describe a theory of Dalit literarity. Instead, it is to locate a singular gesture in the surround of an order of caste, as it is performed across a set of texts.

Lead us to the future

In the founding manifesto of the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA), Mulk Raj Anand identifies a turn to realism as the core feature of the collective's work, writing that their task must be "to bring the arts into the closest touch with the people; and to make them the vital organs which will register the actualities of life, as well as lead us to the future." (Anand 2020). Everyday life, its struggles and its joys, its machinations and movements thus become, for the members of the PWA, the proper subjects of literary expression. Anand continues, "We believe that the new literature of India must deal with the basic problems of our existence today – the problems of hunger and poverty, social backwardness and political subjugation, so that it may help us to understand these problems and through such understanding help us to act." (Anand 2020).[40] The driving force of such writing was to engender a profound and total social transformation – one proper to the postcolonial moment that was around the corner. In this way, it marked a distinctive break from classical traditions of Indian aesthetic theory, setting into motion an art of writing in which "concepts of beauty, poetic form and genre, and narrative ideals were entirely determined by caste and class" (Gajarawala 2012, 36). Inescapably tied, that is, to social experience – an irreducible part "of [a] total historical social process" (Lukacs 1970a, 63).

Unfettered by prescriptions of authority and judgement internal to the classical traditions that determined who can speak and listen, the realist turn transforms literature into a textuality for anyone; a literature of anything and anyone (Rancière 2011b, 12). As Munshi Premchand, a leading member of the PWA, sees all too clearly, this is an openness that places literature into its world, a common history, among the speech and activity of those hitherto silenced. So, Premchand's works speak of debt, drought and dowry. Of feudal lord, farmer, and farmhand. Of lords and labourers. And principally, of soil, sweat, and survival. The village home, the textile mill, the factory, and the farm become the sites for the generation of aesthetic experience. They become the content of a letter, a text, in which "a whole society can be read [in] all its truth"

[40] It is difficult to miss the distinctly Lukácsian pitch and rhythm of this declaration. A literature that expresses in its forms, figures and types, the unique syntheses of particularity, individual agents and their actions, and generality, social consciousness, that are the condition of possibility of historically transformative events/enactments. A broadly Lukácsian imaginary along these lines runs deep in the realist literature of the Progressive Writers' Association, as the later discussion in this section demonstrates.

(Rancière 2011b, 15). It is these stories that Premchand and the PWA begin to tell. That of the underbelly, the hidden and concealed, the fossils and ruins of life under feudal (and colonial) rule.

Responding to the moment of postcolonial transition, to its demand for imagining and bringing into being the new postcolony, the PWA's writings aimed to generate new meanings, create new worlds, and form new visions of living, speaking, and acting; to articulate a new genre, form, and subject. We see this search for novelty most clearly in Premchand's *Nayi Kahani* (literally, New Story) – the prototypical genre of the kind of realist writing members of the PWA engaged in.[41] As Gajarawala argues, the possibilities of newness, for Premchand, are tied intrinsically to the realist 'project' (Gajarawala 2012, 32). The centrepiece of Premchand's realist imaginary – indeed, of a system of realist literature in general that his work exemplifies – is the articulation of the Type. The Type provides for Premchand a way to pose and to anchor a narrative structure, in which the 'mute witnesses' he is after begin to speak, and where these other histories occur and are written (Gajarawala 2012, 39). The Type as literary figure presents, for Premchand, the situation and the stage from which it becomes possible to write the dynamics of realist subjectivation.

Neither generalisation nor particularism, the Type embodies a particular constellation of the worldly and the idiosyncratic, of social and human, of historical and political (Lukacs 1970a, 78). Through the Type, the individual is, to use Lukács' terms, embedded in the historical forces of their production. Historicality is crucial; the figure of the social Type is at once thoroughly historical and thoroughly individuated, singular. The peasant, the feudal lord, the mill-worker, the factory owner, the money lender – each Type in Premchand's work is a situated and historical entity, grounded in the (economic) laws of history. A peculiar synthesis that becomes the condition of possibility of action, activity (Lukacs 1970b, 113-114). The dialectical relation between individual and universal, a historical social process and the possibilities of its

[41] My suggestion in turning to Premchand – an author who wrote principally in Hindi and Hindustani – in a discussion on Dalit writing in Marathi is not that Dhasal and Bagul are responding to him in their works, or that any such intimate link can be drawn between them (at least, within the confines of my discussion). Instead, I draw our attention to Premchand as an exemplar of a particular gesture realist Indian literature (and the PWA) makes. It is precisely this gesture, I argue below, that is problematised by Dalit writers and critics, setting the ground for the kind unruly writing Dhasal and Bagul carry out. The point is not Premchand and his particular works, but a set of features his work exemplifies that are nonetheless more dispersed across a whole tradition of realist Indian writing.

interruption, a singular moment and the fullness of history that constitutes the Type for Lukács is precisely the site and ground of activity. Where the chance event (or act) is uncovered not simply as happenstance, but as 'inevitable', as an unfolding of the "general social significance" embedded within the moment (Lukacs 1970b, 116). Precisely because the social Type is historically situated, necessary to, and an elemental node within the movements of history, it is capable of acting into such history. Capable of generating transformations – altering historically determined movements, and in so doing, inaugurating a revolutionary moment of novelty; a capacity to "conceive of great ends and pursue them against the strokes of fortune" (Rancière 2016, 30). In a word, the social Type is that figure through which both the 'actualities of life', and the project of articulating a path to the future – the path Anand calls for – are brought to life. And the elemental gesture of such transformation – of a historically conditioned upheaval – in Premchand's novels is the change of heart (Gajarawala 2012, 39). In the feudal lord's shift from brutal to fraternal, or the peasant's from subjugated to rebellious, there are moments of twisting history, of grabbing it by its horns and altering its course fundamentally. Indeed, these constitute the figure of the Type itself – moving from being witness, or describing events, to articulating a narrative. (Re)creating the peasant or the feudal lord as historical: products of a totality of social relations, but onto which they also act in transformative ways (Lukacs 1970b). A shift away, that is, from passivity.

The question really is *how* Premchand creates his Types, and the histories they are embedded in. Peasant and lord, farmer and money-lender, labourer and owner: the social Type for Premchand is decisively and conclusively determined by a historical materialism. Social life and the social world, for Premchand, "can only mean [the] socio-economic." (Gajarawala 2012, 41). As Arjun Dangle, a founder of the Dalit Panther Party, also notes, "...the progressive literature [was] restricted only to the capitalist-labour conflict and this conflict was often portrayed unrealistically, being greatly influenced by romanticism." (Dangle 1994, 241). Indeed, Premchand drives home the point in his first address to the PWA, calling on its members to wrest back control of literature and literary order from the wealthy (Premchand 1957).[42]

[42] An interesting demand precisely because, as I show in Appendix A, at the core of the literary and aesthetic orders defining the classical traditions of Indian aesthetics, are the proscriptions of caste. It is birth and its purity – caste, put simply – that determines one's capacity not only to partake in aesthetic activity, but also to find a place in aesthetic representation. Dalit bodies were thus both incapable of aesthetic experience, and unworthy of aesthetic representation – both silenced and accorded the place of no place.

And here lies the rub. The Dalit figure is an enduring presence in Premchand's work, yet caste dynamics are written within a narrative structure that privileges – indeed, that has as its foundation – the antagonisms of class. Even as Dalit characters live, work, and move throughout his novels, they are always only spectral and ephemeral presences. The Dalit figure as a social Type does not fit within Premchand's realist paradigm to the extent that caste does not present itself as a historical category. In other words, the Dalit figure is not the 'product' of the kind of Lukácsian synthesis of particular and general, not embedded within the historical forces of its emergence, in the way the farmer or the feudal landowner is. Caste presents itself as an always-already; the Dalit figure is not a product of particular (historical) social relations, but a sort of permanent marginal presence, a part of social life/experience, but ancillary, to the side. As a result, the caste-ised figure, the Dalit 'Type', is represented as pure particularity with no relation to the historicality of social consciousness. There is always the space, the possibility of conflict, negotiation, or resolution between the dominant social Types, but while this "dialectic of individual and social leaves room for historical movement [but] caste, in its absolute particularity, fixes and stagnates" (Gajarawala 2012, 41).

The Dalit figure, pictured thus, cannot act in the same sense that the other figures populating Premchand's work can. There is no transformation it can undergo, no 'change of heart' or rebellion it can enact. The Dalit is represented precisely as the 'passive' figure "enclosed in the time of the everyday, the time of the mere production and reproduction of life when things happen one after another and when any form of activity is only a means for an immediate end." (Rancière 2016, 31). The sort of historically transformative action that is constitutive of the peasant or the lord in Premchand's novels is foreclosed to the Dalit figure. Social agents do things and speak but always *to* the Dalit, who in turn is trapped, stripped of agency, unable to speak.[43] Dalit agency, Dalit life as activity, is made invisible by an ossification of the social Type. Where, on the one hand, the articulation of the Type enables a literature of anyone and anything; on the other hand, it simultaneously invisibilises the Dalit. In the hierarchies of active and passive bodies, as Rancière points out of Lukács, what is reinstated is a particular distribution of subjective capacities. In the realist project of representing the actualities of life, Premchand generates a writing of life that constrains what such life is (De Boever 2016, 230). In

[43] Rawat and Satyanarayana (2016, 9) suggest that the demands of Progressive Indian literature rendered the "stigmatised victim as the normative figure of the Dalit".

Premchand, these forms of life are his social Types. This literary mode fosters and enables the representation of forms of life previously impossible, but at the same time, institutes its own limits, identifying in this 'project of life' a fullness or totality that nonetheless leaves bodies in its surround. The realism of the PWA in this respect institutes an Order of the subject – of subjects that can have a change of heart, that possess these 'attuned hearts', and of the excess, the remainders who become, once again (or always remain), mute witnesses - objects through which the transformations and epic acts of history pass without incident or impact.

A sense of the subjectivising project undergirding Premchand's realism is reinforced when we consider, in light of the above, that his novels rarely speak of particular relations. The social Type is precisely this synthesis of the individual and general – never simply *a* labourer or money-lender, but through them, a generality or fullness that is the representation of social life as such. In his last novel, *Godaan* ('The Gift of the Cow'), the totalising impulse is seen starkly. One finds an overflowing of figures and Types throughout – the peasant, the lord, the money-lender, the village headman, the labourer, the capitalist, the village shop-owner, the schoolteacher, the doctor, the priests and clerics, the Dalit and the Dalit hamlet, and so on. This sort of holism serves to throw into sharper relief the invisibilisation of Dalit life always present in his work, for the Dalit figure is now entirely trapped. Premchand grounds a whole social world in which each node, each figure, is allocated its part, a process by which a certain coherence obtains for the totality thus generated; the "sense that nothing falls outside its orbit; everything is included." (Gajarawala 2012, 42). And in this partitioned totality, as I suggest above, the Dalit figure is always only a failed figure, unable to transcend the passive repetition and reproduction of Dalit life. Trapped in a paradigm that identifies and locates bodies, gives them shape, grants them space to move, a little wiggle room, or a whole swathe of farmland. A paradigm that controls its bodies, policing them, and determining the possibilities available to them. This is what the holism internal to Premchand's realism – internal, more broadly, to the PWA and its realist commitment – secures. The Dalit figure cannot speak, cannot act, lying outside history, it is the object, the particle, the thing – animalised life inscribed as the other of the human subject.

Write the way we feel

And yet, Dalit figures speak; act and move; fight and resist; love and hate; narrate their history, grab hold of it and twist it; rend it apart and remake it. In articulating a specifically Dalit literature, the 1958 Dalit Literary Conference lays the ground for an insurgence of those who cannot act – indeed, write – set underway against established realist modes of address, forms of speech, narrative operations, figures and styles (the entire schema of types in Premchand's *Nayi Kahaani*, the grand historical arc it traces in which such and such agents carry out their actions, and the vast landscape of social life is demonstrated as internally split). In breaking away from such realism, Dalit literature in the shadow of the 1958 Conference announces its own declaration: "We shall write the way we feel, who are you to dictate to us?" (Dangle 1994, 245). What Dangle has in mind here is a complete rejection – to stop and leave, as we will see more clearly later - of an established technique, or art, of writing and its compact or congruence with a system of bodies determining who writes what, how, and where. It is such resistance that Bagul has in mind when, chastising all Indian literature as upper-caste, he speaks of the "total revolution" that is Dalit writing (Bagul 1994, 289).

To see this interruption more clearly, I want to draw attention to Rancière's work. Not simply to explain away Dalit literature through his conceptual apparatus, but to stage a dialogue that throws in sharper relief the question to which this discussion ultimately turns: of Dalit literary-politics in Dhasal and Bagul. For Rancière, literature is constitutively doubled. It is, on the one hand, a system or form of knowledge and meaning in which logics of action and response, subject-matter and objects, forms of portrayal, and the attendant rules or principles of analysis or interpretation are circumscribed (Rancière 2011b). Conceived this way, literature is a system of visibility – of who can appear where and how, of who acts, what they do, and how these are seen. But, on the other hand, Rancière argues, literature is also a force or potency that disrupts these systems of correspondence and accord. An art of writing that introduces a gap, or dissonance (Rancière 2011a). At the heart of literature, for Rancière, is the possibility – internal to it – to undo the very forms of police that it sets up. Re-drawing the lines of propriety in ways that lay the ground for a reconfiguration of ways of seeing and hearing. Literature, in this latter sense, intervenes in and interrupts a generalised system of visibility, what Rancière calls a distribution of the sensible (Rancière 2011b). It is that art of writing in and through which the cacophony of those (things) who cannot speak is manifested (Rancière 1994, 24).

Even at this preliminary level, we can begin to sense how, in Rancière's theorisation of literature the possibilities of a disruption analogous to that declared by Dangle become clearer. Across both, what is common is a practice of resistance that draws on an excessive or supplementary part – when those who cannot speak, act, or write, begin to do exactly that. Flaubert and/or Dhasal, Balzac and/or Bagul – to write the way we feel is to resonate with, to latch on to, to set out with this destabilising supplement. Rancière conceives of this supplement as a 'garrulous mutism of the letter' (Rancière 2011a, 2011b, 2019), and I suggest it is already at work in Dalit writing. Charting out the contours of such mutism, following Rancière's discussion of Hugo, underscores how Dalit writing in the works of Dhasal and Bagul latches on to an unruly excess or supplement that dismantles the regime of progressive literature. First, Rancière identifies how literature breaks down orders of fiction. For him, these are orders that institute a causal logic or rationality, of actions that follow one another in a specific organisation (Rancière 2016, 2019). It is a question of the change of heart in Premchand, a principle of rationality in which and by which subjects do what they do within a grand chain of causes and effects. In the first instance, it is here that literary order is upturned by the interjection of the utterly random moment; standing out and apart, out of context, improperly situated in a causal order of events and their representation (Rancière 2019). Walking, random walking, aimless walking, that punctures causal givens, as Bagul does, putting away the task of "setting these diamonds into poetic sockets. And [giving] Marathi poetry a precious ornament".[44] He decides to walk – "Come on, let's step out for a bit".[45]

Bagul walks through the slum in *Death is Becoming Cheap*, almost as if jumping, as he navigates a discordant and incoherent agglomeration of diseased, exhausted, hurt and half-dead bodies – Dalit bodies. What is crucial is not the narrative that ties them together, nor the system of causes and effects in which they are imbricated, but precisely their juxtaposition. Encounter after encounter indefinitely. If the subjects of the PWA's realism were sedimentations of particular and universal that gave to them a historical task, Bagul writes precisely what such syntheses leave out. The outside of that totality of objects and their accurate representation, which, as Nagaraj notes, Dalit literature as a whole seeks to resist (Nagaraj 2010, 227-230). Resistance by way of writing that random surround of fictional

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[44] Bagul, *Death is Becoming Cheap*
[45] *Ibid*.

rationality; bodies left outside the space of action – Bhimu Kadam, Ramu Nagvekar, Barku. Bagul resists situating these bodies in a historicising logic or explaining them away as the result of so many social relations/structures. What he does write, what he performs, precisely in his walking, is movement. The wanderings of things, events, and bodies caught up in the flow, mirrored or echoed in the wanderings of Bagul and his friend, as they move from one hutment to the next, one life to the next.

At the same time, Rancière notes how literature, as an art of writing, dismantles determinate relations between genre, object, and subject. What is at issue, Rancière tells us, is the disruption of the hierarchies that organise literary subjects, how they are written (about), and what they (can) say or do (Rancière 2011a). Fictive rationalities, he argues, have internal to them a generic 'system', within which "the subject takes its place in a scale of values" (Rancière 2011a, 45). And this also means, following Rancière, that in the realism of a writer like Premchand, not only is the Dalit figure incapable of a 'change of heart', but such a possibility is also foreclosed by the genre itself. That is, there cannot be a Dalit figure that is represented in such a way, that carries out such and such actions, because to do so is to introduce an inescapable contradiction within that order of writing. An elemental mismatch between the subject that is written, and the object – the object of fiction – that it must conform to (Rancière 2011a). The point is not simply, in Rancière's view, that we are faced with a hierarchisation of bodies and their distribution across a graded space. It is, instead, that such hierarchies are congruent to a hierarchisation of what can be written/said of these bodies – of what they can do, how, and how their actions can be represented.

In Bagul's *Bohada*, the Dalit Damu speak, act, and dance in the most improper way (doing what the Dalit figure cannot do in the hierarchies of genre). In a conflict over who will host the village *Bohada* (a traditional religious event), the Dalit Damu dismantles the links between genre, subject, and object by voicing a demand that opens the story: "This year, I, a *Mahar*, will sing at the *Bohada*".[46] The response makes Damu's disruption clear – "Sacrilege! Anarchy! Since when have you become a *Deshmukh*?[47] – Hear him out- How can we?! Do you know what he is suggesting!".[48] Damu has no place, no business to speak and act the way he is. In the auction

[46] Bagul, *Bohada*
[47] An upper-caste name, Deshmukh refers to the caste of Brahmin priests whose traditional occupation is to conduct the religious affairs of the village and read and interpret the sacred texts.
[48] Bagul, *Bohada*

that follows – an auction in which a disruption is already underway as a Dalit participates alongside upper-caste members of the village – each bid draws us closer and closer to complete rupture. The climactic point where Damu dances and sings at the *Bohada,* doing exactly what that genre, the *Bohada* as a performative art, forecloses to him. Bagul's writing of that performance, moreover, brings to light how Damu's impropriety goes hand in hand with an impropriety in genre and its orders. A *Bohada* is a significant religious event, suffused with sacred imagery and meaning. To write the Dalit figure into this setting, in the midst of this elaborate Sanskritic and upper-caste imagery, is a breaking down of orders of propriety and decorum, of sanctity and religious purity.[49] Sanskritic speech and Sanskrit writing, the proper form of expression of that which is divine is interrupted by this Dalit vernacular piercing through every irreverent sentence Bagul writes of the Bohada.[50] "Coconuts were smashed, lemons were sliced, and amidst all of it danced Damu, ferocious, roaring with enough strength to make the very heart of darkness quiver. He battled and pranced in his monstrous form, terrible to behold, shaking the village to its very foundations.".[51] A set of rituals that carry with/in them their proper forms of expression are set aside here. Coconuts and lemons are not sanctified and given as offerings to the Gods, they are smashed and sliced. Damu – personifying a divine figure with his mask – is not in the form of divine beauty but is monstrous and ferocious. Indeed, Damu does not wear the *mask* (*saung*) of the god Narsimha, he appears with Narsimha's mug (*taund*). And

[49] The ways in which a whole Sanskritic order of genre and form is upended here is made clearer in the resonances between Bagul's story and a Tamasha performance by Sambhaji Bhagat. In *Palkhiche Bhoi* (literally, those who sit on the palanquins we shoulder), Bhagat draws out exactly how upper-caste literature (realist, romantic and Rasa) silences and invisibilises the Dalit subject. And what is particularly relevant is how he goes about doing so. For, what Bhagat takes aim at is precisely the generic systems organising upper-caste literature. He sings, "*dise Chandra, dev Indra, vasti aamchi nahi lihvali*" ('visions of the Moon, of the God Indra and his Kingdom; but you never wrote of our shanties'). And later, "*dise paan, hirve raan; jalti oon nahi livhali – tu rangvali duniya, toh aamcha rang naahi*" ('visions of flowing streams, lush forests; but where is the searing heat – in your colourful world, where is our colour?') (Bhagat 2015b). The Moon, Indra's Kingdom, flowing, playful rivers and verdant forests – figures anchoring a particular generic system are put into question by Bhagat, by his performance that breaks the orders of generic propriety by the introduction of what is discordant and out-of-shape; what does not fit.

[50] Aniket Jaaware (2018) makes a similar point in his reading of 19th Century anticaste writer and activist Jyotirao Phule. He notes how Phule wrote the rupture in the generic orders of Sanskritised Marathi literature. "The first outburst of the anti-caste sentiment and politics expresses itself as difference in style...the kind of Marathi Phule uses was unacceptable in varying degrees to the more educated people." (131) Jaaware marks a crucial shift in genre and the accord between subject, object and subject-matter that is central to upper-caste Marathi literature (in Phule's time as much as in Dhasal and Bagul's), noting a break or dissonance from the established forms of writing coded there.

[51] Bagul, *Bohada*

as this divine being, he does not protect the village in the eternal battle of good and evil to restore balance to the cosmos; Damu makes the village shudder.

Intrinsic to this upheaval of generic systems, to the way Bagul writes Damu, is a reorganisation of the use of words, established metaphors, figures of speech, adjectives and verbs. Rancière elaborates, turning to the correspondence between classical rhetoric's *inventio* as an order of fiction and elocutio as the forms of expression proper to it,

> "If *elocutio* formerly was subject to *inventio*, giving the representative agents of the action the expressions appropriate to their character and their circumstances, it now emancipates itself from this tutelage...henceforth it will be the material part of language – words with their sonorous and imagistic power – that takes the place of the intellectual part – the syntax that subordinates those words to the expression of thought." (Rancière 2011a, 43)

The point, then, is not simply a novel use of language, to use words improperly, but to set loose their 'sonorous and imagistic power'. And here once again, Dangle's familiar declaration: We will write the way we feel. To write a different way, a new kind of writing that dismantles the perceptual givens organising forms of life and forms of writing.

Two movements are occurring in step here. On the one hand, we are faced with a particular vector in and through which determinate forms of expression are disordered. In *Bohada*, as I argue above, it is not simply the appearance of bodies that have no place to appear – at the auction, on the stage – but also the appearance of a dialect that is utterly improper to what is taking place. An impropriety of writing that we see rising to a fever pitch in Dhasal, reaching out across the very limits of literary Marathi (Limbale 2004, 33). Dhasal's poem *Tuhi Yatta* – literally, What is Your Grade? – interjects in a literary order and its forms of expression by introducing to it a whole new dialect, a Dalit dialect; writing this uncanny, unfamiliar vernacular (Chitre 1982, 95).

Padd vadhla ka? Padd? (Lugged around any dead cattle? Dead cows?)

Nisna ghasla ka? Nisna? (Ever scrubbed the grindstone? Grindstone?)

Hyaale manjhe kaay? Hyaale? (Know what the cow's large intestine is called? Ever ate it?)

Parkhaand Manjhe Kaay? Paarkhand? (Ever sucked on the marrow? The marrow?)

Chanya valavlya ka? Chanya?[52] (Fried any chitlins? Chitlins?)

Hyaale, *Nisna*, *Padd*, *Chanya* – these are words unknown to chaste and literary Marathi, but all too familiar to the streets of Bombay, to the chawls and alleys in which Dhasal wrote (and of which he wrote). It is not simply the subject-matter here, but precisely that correspondence between it and the forms of writing. Literary propriety is met with an irreverent force that bursts it open, freeing it from the partitions that establish its proper place. A break is instituted as that order instituting a relation between words and bodies – what Dhasal calls the "rabble of decent folk" – is upturned.[53] Distinctions between aesthetic and unaesthetic forms, between words germane to what is sought to be represented, and those extraneous or excessive to it, between proper speech, proper language, and the incoherent chatter at its fringes, are collapsed. To write the way we feel is to write in this dialect, this 'bastard tongue' (Dangle 1994), an art of writing that upends rules of literary decorum and modes of presentation.

On the other hand, these principles of expression are disrupted by precisely what Rancière calls the sonorous power of words. Writing that extends outwards, beyond its textuality and breaking away from its relation to content, to a point where it begins to operate of a power internal to it – internal to its sonority and materiality. I look more closely at these performances of sonority in Dhasal and Bagul's works in the following section, exploring how their art of writing opens a space of indistinction between sound and text, voice and letter, the word and that noise which subtends it. At this stage, I only want to mark how such phonic interjections are everywhere in their writing. It is in all those interruptions – the *'Hey!'* and *'Ha!'*, the "Oh! Death my sweet kinsman, Enough!", and "Hey you!", distending 'regular' speech and proper action.[54] It is the sonorous irruption making itself palpable in Dhasal's *pad-pad-padley*, and *gul-gul-gulley*.[55] In

[52] Dhasal, *What is Your Grade?*
[53] Dhasal, *Tale of a Dead Man*
[54] Dhasal, *Tale of a Dead Man*; Bagul, *When I Hid My Caste* (Bagul 2018)
[55] Dhasal, *Rigidly Bound Man*

the cadence and rhythm of his work, the "knots n'knots; knots n'knots; knots n'knots" – "*ghattecha-ghat, ghattecha-ghat, ghattecha-ghat*".[56] That metronomic, low drone, the churning rumble as the *Nisna* (grindstone) crushes to a fine powder: "*bhookla konda – nijla dhonda*; *bhookla konda – nijla dhonda*" ('hungry eat husk – to fall asleep a rock').[57] Unbound, these phonic interjections dismantle the literary orders of the PWA's realism. Their disruption is the putting into question of that system's partition of bodies and their connection to forms of knowledge, the possibilities of action and speech, and forms of expression.

For Rancière, both these dimensions are simply differing emphases of the singular rupture this art of writing marks: the absolutisation of style (Rancière 2011a, 2011b). Style for Rancière, instead of any choice or determinate form of writing related to particular subject-matter, marks the register of appearances – of visibility in general (Rancière 2011a). Where things, bodies, gestures, and forms appear as they are, rather than as the product of a particular system of meanings and its proper form of expression. When he speaks of style's absolutisation, then, Rancière is drawing attention to that point where an art of writing breaks down the links between modes of knowing and forms of visibility that determine who can say, do, and write what, where, and how. Absolutising style, in other words, is that manner of writing which writes away, writes off "the modes of linkage proper to characters and their actions that defined genres of representation and determined the 'styles' appropriate to them" (Rancière 2011a, 116). It is, in this sense, a dismantling of the binds that tie together fictive rationalities, generic systems, and forms of expression with an order of bodies and their capacities to say, do, and live/appear. It is dismantled into a sort of indifference – determinate relations between bodies, meanings, and words fall apart (Rancière 2009, 8; 2011b, 157). Style becomes that vector in and through which things – bodies, objects, gestures, or figures – are set out into a system of circulation or free movement, opened out onto an open field in which they become available to anyone and everyone (Rancière 2011b, 13). And the dismantling of these links is also – or is simultaneously – a disruption in the order of bodies – of subjects and the distribution of parts internal to these subjects – of the forms of individuation and subjection that literature as a system of knowledge generates (Rancière 2011a). Visions of the subject are disrupted here, as individuals, individual bodies, are broken down into agglomerations of "the chance dancing of atoms in a perpetual vibration" (Rancière 2011a, 117). More pointedly, in the context of Dhasal and Bagul's works, Dalit figures, Dalit bodies are broken – breaking down, grinding down, collapsing – into a set of intensities and forces 'below' the individual, internal to that individual but now set loose.

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[56] *Ibid*.
[57] Dhasal, *What is Your Grade?*

In Bagul's *Hard Labour*, Daniel struggles to stand in the searing heat of the midday sun: "his stomach was quivering with hunger pangs. His eyes were shutting and blinking *gupa-gup* and he felt like just sitting down with a start, throwing himself towards the earth.".[58] Even as he stands tall, fighting to stay standing, if nothing else, at least on one foot, he is shoved and beaten by the sun, by his churning stomach, and the "winds that were aflame whipping him like cracks of painful lightning.".[59] Daniel's father, Fernandes, and his colleagues endlessly, robotically repeat their familiar line, hoping to lure a new customer into their gambling scam near the textile mill. The heat keeps breaking them down, "Rivulets of sweat were gushing from their bodies...Their mouths and hair were caked with dirt and sweat. Dried because of the heat. Hot vapours were issuing from their mouths and their noses. And even though his throat was aching, Fernandes was muttering like it was his last breath, 'put ten down, win twenty instead...'".[60] The Dalit body is broken down into nails that have "wilt-wilt wilted", into that "black market of organs" ("What among them is mine? What is the name assigned to my face?", the poem continues).[61] The determinate form of the Dalit body, as the inert and silenced type of realism, is transposed, refigured – into what Dhasal calls the "horrific cruelty [surging] and [spreading] through my tailbone; I am breaking bit by bit, because of the revolt surging inside me".[62] The Dalit body fragments and dissolves into these "currents of blood coursing through all pronouns".[63]

In its absolutisation, then, style highlights that doubling Rancière sees as constitutive of literature, and which we have been tracing so far: between a form of knowledge and an art of writing. Between the autonomy of the work of literature and the heteronomy of a literarity that is its ground. Between a mode of language and its attendant differentiations of subject-matter, and the indifference it simultaneously puts into play. Between determinate bodies – becoming a body, embedding within orders linking bodies to meanings, subjectivation – and collapse – dissolution, dissipation, evaporation. But doing so is at once the enactment of a certain politics. Since literature is always both an art of writing and an intervention into a regime of visibility and/or meaning, its literariness lies in the ways it can reconfigure and redraw the lines partitioning the proper and improper. Literature, in its absolutisation of style, stages these moments of dissensus, when words embedded within orders of literary meaning and knowledge are disturbed by an impropriety in their use – their utterance and inscription. An intervention, in

[58] Bagul, *Hard Labour*
[59] *Ibid*.
[60] *Ibid*.
[61] Dhasal, *Tale of Dead Man*
[62] Dhasal, *Cruelty*
[63] *Ibid*.

this sense, into the distribution of the sensible. Rancière argues that precisely because it performs this dissensual moment, literature has internal to it the possibility to make visible and undo a whole sphere of experience – that it has the capacity to intervene "as literature, in this carving up of space and time, the visible and the invisible, speech and noise" (Rancière 2011b, 4). That is, it generates a breaking down of ordered modes of address – of who can speak what and how, of what words are available to whom, and thus of the bodies to which words belong. In disintegrating the relations of fiction, genre, and expression, in the manner we have just seen, style breaks words free from the bodies that speak them (Rancière 2004, 17).

One consequence of Rancière's account is that the politics of literature is not simply or straightforwardly a politics represented or reproduced in literary texts on the basis of a political potency external to it. The politics of literature is internal to the text, to literature itself – it does its own politics. It is on this insight in Rancière's discussion of literary politics that one thread of contemporary readings of Dalit literature is focused. Critiquing what they see as an overreliance on realism in readings of Dalit writing, these accounts – and I have in mind the work of Kumar (2016) in particular, but also more generally, that of Abraham and Misrahi-Barak (2016) – underscore precisely that political operation internal to the text(s). Responding to those such as Limbale (2004), for whom Dalit literature constitutes a consciousness-raising complement to an Ambedkarite political project, Kumar notes

> "Typically, most theorisations – despite their radical tenor – flow from a somewhat deterministic perspective in which the 'politics of literature' is not appreciated on its own terms. Rather, the question is always displaced to what is outside literature." (Kumar 2016, 50-51).

The politics that is internal to literature, Kumar identifies – building on Rancière – with the ways in which Dalit writing opens up a different linguistic-political space (Kumar 2016). Shifts in subject and subject-matter, in form and expression enable a whole sensory and subjective reconstitution. From this Rancièrean insight, Kumar goes on to argue that opening up of such a separate linguistic-political space in/for Dalit literature, is at once the constitution of a novel 'critical Dalit public' (Kumar 2016, 57). Even as it dissolves and so makes visible new fields of visibility, Dalit literature has internal to it the task of reconstruction, reimagination and re-formation. Kumar's 'critical Dalit public' is precisely, the articulation of a novel, collective Dalit subject – a reimagination of Dalit politics and its project made possible by an art of Dalit writing.

But even as Kumar advances such a claim, note that the articulation of a collective Dalit subject is not the same as opening up a linguistic-political space from within which such a subject can

emerge. On Kumar's account, the writing of Dalit literature, its disruptive-dismantling task, is simultaneously the enabling of a new public, the generation of a new vision of the Dalit subject and a reimagination of Dalit politics more generally. But he is bridging two distinct operations without clarifying the terms of that transition: the shift from the disintegration of the orders of sense to a sensual refiguration or reconstitution. The very moment of style, that doubling which for Rancière marks its absolutisation, becomes for Kumar a moment of transformation in which a practice of literary disindividuation is elevated into a practice of subjectivisation. The shift is crucial and carries significant consequences for Kumar's Rancièrean reading of Dalit literature. In papering over the constitutive doubling that is style, Kumar binds what are, for Rancière, two inescapably knotted, but irredeemably distanced operations. The link Kumar presupposes in his Rancièrian reading, is in fact precisely what Rancière problematises.

Literature sets into motion an excess of things, an excess of bodies, as we have just seen, but – for Rancière – it cannot go from there to the articulation or formation of a new collective subject. It cannot embark on a practice of subjectivisation without erasing precisely the operation that makes it possible for it to conceive this novelty. The very rupturing of orders of individuation, orders linking bodies to words (to meanings) that literature introduces then makes it impossible for literature to conceive a wholeness or a fullness that can be given the name of a collective subject (Rancière 2011b). Or, more accurately, such a conception (any 'conception of the subject', as Rancière calls it in *Mute Speech*) can only institute itself in and through the erasure of that specifically literary 'quality'. The dissensual operation conducted by literature is thus distinct from political disagreement (Rancière 2011b). Political dissensus invents names, words to put into motion, stage or otherwise set into circulation bodies that are excessive to any count. And it does so precisely in the act of articulating, of naming a novel collective subject – of naming the demos, the new subject. It is exactly what links causal action and the random moment; what links the straight line of the story and the silences that interrupt it. Literary dissensus, on the other hand, Rancière argues, works "from another angle, by suspending the forms of individuality through which consensual logic binds bodies to meanings. Politics works on the whole, literature works on the units." (Rancière 2011b, 41). On this account, Dhasal's poetry writes no new literary subject. What it does is collapse the order of bodies in which the Dalit male subject is all caught up, as the constitutive part of no part. It brings forth this count of the uncounted, in the sense of making visible what Kumar calls the unaccountable. But, against Kumar and his Rancièrean reading, there is no possibility here of straightforwardly moving from this visibilisation to the manifestation of a novel Dalit subject. Literature cannot do, in

Rancière's view, what it is often legislated in the service of (Rancière 2011b, 44). Its politics is a whole other thing to the matter of names and collective subjects.[64]

My aim here is not to simply to lay out a critique of Kumar's account, or his reading of Rancière. It is instead to inquire into why Rancière has been read in this way in the first place. And what of that impulse comes from the elemental intertwining of *Sahitya* and *Chetna* first articulated in the 1958 Conference. The question, then, is not of accurate and inaccurate readings, but of a fidelity to this demand, the demand of the 1958 Conference, the demand it speaks back to Rancière. Even as he misreads Rancière, I want to suggest, Kumar draws on an impetus or force – internal to this art of Dalit writing – that speaks back to Rancière's account. Where Kumar (mis-)reads this force in terms of a straightforward extension of Rancière's work, I want to inquire after the kind of critique, or augment, that Dhasal and Bagul, writing in aftermath of the 1958 Conference, introduce to Rancière. An augment that proceeds from asking if style and its absolutisation is itself to name a subject. The dissolution into molecular intensities is itself the manifestation of an improper, out of place subject (that is also not subject). If what is at work is precisely the *stylisation* of any notion (conception) of the Dalit male self? What if suspension, in this sense, is the name of the "total revolution" (Bagul 1994, 289) that is Dalit manhood?

Rancière's cut marks that moment where literary dissensus separates itself from political dissensus. Yet for me, and equally, for Kumar, and crucially for Dhasal and Bagul, concerned as we all are with their ultimate indiscernibility, the interest is precisely in the virgule: literature/politics.

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[64] There is no direct relation, in other words, as Rancière makes clear in his critique of Deleuze, between literature and a political immediacy (Rancière 2019). There, Rancière suggests that any link between literature and a subjectivising operation is always mediated by style. Yet, to search for a straightforward subjectivising operation, Rancière argues, returns the absolutisation of style to what it interrupts. It collapses literature's dismantling operation into either the representation of a political project (or subject) given externally, or to an authorial gesture that equally swiftly arrests words unbound from orders of meaning. The figures populating Deleuze's discussion – Bartleby, Kafka – mark not so much a political literarity internal to an art of writing, as much as they are the symbols of a political operation literature is supposed to embody. Symbols that exist beyond the text, not in the sense of an extension outwards, but as a fabulatory force that replaces the text, presenting their political gesture as if it belonged to the text.

Something else entirely...

I want to return to the noise that is everywhere in Dhasal and Bagul. Crowded streets, cramped slums and chawls, overcrowded buses and trains, the steady lento of police batons, the staccato of mechanised looms, the overwhelming chorus of bodies speaking, shouting, hurling abuse, fighting, and loving. An incessant din entering into and erupting from every pore. Kashinath's rage-filled screams in Bagul's *When I Hid My Caste*, is one such moment of eruption, announcing and foretelling a rupture in the steady narrative of progress, or the steady progress of narrative. Something else entirely occurs, as a phonic intensity stops Bagul in his tracks – "But I was rooted to the spot" – returning him to a different kind of movement, an unceasing vibration or shaking from which he cannot escape.[65] At every juncture, in every moment, where a degree of stability – of narrative orderliness, and so an accord that fixes bodies to meanings – begins to emerge, these phonic excesses interject in ways that "makes the whole assembly flow away and that breaks the symbolic structure, no less than it breaks hermeneutic interpretation, the ordinary association of ideas and the imaginary archetype." (Deleuze and Guattari 1986). As Bagul and his friend walk through the slum, in *Death is Becoming Cheap*, as they speak and begin to make sense of the brutality of brutalised life, they are cruelly interrupted. "Suddenly a train thundered past.".[66] At the very moment when they begin to make sense of Ranu Nagvekar and his life, situate him within a narrative unfolding of Dalit life, they hear a commotion: Nagvekar lies writhing and coughing on the floor as by-standers taunt and scream at him – "He isn't hurt! He's faking it! He's just doing this for money!'.".[67] Precisely when narrative seeks to move forward, to explain and analyse and understand, which is to say to place, or emplace within an order that joins bodies to meanings, "the *paal* next to us shuddered as if a bomb had gone off inside and crumpled to the ground. Someone was screaming with all the force they could muster.".[68]

What these phonic interruptions mark is a (re)emergence of a certain overflowing, overloaded noise that generates a break in Dhasal and Bagul. A constant cacophony interrupting all narrative, from within narrative (Moten 2003, 65-66). That disturbs and shakes, that shudders: groups of people screaming, noises from the train thundering past, from exploding houses, burning bodies, and everything else. At every moment, the rendering into sense (into what Rancière calls a fictive rationality) is disordered by these irruptions of a sonorous excess. A

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[65] Bagul, *Death is Becoming Cheap*
[66] *Ibid.*
[67] *Ibid.*
[68] *Ibid.*

phonic intensity and its persistence; its long echoes, reverb, in a word, its suspension, its lingering. One that "Fills the lengthening night with notes of dread/ Notes whose frequencies turn boulders into streams.".[69] That persistently puts into erasure any straightforward literary hermeneutics, disordering it with an outside, or surround that cannot be anchored, fixed, cut, or grounded.

From this/these surround/s literary order – Marathi literary orderliness – is distended, made the site of a break in which a zone of indistinction is opened up between words and sound, text and its sonorous outside. Dhasal and Bagul set these phonic surrounds into motion – the "cruel crack of a pistol-shot: *Mahar*!" – in every sinew, every vein, every word.[70] Serrated teeth do not blunt and fall, they have "fall-fall-fallen (*pad-pad-padley*)".[71] Sharpened nails do not crumble, they have "wilt-wilt-wilted (*gul-gul-gulley*)".[72] Skulls do not smash and break open, they are smashed, are being smashed, "wham-wham".[73] This is not simply a literary device; what they write is precisely the cacophonous overflowing of sounds from the surround. And this requires pushing, or a sort of overextension, for literariness to go beyond itself. Dhasal and Bagul's works attempt to push beyond, to push or shove literature, coerce or cajole an art of writing into that very zone, that transversality where the boundaries of the phonic and graphic no longer hold, where intonation and inscription meld into a blur. A rhythmic anarchy of the letter – the prison bell tolls, "vio-vio-violently (*hinstra-hinstra*)".[74] The bindings work their way in, tightening and constricting by way of knots n' knots – "knots n' knots his body now resembles...knots n' knots...knots n' knots".[75] Into a sort of delirium, a delirious walking of the letter as it moves this way and that, freely. They write the letter that can only be written as sound, as the scream, the wail, the thundering – "he screams screeches howls thunders many, many times like the midsummer rain" – an ungraspable force or intensity that does its own thing.[76] "My day is rising beyond the walls of grammar...a current of blood courses through all pronouns...Momentous kisses and lesions they leave/Creatures of an untouched language.".[77] Literary Marathi injected, interjected, infected with this cacophony that drags it away – a whole other language in language, pushing out towards something utterly foreign, incomprehensible. To what cannot be

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[69] Dhasal, *Rigidly Bound Man*
[70] Bagul, *When I Hid My Caste* (Bagul 2018)
[71] Dhasal, *Rigidly Bound Man*
[72] *Ibid*.
[73] *Ibid*.
[74] *Ibid*.
[75] *Ibid*.
[76] *Ibid*.
[77] Dhasal, *Cruelty*

written without a certain distention of language itself. This is not a question of counter-posing one language to another, one art to another, but of working from within to undo the links and anchors holding literary Marathi in place. A phonic interject that cuts across and within language, right through the proper language of proper literature

Now, alongside such phonic interjections, indeed occasioned by them, Dhasal and Bagul's works inscribe a churning or vibration making its way through Dalit male bodies. An agitation – seething, frothing – that throws Dalit men and Dalit manhood between collapsing into the earth, into this "life screwed over by death", and keeping their necks up, their voices loud and active.[78] Crucially, these bodies are not static surfaces on which such and such emotional states – anger, hunger, despondency, guilt, hate – are inscribed. They are constantly moving, shape-shifting and changing, deforming and re-forming. Dhasal and Bagul write Dalit male bodies moving through these intensive states. Barku's son – in *Death is Becoming Cheap* – "began sporting a topknot, wearing a sacred thread and applying a fragrant paste on his forehead as he began sitting outside a temple", precisely when Barku "collapsed, and the force was such that he was permanently crippled. He'd often just lie on the mattress, prone. Like an animal, he started defecating right where he was.".[79] These bodies, in a certain respect, never arrive and are never stable or static. At the very moment where some seeming staticity begins to emerge, as I note above, we are drawn back. Dalit male bodies are abused, mutilated, beaten, and assaulted constantly – broken over and over. The police officer "simply let his hand fly and explode on Fernandes' gaunt, haggard face", Bagul is woken from his sleep with a rain of blows as his colleagues finally discover his theft and exact revenge.[80] Broken bodies passing through moments of fragmentation and coherence – when hearts are torn to pieces, when "too much poison has been swallowed", when "bombs explode in empty stomachs".[81] Across the surface, along the veins, crawling on the skin. This "captive, rebellious body tosses about within the confines of the room, being slammed by itself, tumbling in ten different directions".[82] In their rhythmic anarchy, Dhasal and Bagul write this tense heaving and tossing that for them is constitutive of Dalit manhood – between forming, giving shape, and collapsing into fragmented flesh.

"He steadies himself and again, fills his veins with storm and wind; narrates

[78] Bagul, *Hard Labour*
[79] Bagul, *Death is Becoming Cheap*
[80] Bagul, *Hard Labour*; *When I Hid My Caste* (Bagul 2018)
[81] Bagul, *When I Hid My Caste* (Bagul 2018)
[82] Dhasal, *Rigidly Bound Man*

The imperishable history of bondage and slavery

Stumbles all over the room, gets bloodied all over. No one comes to his aid.

Not even a crow perches atop the prison's crown

His illuminated eyes, now trained to witness the demonic heart of blackness

His hands tremble, begging to pluck his eyes out"[83]

It stops mattering where Ranu Nagvekar, or Barku, or Bhimu Kadam ends and the others begin, where their stories and lives end and another begins. They are all caught as they strive and fight and struggle. As they write and push to give shape, to form some wholeness. And yet, they all fragment, taking and losing shape in the "currents of blood coursing through all pronouns".[84]

"A tender, green leaf quivers at desire's door, Despair's carcass is being sewn up"[85]

This dramaturgy of the art of writing that Dhasal and Bagul develop is crucial to understanding the break they break open. Paying attention to such dramaturgy means drawing our focus to those moments between words, to the outside and underside, and alongside of words from within which these phonocorporeal interjections are performed. And it is in the Dalit performance art of *Tamasha*, energising Dhasal and Bagul's art of writing, that such moments of the blurry interstice become thoroughly palpable.

A central figure in contemporary Dalit performance art, Sambhaji Bhagat's music is particularly illuminating in this regard. Bhagat sings with an always off-beat style, his voice refusing and resisting falling into line, always a half-beat after or before, too early or too late. What appears at first diffident or even amateurish begins to unfold into an inimical syncopated rhythm where precisely those spaces, the interstices of words and sound begin opening up. In the interstice of each beat, Bhagat interjects in ways that shift and carry away the whole arrangement. Metronomic rigour is conceded to silences, mute restlessnesses unwilling to let go the last and eagerly anticipating the next. Bhagat sings the music of that (off)beat, the words – the untouched language – of those silences. At times, he is rushing, against the rhythm, to say what he has to before time runs out, before the meter closes on him. At others, he is slow, repetitive, circumspect and cyclical.[86] *Tamasha*, in this syncopated style, enables sites of improvisation

[83] *Ibid*.
[84] Dhasal, *Cruelty*
[85] *Ibid*.
[86] See in particular, Bhagat's performance in *Palkiche Bhoi* (Bhagat 2015b).

against the grain of the music, pushing against what can be sung and how. And what makes these improvisations possible is precisely the drama of that iconic *Tamasha* 'device' – the interruption. Sudden and irruptive gestures accompany Bhagat's vocal interruptions – his long hair flailing, arms akimbo, as he breaks rhythmicity with silences. During one such performance, Bhagat declares: We are not here to entertain you, we are here to disturb you! – I want to wake you up; to bring you back from being all lost in the music (Bhagat 2015b). To the silences that punctuate and puncture it. Every so often, Bhagat interrupts himself – *HEY! HAI!* – over and over he screams, *Chal! Chal!* (Come on! Let's go!) (Bhagat 2015a, 2015c). Whenever it has gone on for too long, this steady, orderly music we hear a sudden – *Aararararara HA! HA!* – a long pause; silence; and from within it, Bhagat sings his offbeat croon again (Bhagat 2015b). And again, we hear breaks, ruptures, irruptions – *Bolo-Bolo-Bolo!* – breaking down melody and narrative, systematicity and linearity – *Arey! Arey! Arey!* – from the folds, the inscape of those silences that are below, around and all up in (his) the music. It is these interruptions that resonate so vividly in Dhasal and Bagul's writing – the interruption of the "rabble of decent folk" – performing an upturning of literary Marathi and its orders by way of what is in its surround.[87]

These links to *Tamasha* and the centrality of interruption are crucial precisely because they point towards those interstitial points, offbeat silences, mute words, neither here nor there, where Dhasal and Bagul situate Dalit manhood. As being in and constituted by those interstices – riven by them, split and splitting, forming within them and dissipating along their axes. An interminable refrain – that horrific cruelty which "surges and spreads through my tailbone".[88] What they write are precisely the contortions, gestures, twitches and contractions, release and unfolding, binding and tightening – "knots n' knots his body now resembles/ knots n' knots twist his mind, now awakened/ knots n' knots kept forming for thousands of years".[89] In so doing, it draws back, as Kashinath's interruptions, it makes unruly any striation, any attempt to think a stable, fixed notion of Dalit manhood – of the fully-human subject of caste, the type that can act into and onto history. In its place, Dhasal and Bagul's gesture pulls away into that torrential downpour of intensive moments where the Dalit male body is dispersed. The tension that Dhasal and Bagul write moves between the shapes that bodies take. Not an opposition between subjectivising and disindividuating currents, between shaping, moulding the body and a collapse into some general fleshiness, but that which is in their gap, in the interruptions. The fingers and eyes and nails and teeth that have 'wilt-wilt-wilted' and 'fall-fall-fallen', the 'wham-

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[87] Dhasal, *Tale of a Dead Man*; *Sound*; *Kamathipura* (Dhasal 2007b)
[88] Dhasal, *Cruelty*
[89] Dhasal, *Rigidly Bound Man*

wham' of skulls smashing, the infected genitals (and the infection in the genitals of language), the maimed feet – Dalit bodies and Brahmin bodies, liminal, broken bodies and 'canonical' bodies. The fully-human, upper-caste male subject – the subject of modern and progressive India, the man from Bombay, bringer of freedom. And the breaking and dissolving of this very man along axes of caste brutalisation. Between visions of a subject integrated into an order of being (of ways of saying and seeing), and those at the periphery, liminal zones where any such subjective fullness disintegrates. Incorporation into an order of caste, and the ultimate refusal of caste in persisting at and beyond its limits; in its breaks, its surrounds.

The railway tracks become the figure of this churning in Bagul. They are the speedways of modernity, along which an entire nation is now suddenly up and away. Where the mechanisms of caste are counterposed to a whole different machinery, and it does not matter who sits shoulder-to-shoulder with you, who rests in the tiny berth above or below you. Where sound sleep and a certain bliss is possible, as Bagul narrates in *When I Hid My Caste*. In his work, the train and its rails are sites of transcending the violent realities of caste. The squalor of the labour colony at the fringes of Bombay and everything they bring – unemployment, crippling poverty, drudgery, bruises left by the police batons, scars inscribed by centuries of caste oppression – are escaped by boarding this train. Bagul's journey leaves him buoyant – he has a new job, a new life, and here in Udhna, he does not (yet) carry the mark of caste. He is simply the man from Mumbai – "he who fights the good fight, who gives his life in the defence of the right, and whose hands are the wheels of India's progress".[90]

But all the same, the railway tracks conceal cruel violence. They are those dark recesses where Dalit bodies are mutilated, broken, and distorted. Where people shit and defecate. "What are we but completely discarded people, we'll live like cats and dogs, live anywhere...".[91] Where – having had too much to drink – that old man lays spreadeagle, unable to move, waiting for a train to dismember him. Where upper caste rapists escape into the darkness. The railways become the most intensified sites of caste brutality. The very place where Bagul for the first time must act out his theft – the theft of caste – as his upper-caste colleagues violently attack the Dalit Kashinath for daring to sip tea in the same room as them – "Smash that dirty *dedha*!" – for daring to sit on those very seats where they were sat only a moment before.[92] And it is the railway

[90] "I am the artisan of the new joys of the common man. I am a warrior in the cause of humanity. I am willing to give my life for it. I have a name. I have a city: Bombay.", he continues Bagul, *When I Hid My Caste* (Bagul 2018)
[91] Bagul, *Death is Becoming Cheap*
[92] Bagul, *When I Hid My Caste* (Bagul 2018)

canteen where a "voice like the cruel crack of a pistol-shot' yells '*Mahar*!", freezing Bagul in his stride.[93] These railway tracks conceal disposability; a life that is cheap, marking that site of transition, for Bagul, between some sense of humanity and its complete disintegration, between the annihilation of caste and its perpetual persistence, the capacity to dream, fight the good fight, and fall apart in brutalised life – "here human eats human and *Death is Becoming Cheap*.".[94]

This is the cruel bargain of Dalit manhood in Dhasal and Bagul. Striving on the one hand, to become a fully-human subject, liberated from the brutality of caste, yet escaping that violence only in terms of such a caste-ised subjective order. Bagul's sense of being the bringer of freedom, the new subject of a new nation, is pierced by the persistence of an order of caste into which – whether he wants it or not – he is embedded first as an upper-caste subject, then as a Dalit man. On the other, it strives for refusal, to resist and reject this brutal casteism, which demands either disintegration or incorporation only on its own terms. Either integrate into an order of caste or cast off and disperse – "Man, you should explode!" (Dhasal 2007a). This is the agitation, the restlessness of Dalit manhood.

It is nothing other than untouchability itself, the experience of being untouchable, of the untouchable body within an order of caste. To this order, the untouchable body is, in Ambedkar's words, "an entity beyond human intercourse" (Ambedkar 2020c). The order of caste assigns bodies to a hierarchical distribution of functions and capacities tied to birth. One is thus born into a caste – the caste of one's parents – and lives their life bound to that place within a social order.[95] In this respect, it is a system of graded inequality establishing particular relations between parts of a social whole, as well as identifying those that belong to the part of no part, that are beyond human intercourse (Rodrigues 2024). Such order, in turn, is operationalised through a network of practices prescribing proper forms of conduct and behaviour to ensure purity and avoid pollution (Ambedkar 2020a). Central among these are the regulations on practices of marriage, food, and occupation (Ambedkar 2020b, 108, 111; 2020d, 292-293). Much less than a division of labour and the allocation of work and roles, then, caste is a division of the labourers (Ambedkar 2020a). It is a distribution or allocation of bodies and their modes of conduct, their utterances and actions – what one eats with whom, who one falls in

[93] *Ibid*.
[94] Bagul, *Death is Becoming Cheap*
[95] In this sense, and to extend the claim, caste can be said to precede one's own embodied situation. Its inherited character means it is known even before one is born – one enters into this world always-already bearing the marker of caste.

love with, what one does. And precisely because it is bound to the body in this sense of its regulation and policing, the practice of untouchability is central to such an order. It is the governance and control of touch that lends to an order of caste its consistency, that ensure and secures its graded inequalities, and the insularity of its allocation of place, functions, and capacities. Indeed, in the *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar notes the central place of untouchability to the order of caste, arguing how despite deep differences in caste names, hierarchies and religious practices across India, two things remain consistent: a proscription against entering or touching that which is sacred, and a broader proscription against defilement and pollution (Ambedkar 2020a). But the practice of untouchability is also more than a prohibition against the sacred and the pure. The proscription on touch is a much deeper policing of forms of seeing, doing, and being – of modes of appearance and forms of speech. For touch is more than that ephemeral moment. When a brahmin man is “defiled”, upper-caste rituals demand a complex procedure of purification so that the trace of this pollution can be erased. In parts of western India, Dalits were forced to walk with a broom attached to their back, sweeping away the soil polluted by the touch of their feet. Touch persists and lasts, leaving traces, and because of these traces, the practice of untouchability is more than a control of who touches and is touched by whom. It is, as Jaaware argues, a more general and dispersed regulation of presence and absence (Jaaware 2018, 155). Touch marks presence – the ‘pollution’ of the Dalit’s foot is still there, in the soil, until it is swept away – and so the practice of untouchability is nothing other than the regulation of this presence. As Jaaware points out, “Untouchability then, [seems] to be a denial of bodily presence.” (Jaaware 2018, 155). A generalised system of presence and absence – a prescription of who is and is not here, who can and cannot be here.

Yet, untouchability as the denial of presence recognises that those deemed untouchable are nonetheless here, present. The order of caste not only accords to the untouchable body the place of no place (as absence) but at the same time makes demands of it, calling on it to fulfil its obligation – cleaning sewers, cremating the dead, slaughtering animals, among others. That is, the untouchable body is at once out of place in the social whole of caste, neither to be seen nor heard, and a vital part of that whole. Rodrigues, paraphrasing Ambedkar, suggests that the place of those deemed untouchable within the order of caste is such that they are “outside the Hindu fold but [inextricably] bound to it, as the despicable but useable other.” (Rodrigues 2024, 87). The practice of untouchability, then, is a regulation of presence and absence, of parts and no parts, of graded inequality based on the presupposition of equality and presence. It is this tension or dissensus – the resonances with Rancière’s theorisation of what he calls a mèsentente are striking – that erupts when Dalit bodies begin to speak, write, and act – to do what they cannot do, yet enacting a capacity presupposed in them. It is this dissensus that is

staged in Dalit politics, and that is set to work in the art of writing that is the focus of my discussion here. The churning of Dalit manhood Dhasal and Bagul write is the trappings of untouchability between this presupposition of humanity – a fully-formed subject within an order of caste – and its complete denial. Untouchability in Dhasal and Bagul, as the preceding discussion shows, is both participation in an order of caste and its proper subject, as the fringe, the limit, and the absolute outside and other of any such subject. Both a part of caste, and apart from it.

Now, for Rancière, the staging of such dissensus is the enactment of politics, putting into action a claim to the whole (a claim that, as the discussion in the preceding section shows, Rancière suggests political dissensus enacts, while literary dissensus cannot). The figures populating Rancière's work – Gauny, Blanqui, the plebeians on Aventine hill, and so many others – stage this dissensus to claim in the name of a wholeness denied to them. Yet, Dhasal and Bagul reveal a different possibility here. Staging the dissensus that is untouchability does not lead them to claim a fullness or wholeness for Dalit manhood. Subsisting within the terms of that dissonance, instead, they inscribe Dalit manhood as suspension, as a claim not in the name of the whole, but in the name of precisely what such a whole leaves out.[96] Untouchability, its experience, is for Dhasal and Bagul marked by a churning that binds Dalit bodies to an endless circulation or movement between taking shape and collapsing, between forming into a subject and dissolution, between presence and absence. In writing Dalit manhood in terms of suspension – as suspended within this churning, this vibration – they suspend the terms of that cruel bargain. In other words, Dhasal and Bagul's art of writing not only makes clear the churning of Dalit manhood that is the "unaccountable" (Kumar 2016) experience of untouchability, but in that very gesture, they mark the ways in which Dalit manhood is fugitive from that very unaccountable.

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[96] There is a crucial shift taking place here, a shift that in its low rumble speaks back to Rancière, that in their low frequency Dhasal and Bagul speak back to Rancière. Because for Rancière, the question of politics is a question ultimately of noise and speech – of what noise appears as speech. And here, a total reversal of that whole paradigm is set underway, because the concern is no longer speech, no longer a (collective) Dalit subject that grabs hold of the word and speaks what they must not or cannot. It is instead the endless circulation, the production and churning of noise – and the bodies through which it moves. A noise that sets aside the question of appearance and subjectivisation, in favour of that suspension – in the interest of naming that suspension and its long delay. This is a very different literary politics to the one Rancière has in mind (indeed, it is a very different politics to the one Rancière has in mind). Elaborate on this a bit more. The point is not to speak with or against Rancière, but through the palpations recorded on the surface of his theorisation of literary politics, to try and sense the whole other thing that this Dalit writing is bringing forth.

The refrains in Dhasal and Bagul's works point to the terms of such fugitive departures. The return, over and over, to an in-between moment, that interstice where Dalit manhood is 'situated'. Not in terms of some intermediary state, but as that place where "living and survival have become one in his eyes. His mind is dead... his sorrow is *something else entirely*...".[97] Something else, a whole other thing. Escape that is not so much a stepping away as it is a different pitch, a different tone; "a sound not in between notes and words, not in between language, in the not-in-between of accent, a sound that bends the regulatory musicological frame of notes, the hermeneutic insistence of the meaning of words" (Moten 2017). The bend of a note as it "Fills the lengthening night with notes of dread, destruction/Notes whose frequencies turn boulders into streams".[98]

"In between, he weeps"[99]

A refrain that returns, perpetually, to this place that is there, that is here and is nonetheless something and somewhere else entirely. A break – away from an oppositional terrain to one of augmentation. Between intonation and inscription, narration and lyricality, writing and speech, subject and object (Moten 2017). The Dalit male body as untouchable is not, for Dhasal and Bagul, the converse of the caste body (the fully-human, subject of the order of caste). Nor is it simply a response to the caste body as its antagonistic other. In the pitch Dhasal and Bagul render it in, what is at issue is precisely visibility – the becoming-visible of some shape and stylisation of Dalit manhood, and the evasion, dodging, and escaping of all shapes. The writing of fugitive invisibility, as a refusal of, a stepping away from, the terms offered. This is Bagul's familiar refrain, the departure he offers: "Let's go".[100] Let us step away; let us dissolve. The Dalit manhood Dhasal and Bagul write – precisely in its churning, writhing, fighting, between the light and the dark, visibility and invisibility – enacts a fugitive in/visibility. The empty alleyways, the recesses, the shadows and the dark surrounds: the muck, the sewers, the squalor. Dalit life and its churning, in this sense, occurs somewhere else, some other place, some other time, some different everywhere and nowhere.

But such fugitivity does not mean collapse or disappearance – more than anything, it is resistance, an unstoppable resistive force of Dalit life. It is to redraw the battle lines – to reimagine the fight to be fought. Seen this way, the fugitive departure of Dalit manhood in

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[97] Bagul, *When I Hid My Caste* (Bagul 2018)
[98] Dhasal, *Rigidly Bound Man*
[99] *Ibid*.
[100] Bagul, *Death is Becoming Cheap*. We see this gesture of departure also staged in *When I Hid My Caste*, where Bagul says to his interlocutor, "Come Kashinath, let us go from here".

Dhasal and Bagul marks the perpetual resistance of the Dalit body to a ready integration into an order of caste. “Then, he started a grand campaign for the eradication of mosquitoes/Extremely potent, vile venom he spewed in all directions/ And their descendants managed to digest even that…You can’t trample any lowly thing after all/Not even if you are a professional criminal”.[101] At every juncture where narrative attempts capture, this fugitivity – in the phonocorporeal interruptions where it is performed – pushes back, “surges with the rising tide”, as a “deranged brilliance shoving Eternity’s statue”.[102]

[101] Dhasal, *Lowly Thing*
[102] Dhasal, *Cruelty*

Come, let's go

The question, then, is one of the political force or potency of these fugitive departures, of Bagul's 'let's go'. But these are not new gestures. The stopping and leaving internal to the fugitivity Dhasal and Bagul write is something already pointed towards by Ambedkar's own work. His rejection of the order of caste leads him to ultimately leave the fold of Hinduism and convert to Buddhism (Elam 2020). To stop and leave, to leave the fold, as Elam suggests, comes to be an elemental gesture in Ambedkar's thinking of Dalit politics. The practice of untouchability within the Hindu fold, within the order of caste, is a denial – for Ambedkar, as I discuss above – of an individual's sanctity as a human being. In Buddhism, Ambedkar finds an expansive and open-ended conception of a universal humanity practiced through compassion (*karuna*) and love (*maitreyi*) (Ambedkar 2011). Dalit politics, or the Dalit political project that rests on the annihilation of caste, is in this sense bound to a departure from the Hindu fold towards Buddhism. Dhasal and Bagul, then, seem to follow in Ambedkar's footsteps, articulating the very fugitive departures he gestures toward. A revolution that begins by leaving the fold and adopting a novel conception of the human and humanity. Bagul's heart being set aflutter like a city in revolt just after he utters his 'let's go' in *When I Hid My Caste*, echoes this Ambedkarite departure. In Dhasal's ode to Ambedkar, it is this distinctly Ambedkarite gesture that becomes the defiant joining "in the war cry of lions/ Whose father should we fear?".[103] Yet, on the reading I develop here, my suggestion is that there is a crucial difference in the fugitive departures Dhasal and Bagul write about, and Ambedkar's leaving of the fold. Because the point is not simply the departure, but – as the preceding discussion makes clear – the terms in which such departures are performed and the political valence they carry.

As I indicate above, Ambedkar's leaving of the fold occurs on the particular terms of a Buddhist humanism. The order of caste reduces the untouchable body to an inhuman mass, outside the fold of the human. It denies to the untouchable body, to the untouchable subject, what Ambedkar considers the innate human capacity of reason and discernment (Rodrigues 2024, 107). This capacity, for Ambedkar, is not in the order of a human essence but thoroughly sociogenic. Sociality, the social situatedness of individuals, is the condition of possibility for the expression of their innate humanity and reason. The practice of untouchability is thus a refusal to recognise the humanity of the untouchable subject precisely on the grounds of a denial of sociality. Ambedkar's call to leave the fold, then, is a call to return to a sociality outside the

[103] Dhasal, *Ambedkar 1981*

order of caste, where it is not proscribed, so that the expression and experience of an innate humanity is possible. Buddhist ideals of compassion and love become the foundations of this sociality outside the fold, a sociality in which those left beyond the fold of the human realise their own humanity. Note, however, that the kind of sociality Ambedkar has in mind, beyond the fold of Hinduism, is one that returns their innate humanity to subjects denied it. Which is to say, sociality in Ambedkar's rendition here is the condition of possibility for a fully human subjectivity, for becoming the subject of reason, the capacity constitutive of humanity. Indeed, in Ambedkar's work, reason comes to mean a network of capacities "to observe, meditate, cogitate, study and discover the beauties of the Universe and enrich his life and control the animal elements in his life" (Ambedkar 2020e, 283). This is a particularly thick conception of the human and of human subjectivity that the sociality borne of leaving the fold becomes the ground for. And it is the thickness of this Dalit sociality outside the Hindu fold that allows Ambedkar to articulate a novel vision of the Dalit subject – as this subject of reason – emancipated from caste. No matter how brutally the order of caste oppresses this Dalit subject, denying them their humanity, a kernel remains: fighting to leave the fold and join in that sociality that gives it fullness.

Yet, for Dhasal and Bagul, on the reading I develop in the preceding section, the departures constitutive of Dalit manhood pull in a different direction. For them, to stop and leave is not to go to some other place or somewhere else altogether – there is no some other place, somewhere else. It is not (and cannot be) escape, precisely because there is no escaping caste – no way out. To stop and leave then is to articulate, to write an impossible demand, an impossible politics, insofar as it demands an escape from something that cannot be stepped out of. "The thirst-filled wound beyond the apogee of difficulty/ That which is crushing/ Truly becomes the fatal game".[104] The 'let's go' is to go without having anywhere to go. There is no emancipated future Dhasal and Bagul write, no fabulatory rhythm that they sing. Indeed, following Ambedkar, it becomes possible to locate such an emancipated future (a new sociality and a new subjective imaginary outside the Hindu fold). But, as I show in my reading of their work over the preceding section, in the endless churning that is Dalit manhood, caste – untouchability – is everywhere; all around, enveloping and ossified. "He's fighting the knots that constrict him, the bindings of five *yugas* past."[105] The impossibility of escape, of leaving, becomes precisely a condition of possibility for a fighting, a resistance in the meantime, in the here and now, the present moment. "He does not speak of the past; his present keeps marching

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[104] Dhasal, *Sound*
[105] Dhasal, *Rigidly Bound Man*

onwards/ Seething with dangers".[106] To that utopic dreaming – of "elaborate, happy dreams" – in which the Dalit subject will finally emerge, Dhasal and Bagul respond with a fugitive restlessness.[107] A restive politics in which the concern is neither the negotiation, nor the auguring of a future subject of politics that has been foretold and anticipated. "Enough! Enough of these seed-sowing futures/ The Epic of conclusions blinding today's frustrations/ We still have to grapple against this ending of everything".[108] Within the very break constitutive of Dalit life. To stop and leave, then, to reject and refuse, is to enact a sort of return to that interstice or that break. Which is to say, it is to step out and away from, but nowhere else aside from, that order linking bodies to words, tying forms of expression and shapes of bodies, linking the contortions of the body (the Dalit male body) to a whole distribution or partitioning of places and lots, of forms of life and the capacities for living. To stop and leave is to break out from this emplacement: into the break.

Two elements of the kind of fugitive departures I suggest are at work in Dhasal and Bagul make clear the difference from Ambedkar's stopping and leaving. First, the form that the refusal of caste and untouchability takes here. The refusal performed by Dhasal and Bagul is one that rejects and renounces a vision of some end to caste, in the service of which Dalit politics can be legislated. The rejection of any spiritual, socialist or liberal utopia in which the Dalit subject finds utterance and begins to speak with and alongside others; a rejection of "dreams, adorned by scrumptious fucking/ Waking up to a new day with new, spotless khadi that makes up their elaborate *superstructure*".[109] And the refusal of such ends, opens up again the break that distends narratives of progress and the progress of narrative. Their fugitive refusals germinate a discontinuity between collapse and formation, between flesh and body, the not-yet and the subject, and the whole arc, the whole chart in which these movements are inscribed. To continue with these "elaborate, happy dreams" is to reproduce or reinvigorate a future or the possibility of a future already known and controlled in the present (Elam 2020, 118).[110] And so, to reject these utopias is to leave aside in favour of a practice of unknowability, of hesitancy, and uncertainty. A practice that commits itself to the unknowable heteronomy, to augmentation and its perpetual possibility constituted in the engendering of discontinuity. An impossible future is left to its devices, while an urgent, restless politics of the present enacts and performs, "in minor, unintelligible, illegible ways" (Elam 2020, 6), its resistances in and from the break –

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[106] *Ibid*.
[107] Bagul, *When I Hid My Caste* (Bagul 2018)
[108] Dhasal, *Sound*
[109] Dhasal, *Ambedkar, 1981*
[110] Bagul, *When I Hid My Caste* (Bagul 2018)

resisting and refusing the terms of the battle. It pushes back against visions of ends in performing a perpetual reactivation of the present moment – We're already here – this moment that is in and of the break, that is the in-between that is not-in-between. "We still have to grapple against this ending of everything/ If that will be, then let it be/ But that's how casteist our crippled, reclusive present is".[111]

Second, such resistance is simultaneously the rejection and refusal of a vision of the Dalit subject as self-contained, autonomous, and in possession of a certain self-mastery. "O Death! My sweet kinsman/ Be careful. / Lest you die or something amidst this rabble of decent folk".[112] A refusal to fall into that trap of becoming, of forming oneself into a stable subject by way of holding open the break in which Dalit manhood finds itself. An attempt, we can say, echoing Elam, "to be unknown and unknowable, to abstain and be inconsequential, to relinquish and disavow." (Elam 2020, 115). The Dalit man in their writing is neither a Type nor a figure, he is simply a gesture; gesturing and gesticulating in an almost ungraspable blur. "Do I truly have a nose?/ Do I truly have an anus?/ What is this air that slithers from top to bottom?/ This black-market of organs/ What among them is mine?/ What is the name assigned to my face?/ Sitting on the path to the crematorium".[113] Not only does this amount to a dismantling, but – as with their refrains – a persistent questioning. An inquiry that is constantly returning, or turning into a posing of the unknowable, the unintelligible, the illegible. *Nisna ghasley ka? Hyaale Manjhe kaay? Phaansi khaal-li ka?* (Ever scrubbed the grindstone? Know what the cow's intestine is called? Ever been hanged?). "Tell, do tell".[114] Dhasal poses and counter-poses questions that throws the Dalit male subject back onto himself, into that break. Questions that cause an escape from, or more accurately a renunciation of, subjective fullness. Against every attempt to envision, to write a stable Dalit subjectivity, Dhasal retorts, "What Grade are you in? What Grade?... You have a lot to catch up on".[115]

A practice of unknowability is not a resort to some sort of collapse, or apathy, or dispersion. It is a resistance and refusal to recognise, that is, to identify, to stultify and stabilise, to ossify and petrify. The absence of totality, those recesses and gaps, those folds where mastery and control are problematised – this is where Dhasal and Bagul situate Dalit manhood. A radical literary politics that is, as Elam points out, "not accountable to regimes of recognition but rather to the

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[111] Dhasal, *Sound*
[112] Dhasal, *Tale of Dead Man*
[113] *Ibid*.
[114] Dhasal, *What is your Grade*
[115] *Ibid*.

time being, the passing moment, and the final instance. We must stop; we must leave our own selves in favour of the collectivity of unknown comrades." (Elam 2020, 119). Bagul's 'Come Kashinath, let's go', then, is a departure in this specific sense – that is, not as leaving the fold in the interest of a sociality that promises fullness, but a different intensification. The expression of a force we can say, echoing Moten, "not held within the determination of any (impossible) exclusively singularlised agency." (Moten 2018, 46). The project of democratic appearance, of the manifestation of/as the full subject – of wholeness – is undercut in favour of a still-democratic receding and invisibility into that unknown collectivity, a collectivity of the unknown. Our discussion up to this point has attempted to give some shape to the syncopated cadence of such an unknown collectivity: a phonocorporeal distension that marks, or is, Dalit manhood in the break. Ramu Nagvekar, Bhimu Kadam, Damu, Fernandes – indeed Dhasal and Bagul themselves – collapse into an amorphous and heteronomic collectivity that is first announced in the not-in-between of its sound. A sociality that, even as it refuses the whole game of appearance, of subjectification and identity, plays its own game – still democratic. Not to claim in the name of the whole, but in turning away from this rabble of wholeness, in the name of the surround that is beneath and all around.

> "We are already here, moving. We've been around. We're more than politics, more than settled, more than democratic. We surround democracy's false image in order to unsettle it. Every time it tries to enclose us in a decision, we're undecided. Every time it tries to represent our will, we're unwilling. Every time it tries to take root, we're gone." (Harney and Moten 2013, 19)

Because the point is not just renunciation, but to renounce in the interest and intonation of a different world that is still right here, surrounding, in the surround. To the side, alongside, and underside the whole schematisation of subjects and their appearance/formation. Dalit sociality that is constituted in the break in which Dalit manhood finds itself: the heteronomous and plural sociality of "O Death! My sweet kinsman", and of going "beyond all the pleasures and pain of whoring [to] wait/ For your lotus to bloom".[116]

My suggestion is not that Dhasal and Bagul reject the Ambedkarite program. Indeed, throughout their works, the figure of Ambedkar looms large: "O Ashen Sky, Wont the Monsoon fall upon us, drench us to the bone? The gates of 1981 are wide open for him…we who've torn asunder the curtains of dreams/ And are ready to join in the war-cry of lions/ Whose father should we

[116] Dhasal, *Tale of a Dead Man*; *Kamathipura* (Dhasal 2007b)

fear?".[117] Instead, I argue that in responding to Sathe's call for a revitalisation of Dalit politics and Dalit literature, Dhasal and Bagul's work evinces the ceaseless multiplicity of the figure of Ambedkar. A generous generativity that comes like the monsoon. "Where aren't you?/ In the sunshine and rain/ Amidst the winds and the forests/ In the past/ In the sorrows long gone/ In my eyes/ In the rainbow of my eyebrows".[118] To the demand to reimagine Dalit politics in the shadow of Ambedkar's death, Dhasal and Bagul write a literary politics that both draws on Ambedkar (in that it echoes the departures he announces), only to present to his vision a radical augment.

In the same breath, the augment I suggest Dhasal and Bagul introduce to Rancière now completes its arc. Dalit writing, as literature, has its own politics, does its own politics, a political operation internal to it, and particular to it. But this is a political operation that not only dismantles and dismembers the Dalit body and its contorted form within progressive realism's orders of speech and action. In such dismembering, it recedes into the receding depth of a Dalit sociality. A literary politics that marks a break, performs that break, the in-between that is not-in-between. A site, a space, a field, a shanty out over there – beyond the walls of grammar, beyond the horizons of hope, beyond all pleasures and pains. This is not subjectification – not the articulation or appearance of the Dalit man. In fact, it is the disappearance of that image into a dense sociality; "Something else entirely".[119]

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[117] Dhasal, *Ambedkar, 1981*
[118] *Ibid*.
[119] Bagul, *When I Hid My Caste* (Bagul 2018)

Paths of departure

The Dalit sociality that Dhasal and Bagul write never gives in to staticity, always forming and dissipating. Dalit social life that refuses stability in the blur of illegibility, holding open to the next augment. The literary politics they thus set into motion is not one grounded on a fully-formed image of the Dalit subject and their actions or utterances. It is performed, instead, in the restive resistance of restless refusals of a Dalit manhood in the surround of any subjective imaginary. Against the binds holding bodies to words in the regimes of realist writing, Dhasal and Bagul mark through their work a path of escape, a departure – stopping and leaving. All in the interest of a response to Sathe's demand: to reimagine Dalit politics from that intertwining of literature (*sahitya*) and politics (*chetna*). In tracing the contours of this response, I have aimed to show how Dhasal and Bagul's works respond not only to Sathe – and through him, to Ambedkar and the possibilities of Dalit politics in the aftermath of Ambedkar – but also to Rancière and his influential theorisation of literary politics. This calls for a different reading: where the resonant cacophony of an art of writing, the performance of an interruptive phonocorporeality, and the enactment of a fugitive refusal rises to a fever pitch. In the break of these three movements, Dhasal and Bagul write – as I argue above – Dalit manhood as fugitivity, suspension.

But, as I noted briefly at the beginning, Sathe's call was heard in many different ways, and some heard it as a demand for a more rigorous and committed realism. This is what Dalit writer and critic Sharankumar Limbale calls for in his seminal work on Dalit aesthetic theory (Limbale 2004). The task of Dalit literature, on this account, is the authentic presentation of Dalit life, and in so doing, to set the ground for a project of Dalit politics. Limbale's realism does two things at once. On the one hand, calling for Dalit writing to authentically represent Dalit life is a call to reproduce in exacting detail the reality of Dalit life, the structural conditions that result in its brutalisation, and the forms of resistance enacted by Dalit politics, in such a way that this reality can be (or is) transparently rendered in Dalit writing. Dalit literature must make it possible to decipher and interrogate the (objective) conditions of Dalit life and experience. The demand for authenticity, however, is not only an injunction on subject-matter but also on practices of writing and reading. For, if Dalit writing is to represent its proper subject and subject-matter, then such subjective propriety must correspond to proper forms of expression and interpretation.

On the other hand, in suggesting Dalit literature ground itself in an authentic representation of Dalit life, Limbale begins to separate the terms bound in that virgule: literature/politics. Dalit writing does not do, or set into motion, a politics of its own (such as we have seen in the

preceding discussion). Its political force or valence is externalised to a project of Dalit politics taking place somewhere else. Dalit literature as the generation of authentic representations of Dalit experience is put to the service of a Dalit politics, but one that is already constituted in advance of the act of writing (Limbale 2004). Dalit writing, then, is the representation of such a political project in literary form, as an instrument in that wider political operation; writing what is already written. The realism Limbale calls for, then, returns to that distribution of capacities and functions, allocating to the Dalit subject a proper place and forms of expression and representation. Allocating, moreover, functions to literature and politics, dividing up their roles so that it is no longer literature's project to imagine or reimagine Dalit politics, but to reflect a political force brought to it.

My point is not to summarily critique Limbale but to begin to register the operations of closure, harnessing and reining in the unruly literary politics discussed here.[120] Readings of Dalit literature such as Limbale's return a certain orderliness to the politics of Dalit writing. Grounding this art of writing in a distinct subjective imaginary and binding it to a particular organisation of the relation between politics and literature. This very orderliness is also reflected – now that they have been separated – in Dalit politics. By the 1990s, the radical visions of Dalit politics Dhasal and Bagul set into motion in their works begin to collapse. First, in the factionalism and ultimate disbanding of the Dalit Panther Party (Wankhede, 2024; Pawar, 2010). But equally in the emergence of a different Dalit political formation (in northern India, as opposed to Bombay) as Dalit leader Kanshi Ram establishes a union for Dalit government employees, the Backward and Minority Communities Employees' Federation (BAMCEF). BAMCEF brought to Dalit politics its own image of Dalit subjectivity, grounded not only in the persistence of caste brutality but also – indeed, principally – in state-bureaucratic and legal categories (Teltumbde 2014; Jaffrelot, 2003). BAMCEF eventually transformed into a large, organised political party – the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) – contesting local and federal elections. The BSP, like the BAMCEF before it, adopts what Wankhede calls a pragmatism in its approach to Dalit politics. That is, it responds to the question of Dalit politics by committing itself to a project rooted in electoral success, representation, and an imaginary of Dalit subjectivity in consonance with postcolonial order. Dalit (literary) politics as a fugitive refusal, an unruliness in the surround of postcolonial order is thus replaced by a reinstitutionalisation of

[120] Indeed, more recent attempts to theorise Dalit literary subjectivity also draw on such visions of certainty. Yengde (2019), for instance, sets up an intricate typology of Dalit subject-positions in terms of a social 'cartography' of their articulation. Whatever their validity, the crucial point is that such typologies can only emerge upon a departure from the kind of interstitial gesture of Dalit manhood traced in the preceding discussion.

the Dalit subject. By a return to the parliamentary, statist-representative form of democratic subjectivity constitutive of postcolonial order. Precisely the order from which the 1958 Conference, and Dhasal and Bagul in particular, sought escape. This is not to suggest some sort of decline or regression but to note the suturing of a caesura Dhasal and Bagul open within imaginaries of anti-caste politics.

A caesura that also works to hold open the fractures of Dalit life that Dhasal and Bagul themselves attempt to suture. Even as they inscribe Dalit womanhood and the Dalit female figure as bound to a particular type, with her determinate forms of action and speech, the unruliness they write works to erase precisely such typological categorisation. Dalit womanhood can speak back to Dhasal and Bagul in terms of the very unruliness they inscribe in speaking back to the orders of upper-caste realist literature. Even as Dhasal and Bagul write an unruliness bound to the Dalit man, and to him alone, their work sets into motion a force that pushes against an orderly vision of the Dalit subject *tout court*, that pushes back against those partitions that establish the place of no place for the Dalit woman. What emerges from their art of writing – despite their art – is a current drawing outward, an anti-caste gesture always interrupting, infiltrating postcolonial orderliness and its striation of Dalit life, of Dalitality as a whole.

Even as these arcs close on themselves and Dalit politics finds itself once more bound to the statist and representative categories of the postcolonial state, Dalit fugitivity endures, rejecting and resisting, undercutting every stabilisation. Situated in the surround, this interruptive phonocorporeality carries on the performance of a radical Dalit sociality. As much in Sudharak Olwe's (2004) haunting images of Dalit life marking precisely that churn of fugitive in/visibility, and in the sycopations of Sambhaji Bhagat's music, as in the bardic *tamasha* of Sheetal Sathe, Sachin Mali and the Kabir Kala Manch. In marking out a different trajectory from Sathe's call, Dhasal and Bagul's works set into motion an unruly politics that continue to threaten postcolonial order and its proper subject. And so, the arrests and imprisonments continue: members of the Kabir Kala Manch are arrested under anti-terror laws, and Sachin Mali remains imprisoned.

Chapter 4 Refusing the City: improper sociality and the politics of architecture in the *chawls* of Bombay

Introduction

The apartment where my parents live in Bombay is in what is called a redevelopment building. An apartment block built on the site of an existing residential building that was torn down to make way for the new structure. The property developer arranges with the residents of the old building. The developer will construct two separate apartment blocks: one with new flats for all the residents of the old building and another with flats that the developer can sell to make the whole enterprise profitable. Local building regulations, planning codes, and zoning laws incentivised and facilitated such an approach to private housing, making it easier for property developers to identify suitable sites, secure consent from residents, and sell properties on completion. In 2005, when my parents bought their apartment, the building was still very new – its redevelopment very recent. It had hardly been a decade since the old residential building had been demolished, and I remember seeing its remnants everywhere when we moved in. A bit of an old brick wall jutting out of one corner, that was clearly much older than the freshly-painted white and blue concrete boundary wall. Or, the snaking roots of a *Peepal* tree that once grew along (perhaps on) a part of the old building, cleanly sawed off to make space for a steel and concrete pillar holding up a parking ramp.

But, of course, the most obvious reminder that another structure once stood at this site was the row of apartment blocks built for the residents of that older building. Those stocky apartment blocks and the high-rise where we lived were right next to each other but always felt impossibly distant. For one thing, they looked nothing like each other. The developer was required, by law, to only provide as much floor space to each resident as they had in the old building, leading to flats that were small, often only a couple of hundred square-feet to each family. Each of these had small windows and poor ventilation. The corridors and stairwells were dimly lit and suffocating, with unpainted walls and poor maintenance. In contrast, the high-rise apartments were all large and airy, with floor-to-ceiling windows perfectly placed to allow a cool breeze to blow all day. High-speed lifts and marble tiles in all common areas, and crews responsible for regular cleaning and maintenance meant all this infrastructure was carefully looked after. It was

also incredibly difficult to walk from one building to the other. While there were no entry gates to the old residents' apartment blocks, one could just saunter in, to get to the high-rise, one had to navigate RFID-activated barriers, large metal gates, and two separate interactions with security guards enquiring after the reason for one's visit. Except for these entry points – of which there were two – thick concrete walls and high fences preclude any possibility of interface and interaction. I remember as a child how thrilling it would be when a cricket ball would clear the fence – but these were always either quickly returned or confiscated; no one ever came asking after them.

Even as these tall fences rend them apart – what was one building had now become two – the differences were more than simply structural. Two distinct zones were established, each with its own rules and procedures. Which is to say, its own regulations of movements and appearances. Who could walk, run, play and rest where (and how) was controlled and ordered differently on either side. On one side of the fence, in the high-rise building, security guards and CCTV cameras ensured everything was in its place and moved as it was required to. I am not allowed to catch my breath after a run by leaning against one of the boundary walls. That place is not for resting, I am told. On the other, outdoor areas, stairwells, and hallways were always subject to a multiplicity of uses and functions. Games of cricket, volleyball, and badminton all shared the same field, often simultaneously. Stone benches where elderly residents sat and chatted in the evenings were wedged in among a crowd of parked motorbikes. In one corner, a tailor had discreetly set up shop, expanding his premises every year by just the right amount to not draw anyone's attention. In the opposite corner, a vegetable vendor had done the same, fiercely protecting their produce from stray cricket balls. From where I was, in my parents' apartment, it seemed chaotic, messy, unruly. But as much as it looked all that, it also looked like so much fun! To me as a child, the constant activity, the shouting and laughing, the complexity of what was going on was irresistible. Festivals were a time of high excitement, I would sit glued to the living room windows, all wide-eyed, watching the firecrackers and music and dance for *Holi* or *Diwali* or Christmas. Growing up, I began to recognise that underneath what seemed chaotic (and fun!) was a distinct arrangement of life, of ways of being and doing and saying that only seemed unruly from the windows of the high-rise building. A form of life that was tied as much to these new stocky apartment blocks as it was to practices of sociality that first emerged in – and were sustained in and by – the building that stood at this site before.

That older building was a *chawl* – a form of working-class housing unique to Bombay. Built around the early 20th Century, chawls were intended to house the large number of migrant workers that arrived to work in one of the city's many textile mills (Adarkar, Pendse, and

Finkelstein 2011). They were distinctive in their architecture, with low, squatted buildings, long corridors strung along the outer faces, and shops and commercial enterprises occupying most of the ground floor. Chawl homes were small, often only a room or two for a whole family, with communal toilets and water points. As I explain more fully below, the architecture of the chawls is closely intertwined with the forms of social and communal life that it is the site for. It is the carefully nurtured forms of social life as they emerge in this relation between a place and a form of life that I could see when looking over the fence. But where my parents live, and in several other parts of the city, it is precisely these practices that are sought to be erased. Because by the 1980s, and certainly by 2005, the textile industries whose workers lived in the chawls had collapsed, and the city transformed from an industrial powerhouse to a financial megalopolis. No longer needing large complexes of working-class housing, the city's focus shifted towards towering high-rises with large, luxurious apartments to attract the global financial elite. Accompanying this transformation was a fundamental reorganisation of urban life and space in the city. The textile mills were razed and replaced with shopping malls and one after the other, chawls underwent redevelopment, being replaced by luxury apartments. In the same way, communities were uprooted and relocated as the city was divided anew, its parts reallocated. The urban poor and working classes were in turns cajoled and coerced into leaving their neighbourhoods in south and central Bombay to move to far-flung suburbs in the north. New systems for the circulation of bodies through the city were instituted, as new orders were established dictating who can be where, when, and how. The process of redevelopment, the boundary walls and fences, and the plethora of petty regulations that I saw where my parents live are one instantiation of a much more brutal and widespread process of orderliness and control brought to bear on the city. It is the story of this process of reconfiguration, and the place – or indeed, the out-of-place-ness – of the chawls in it, that forms the principal focus of the discussion that follows.

The trajectory of this transformation, I argue, is one corresponding to the imposition of a proprietary order on the city. Articulated in terms of a project for urban beautification and renewal, this order institutes a series of zonal divisions of the city. Rigid boundaries established through a complex of planning regulations, zoning laws, and development control regulations – of which redevelopment laws were one component – reconfigure land-use and infrastructure throughout Bombay. Informal organisations of urban space are replaced with formal design principles proceeding from master-plans and development codes. Segmented into zones, the city can be known minutely. It becomes possible, in other words, to police the city as such, to allow some in, to bar entry to others, to allocate to yet others a place far, far away. This project of beautification is nothing other than a project of order, in which the space of the city is divided

up, or portioned out, in the institution of a series of exclusions and privations, removals and evictions, razings and demolitions. At the same time, zonal discipline is met with the mechanisms of a neoliberal transformation of the city. Public infrastructures are dismantled or have their access restricted. Alongside the privatisation of land and the creation and appropriation of formal proprietary rights, is the privatisation of vital public services (such as electricity distribution) limiting and restricting access. Building on Devenney's (2020) work, I will argue that such spatial ordering is simultaneously an order of the subject proper to the beautified city. As he points out, any order of property "distributes rights of appropriation. It polices relations between [citizens and non-citizens]" (Devenney 2021, 33). In the proprietary order of the project of beautification in Bombay, this is a subject that can own, and hold, a subject of mastery and control, to which the city will yield.

The chawls, I suggest, are then out of place not only in the sense that they are in disjunct with the reorganisation of urban space that is underway but also in terms of the subjective imaginaries they are – and become – the site for. As I show more fully below, the chawl becomes a site for performances of subjectivity – always collective – constituted by practices of care and sociality that respond to the city and its proprietary order. My suggestion here is that tuning in to these practices of care and sociality in the chawl brings to light how it interrupts and interjects the city's order by gesturing toward novel visions of collective subjectivity. But that is not to say that the chawl is a site for/of radical communality – all fluid and porous. It is not straightforwardly a negation of the city's order. The imaginaries of collective subjectivity emerging from the chawl refuse the very terms of the binary the city offers it – zoning or fluidity, order or chaos. They are moving along their own tangent, dancing to their own rhythm.

Below, I call this the complexity of chawl life, and I argue this is what a series of ethnographic works on the chawls of Bombay fail to fully come to terms with. In failing to recognise the political potency of the complexity of chawl life, they cannot account for the democratising force internal to the chawl, too readily reducing performances of care and sociality to an endlessly fluid and malleable community. Choosing a different path, I ask after the politics of chawl life as it proceeds from its complexity. Turning to Honig's account of public things, I argue for thinking/reading the chawl as akin to a public thing. The chawl is a holding environment – in the very sites where neoliberal deprivation has dismantled and erased public infrastructures vital to life – for practices of care and sociality in and through which figurations of collective subjectivity are built, sustained, and repaired. Locating these resonances between the chawl and Honig's work allows me to show the specificity of the political gesture of chawl life without reducing it to the terms of a binary that it is constitutively fugitive from.

In their refusal of the city along these lines, I will argue, the chawls and chawl life are constitutively improper. Theirs is a refusal of the terms of that order, of what is offered, in the interest of precisely that which is denied. The imaginaries of collective subjectivity that emerge in and from the chawl, I suggest, are not those of a whole, or a stable vision of such collectivity, but an improper, out-of-place collective in the surround of the city. Following the trajectories of such an argument, the chawls exceed the reading they have been given, introducing to that which is introduced to them an augment that displaces and distends in productive and novel directions. In the discussion that follows, in other words, my aim is not only to draw out the productivity of reading the chawls as Honigean public things, but also to register those indents and interjects that the chawl introduces to Honig's work. The chawls point up the centrality of impropriety to Honig's account. Public things can become these vital sites only if they are improper and out of place. The politics of such impropriety – the improper politics of public things, in one respect – and the democratic potency of such an improper collective anchored in the practices of care and sociality in the chawl is at the centre of the story I aim to tell here.

Taking as a point of departure a project of urban renewal and beautification launched by the Commissioner of the Bombay Municipal Corporation, M. L. Sukhtankhar, in the 1980s, the first section below draws out the ways in which such a project was simultaneously a process of the proprietary reconfiguration of the city. Peering into this historical moment through close analyses of Anand Patwardhan's documentary film, *Bombay: Our City* (1985), and placing it in dialogue with le Corbusier's modernist architectural discourse on the one hand, and critiques of biopolitics through Foucault and Esposito on the other, I show how beautification meant a reordering of the city and its proper subject.

Counterposed to *Bombay: Our City*, I turn attention – in the second section below – to another of Patwardhan's films, *Occupation: Mill-Worker* (1996). Working through the central themes of the film as they are interwoven with interviews I conducted with my grandmothers, oral histories, and extant ethnographic research, I show how the chawls and chawl life resist and refuse the city's order by pointing up their complexity and impropriety. In drawing attention to the conversations I had with my *dadi* and *nani* (paternal and maternal grandmother, respectively), to their lived experiences of chawl life, and to close readings of similar histories through other studies of chawl life, I try and demonstrate how a stand of ethnographic explorations of the chawl do not pay sufficient attention to its constitutive complexity. In this, they fail to recognise the radical political gesture the chawl becomes a site for. Turning at this point, in the third section below, to Honig's work, I draw out the radical politics of the chawl as it both resonates with and responds to her work. The politics of the chawl is all improper, embedded in practices

of care and sociality, and in its impropriety it makes possible the imagination and enactment of novel forms of collective subjectivity.

This is an exploration of the politics of architecture, but such a politics is never simply a question of specific built forms taken in isolation. It is instead a question of how such built forms enter into relations with economic, social and legal processes, political projects, and practices of everyday life. My concern with the politics of architecture, then, is not an insular concern with built form. It is a concern with the ways in which the architecture of the chawl becomes the ground for a political operation in the very moment it comes into contact with (which it always-already is in contact with) processes of urban renewal and reorganisation in the city.[121] Similarly, the politics of architecture is not limited to a politics of the built environment. My premise here is that we can locate the politics of architecture at the intersection of built form and social or political practice, at that point where each modulates and contorts the other. In this sense, my inquiry traces an architectural politics of the chawl in and through its intertwining with the social practices that it is the site for. The chawl, as I argue throughout the following discussion, is not simply a structure but that relation between a place or a site and a form of life. Taking this as my point of departure allows me to draw out the ways in which the chawl becomes the site for the imagination and enactment of radical, democratising forms of subjectivity.

But these intersections where architecture, political theory and architectural politics each get drawn out of place demand a similarly displaced reading. One in which oral histories, film, images and anecdotes are interwoven with architectural discourses and apparatuses of political theory. In this sense, the point in what follows is not to suggest that Honig, or le Corbusier, or indeed, Shetty or Adarkar can tell us something, help us excavate and uncover from the ruins of the chawl a radical political operation. The aim is even less to bring these apparatuses to bear to shine light on a set of practices that, until now, could not be fully grasped. My aim instead, is to note how the lived experiences of chawl life, how the chawl as built form, both partakes in this dialogue and displaces it. Displaces, that is, the sense that this is a matter of applying a theoretical framework that itself remains untouched in the encounter. As much as the chawl is neither only architectural object nor form of life (but precisely their intertwining), it is also not just an example. The chawl, in the way I read it here, is the site of a

[121] In his discussion of balconies as interstitial sites mediating the relation of a public outside and a private inside in Beirut, Zacka makes a similar point. For him, the kind of 'reserved sociality' made possible in the balcony, and its political potency, is one that can be brought to light only by underscoring the point of interface between urban studies and architecture (Zacka 2020)

meeting, one that I argue is of generative and critical significance. The place where a certain scenography is constructed in which that which is held apart is put together.

I

Anand Patwardhan's 1985 film, *Bombay: Our City* (1985) captures a city amid a profound urban transformation. The Commissioner of the Bombay Municipal Corporation (BMC), M. L. Sukhtankhar, the film tells us, has launched a large-scale project of urban renewal and beautification. At the core of such a project is an attempt to clean the city, sanitise it, by getting rid of all those who live here 'illegally' in tenements in working-class housing estates, shantytowns and slums, or on the city's streets. During an interview in the film, Sukhtankhar argues that these 'illegal' occupiers have no right to be where they are, in the city, taking up space that is not theirs. More directly, he frames his project in terms of a process of purification. To beautify Bombay means to eradicate the pollution that has sullied it for so long; pollution that emanates from the intruders, those daring to squat on this land. 'You are not tolerated', Sukhtankhar makes clear in that interview, sipping tea in the verdant lawns of his bungalow on Malabar Hill, overlooking the working class neighbourhoods of Bombay. Throughout, Patwardhan stages striking montages, jumping between the well-manicured lawns and quiet, shaded gardens of Sukhtankhar's government bungalow, orderly press conference rooms at the Police headquarters, and the chaos of police 'clearing' raids as informal settlements are razed without any due process. Right at the outset, a police officer declares, "*sabh ghus jao andar*" – go tear everything down! (Patwardhan 1985) as bulldozers demolish precarious homes made of tarpaulin sheets, pre-fab concrete blocks, and sheet metal roofs. In Sukhtankhar's own words, this is a war – a war on pavement dwellers, a war on hawkers, a war more generally, on informality; informal work, informal lives.[122]

Yet, this project is not only Sukhtankhar's concern – Patwardhan shows us the considerable support he finds from the urban elite. In talking about beautification, Sukhtankhar ventriloquises concerns with pollution and chaos, unruliness and criminality, with the

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[122] My discussion of informality follows Forman's identification of the critical import of practices of informality. Where formality – formal rules, procedures, laws and techniques – establish a civic armature in which the city is segmented and striated, informality is a question of a sort of indocility. The city's formal order establishes zones of civility and incivility, of order and chaos, but practices of informality problematise these very binaries. They take formal rules and structures, and make them the site of a certain hybridisation, or introduce to them some augment. As Forman notes, taking of such practices in the San Diego-Tijuana region, "These often informal and invisible circulations shape the transgressive hybrid identities and practices of everyday life in this part of the world." (Forman 2022, 127).

protection of Bombay's pride, of 'our' pride, and that of the Nation emerging in the chatter at cocktail parties, social gatherings, weddings and festivals in the quiet, palatial neighbourhoods of Bombay's elite. How can we tolerate them?! The filth?! The shit?! They have already taken over our footpaths and parks, soon they will be on the roads! Always the same refrain. Why must they stay? Why can't they work and then be gone, go back to their villages? Why stay here?! (Patwardhan 1985). What 'they' threaten, by their arrival in the city, is some notion of the old Bombay, of a city proper to those that seem to have always been there. In staying here, moreover, in this city that is not theirs, these impure bodies, figures of pollution, are out of place. Theirs is the place of the rural hinterland beyond the city's frontier. Instead, they stay, filing in and out of overcrowded trains and buses too full to move. In cramped chawls and asphyxiating slums, along narrow footpaths and narrower railway platforms.

What the film captures is a struggle over space – the fighting pushing jostling over pieces of land between residents of informal housing, police, property developers, and municipal authorities. At stake is a spatial order of the city – of who owns what land, how it is used, for and by whom, of who can be where, who can appear, live, work, and sleep where. And Sukhtankhar's project of beautification is a reconfiguration of precisely such a spatial order. A reconfiguration that establishes for the city's poor the place of no place as slums and informal housing are cleared through police operations and raids by municipal authorities to make the land available for private developers to build high-rise luxury apartment buildings. Old chawls are sold to facilitate redevelopment, and textile mills that once employed those living in the chawls are torn down and replaced by shiny new shopping centres and malls (Menon 2012). Legal and policy changes introduce land-use and zoning regulations, development control regulations (DCRs), transferable development rights (TDRs), and building codes that incentivise property developers to aggressively acquire land across the city (Patel, Parthasarathy, and Jose 2022). The city's poor – its mill-workers, daily-wage labourers, domestic and care-workers, and those employed by the construction industry – are expunged to its fringes, priced out and bought out by private capital as it brings ever larger parts of the city under its control.

The resonances between this project of beautification and the project of modernist architecture – and in particular the work of le Corbusier and the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) – makes it possible to trace the contours of the spatial order Sukhtankhar seeks to institute.[123] For, what is shared across both is an overriding concern with determinacy,

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[123] Le Corbusier by this point had of course, already designed the city of Chandigarh in northern India, and his idea were well established within urban planning and architectural discourses in India. By drawing on him here, I do not seek to introduce a conceptual architecture that is foreign to the context of Bombay's

predictability and orderliness. To know who is where, who is moving from and to where, and when in ways that make social life – the messy complexity of urban life – legible as the subject of a certain architectural knowledge is at the core of le Corbusier's project (Scott 2020). "To create architecture", in this sense, le Corbusier notes, "is to put in to order." (Corbusier 2008, 69-70). Informal housing and informal work and leisure spaces threaten an unpredictability that, in turn, threatens to disorder the city. Complex and criss-crossing relations traversing sites that are constitutively multiple – at once places of living, of care, of work, and of play – demand a radical simplification. One achieved by a functional segregation of the city into zones dedicated to work, leisure, transit, and residential use (Aslam 2020, 167). Reconceived in this way, the roads and railway stations are transit zones, unfit for all but the most transitory occupation, and certainly not for sleeping or running one's business. The mill-lands are reimagined as sites of leisure – workplaces torn down to build shopping centres. The chawls in the vicinity of those mills are now unfit for residential use by the mill-workers, their place in the metropolitan core an impediment to trade, commerce, and the free flows of capital to which they must cede. Beautification comes to mean a certain zonal discipline. The city is carved up and distributed across a set of one-dimensional, functional uses.

And internal to such a spatial reconfiguration is the institution of a novel proprietary order of the city. Because beautifying Bombay, in terms of the segmentation and zonal distribution of urban space, really means privatisation. The search for functional orderliness across urban spaces dedicated to discrete uses demands a transformation of informal, complex, and overlaid housing and living arrangements with the strictures of formal property relations. As Roy points out, these are practices of transformation that impose proprietary orderliness, reducing complexity and informality to determinate and fixed relations of property legible to a state apparatus (Roy 2017, 3). Informal housing arrangements in slums and chawls, in other words, are deemed irregular and illegal, enabling their replacement by formal and regularised "cadastral property [with] globally legible value." (Roy 2014, 138). In this process, just as the city is carved up and partitioned into zones, new proprietary relations are set up. As property developers, construction companies, and their financiers take advantage of (de)regulation that gives them control over swathes of urban space for the project of beautification, old proprietary relations are appropriated into this new formal regime. At the same time, loosening regulations on land acquisition accelerate processes of slum and chawl demolitions and redevelopment.

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urban transformation, instead, I aim to draw out more intensively, and along a distinct trajectory, the resonances – sometimes latent, often overt – between a modernist vision of the city and a project of urban beautification.

Coupled with relaxations in floor-space index (FSI) regulations – that regulate built-up area as a ratio of a structure's footprint – this process creates new proprietary rights where none existed before, as developers can build and market many more individual units on the same area (Parthasarathy 2022, 160). The zonal and functional segmentation of the city as part of its beautifying project is situated, then, within this neoliberal transformation of urban space as ever larger parts of the city are privatised and handed over to redevelopment in accord with the master plans of urban renewal (Patel, Parthasarathy, and Jose 2022). The point is not only that such plans for the city and its zonal discipline are drawn up following which private capital is corralled to the task of carrying out that reconfiguration. It is, instead, of the intertwining of these two processes – their indispensability to each other. The acts of appropriation, these practices of closing in and closing off facilitated by the project of beautification, do not just reflect an urban orderliness but work to institute such an order. The reorganisation of proprietary relations – from informality to formality, complexity to orderliness – is simultaneously a redefining of urban space as such (Devenney 2011, 160). In replacing, all over the city, chawls and their complex proprietary arrangements – a complexity I discuss below – with discrete, exclusive and private apartment units, the very terrain of urban space is reconfigured. From a multiplicity of uses and functions, the overlaying of multiple zones and their proper objects, to an exclusivity and insularity that closes off each zone from others. Exclusivity and privation work to institute and reinforce the zonal discipline and segmentation central to beautification.

The spatial reconfigurations of the city, and the proprietary orderliness internal to it, in this sense, set up new boundaries and limits. But, as Devenney points out, these are boundaries that prescribe formal proprietary relations as well as a whole "vocabulary of the proper" (Devenney 2011, 162). The privatisation and acquisition of land, the eviction of the urban poor from slums and chawls, the partitioning of the city into zones of work, play, and life configure processes of subjectification and the "policing of different subject positions" (Devenney 2020, 23). Even as it brings to the fore questions of urban design and of those who pay the price for grand visions of civic beauty and modernity, Patwardhan's film draws out this subjectivising operation of the project of beautification.[124] Zonal divisions not only make the city more orderly and regular but also make the bodies moving through it more governable insofar as their

[124] As Wallerstein notes, emergence of modernist architecture establishes of an inescapable link between an art of space/s and built forms, and the biopolitical order that such space institutes. through zoning laws, development plans, masterplans, and building codes, architecture as an art of built forms and of space is corralled to the imperatives of biopower (Wallerstein 2009).

movements can now be known and predicted. The concern, for Sukhtankhar and his BMC, is bodies that are out of place, people that do things not allowed by zonal discipline, and all those movements, utterances and actions that take place in ways that cannot be known or seen precisely because they do not fit in the regulated organisation of city life. The aim is not, however, simply to be rid of these unruly bodies, but to schematise and order movements, circulations, actions and utterances, and sites of dis/appearance.

Indeed, as Foucault notes, the operations of biopower are concerned with making live; arranging things in their right disposition so that a flourishing life is possible (Foucault 2008). In this sense, it is a process of rationalisation that takes as its object "matters of life and death, [birth] and propagation, [health] and illness, both physical and mental, and [the] processes that sustain or retard the optimisation of the life of a population." (Dean 1999, 99). The concern for Sukhtankhar is certainly spatial – ensuring only certain spaces are available to certain bodies – but it is equally a concern with life, with living in the city, with what such life looks like, and with how it can be enabled and optimised. And so, workers must file into overcrowded railway stations, stare blankly out of tiny windows in claustrophobic train carriages, and mechanistically set to work on their looms in damp, musty textile mills. Each site in this sequence has its specific function, and movements between them are carefully orchestrated and controlled to maximise efficiency and optimise working and living conditions (Packer 2003, 145). It is with this in mind that built forms are sought to be demolished and new forms created to replace them, as the city transforms into a series of regulated, policed spaces, determining who can show up where and when. An architectural apparatus that seeks to foster and enable movement (that needs this movement), but always only in linear and segmented flows.

To show up out of place, moving against the flow, or to not move and stay in place threatens this whole apparatus. It introduces the prospect of disorder and uncertainty inscribed as a threat to the population (the city, the nation, as articulated by Sukhtankar and others) that the operations of (architectural) biopower seek to immunise (Foucault 2004). Throughout the film, Patwardhan shows us the urgency and anxiety of the persistent threat of some sort of impending urban catastrophe if nothing is done to reconfigure the city. A crisis of health and disease, a crisis of organisation, a crisis of criminality and order, of efficiency and beauty fold onto each other in the angst in Sukhtankhar's (and others') claims about how the urban poor threaten to take over the city and its roads. Indeed, this worry is reflected as much in Sukhtankhar and the BMC's vision for Bombay as in the modernist underpinnings of le Corbusier's project. The choice, le Corbusier makes clear, is between architecture as the modality by which order is introduced and sedimented, and revolution as the marker of urban uncertainty and chaos (Corbusier 2008).

In the Bombay of the 1980s, such revolution takes the name of urban nuisance. Not simply as a disturbance of urban (zonal) order, but as an improper use of the city; or more pointedly, forms of activity, appearance, speech and movement inappropriate to an apparatus of zonal discipline (Ghertner 2012, 1171).[125] The project of beautification thus expresses a pervasive obsession with safety and order, with sanitation and pollution, as the control of a certain unruliness in and of the city.

The predictability and regularity of circulation and zonal discipline is instituted, therefore, as much through spatial segmentation as through the formation of norms of the proper citizen, their proper behaviour, activities, modes of speaking, gestures, and mannerisms. As Aslam notes, "Dividing the city by use had the consequence of normalising behaviours and activities within and across those zones." (Aslam 2020, 167). Even as these practices of control enact their cold normalisation and banal regularity oriented towards the optimisation of life, they emerge in reference to normative and pathological forms of life, taking as their point of departure a vision of their proper subject (Rutland 2015). One that is immanent to those very practices insofar as they generate the norms and knowledges with which they are set to work (Foucault 1983). The enabling and optimising operations of biopower are, in other words, juxtaposed to and on an order of bodies of greater or lesser impropriety. Which is to say, greater or lesser threat to the biopolitical order of the city. When Sukhtankhar declares, 'you will not be tolerated', what is at work is the identification of those bodies that are too improper, too pathological, that (will always) pose a threat to the city from their space beyond norm. And for all on the margins of the subjective norm – the urban poor, workers in the textile mills, daily-wage labourers, *Koli* fisher communities, slum-dwellers, Dalits and millions of others that are constitutively out of place – the project of beautification is one of expulsion, eviction, and brutalisation (Foucault 2004). Throughout, Patwardhan's film stages the violence that accompanies – that is necessary to – Sukhtakhar's project. It is only by way of the violent eviction and removal of 'these people' that the city can be made beautiful, its zonal order and discipline instituted and maintained. An hour into the film, as bulldozers and police platoons tear down a slum in Bombay's affluent Bandra neighbourhood, one of the residents puts the

[125] Ghertner's account of nuisance talk in Delhi records the ways in which the urban elite discursively articulate nuisance as the marker of the improper use of bourgeois public space, and the ways in which a principally aesthetic concern – of the city's beauty – get inscribed as essentially biopolitical concerns – i.e. concerns with health and sanitation, efficiency and public safety. In this sense, the project of beautification staged in Patwardhan's film is the mirror image of the discursive operation Ghertner notes. Here, it is precisely the overdetermination of a multiplicity of biopolitical risks that are inscribed in aesthetic terms. In either case, the point is the same, to beautify the city is to sanitise it, to cleanse it, to make it safe so that a particular form of life is made possible.

point starkly, "*hata do humko; nikaal do idhar se; idhar se utha ke koi kopche mein daal do; phir banao apne sheher ko chikna.*" ('Get rid of us; remove us from the footpaths, send us away to some corner. Then make your city beautiful.' *translation my own*).

Yet, Sukhtankhar's utterance in that interview with Patwardhan also suggests to us something of the form that this subjective imaginary takes in the city: this is our city, our land, our space; it is not for you, you do not belong, you are not welcome. Beautifying the city is the task of those to whom the city belongs, who own it, by way of ordering and controlling the movements, utterances and appearances of all those who have no business to be there. The subjectivising operation of beautification, its dispersion of bodies along spectra of propriety and impropriety, is grounded in a vision of ownership, possession, and property emerging within those spectra. The proper subjects of the city are those that can hold, rein in, and reign over the space of the city. Subjects, that is, that can turn away, step beyond, and escape its messiness, the overlaying of zones and functions. Those that can roll up the windows of their air-conditioned cars or lock themselves behind iron gates and security cordons, and in this way shut out the city in which they nonetheless are. Gliding over its roads, towering above its claustrophobic neighbourhoods in large apartment blocks built on the ruins of a chawl or a slum as part of the grand design of beautification. It is only in being unencumbered by the city's stench, its filth, that its proper subject can take hold of and possess their life, their movements, their modes of speech and action. Only in stepping out and away is it possible to both imagine and then actualise an order of zonal discipline that the project of beautification demands. To be in place, in the proper place in this new distribution of parts, necessitates a certain form of distance and remove – to not be too caught up in the chaotic din of crowded streets.

This is a subjective imaginary that in its configuration of modes of behaviour and response – forms of action, speech, and appearance – conditions forms of life in the city. The proprietary order of beautification is a reconfiguration of ways of living, working, socialising, and moving in Bombay. It is, in this light, not only that informal housing is improper to the city's orderliness, but that the forms of life such housing becomes the site for (and enables) are improper and out of place in the beautified city. Alongside demolitions and evictions, then, the city's proprietary order is operationalised through an assault on these improper forms of life. The violence of a brutal state apparatus is met with the brutality of a rapid dismantling and withdrawal of public infrastructures vital to life in the city. Transport systems central to urban mobility, work, and livelihoods of the city's poor have their funding stripped and redirected towards roads and highways for private vehicles (Anand 2006). Social clubs, working-men's centres, youth clubs, creches, and canteens close as municipal funding and support is withdrawn. Schools, health

centres, and employment offices face similar cuts. And, crucially, as I discuss in relation to the chawl below, basic public services – the supply of water and electricity, waste management, and sanitation services – are underfunded and left in disrepair.

What Sukhtankhar and his BMC undertake, in this light, is the institution of an order of spaces and things that corresponds strictly to an order of bodies proper to them. A regime of property and an image of the subject proper to it constituted by pervasive practices of control and exclusion, privation and privatisation that augurs the city's beautification. The threat to be contained has as much to do with filth as it does with the impropriety of those who act as though they belong. Indeed, it is the threat of the disorder and pollution of those laying claim where no claim can exist. The danger is not only of these bodies refusing to fall into line, to circulate in accord with new regimes of zonal discipline. It is that in this refusal what is challenged is not only functional segmentarity and an architectural project of order and beauty, but a whole proprietary infrastructure that props up any such project.

The modernist vision of architecture as "a project of subject-formation, [the] moulding and shaping of subjectivity understood as life" (Wallerstein 2009, 4) undergirding Sukhtankhar's project of beautification is also grounded in the presupposition of such a proprietary order. The modernist demand to know the city, to control flows, and exclude elements of chaos and disorder (the revolution le Corbusier counterposes to architecture, discussed above) takes as its foundation a form of the subject that is always-already a subject that can hold, can own. One that can rise above the city, to command and control it in its entirety, exercising that sole and despotic dominion in the arrangement of forms and distribution of spaces to realise "an order which is a pure creation of [their] spirit." (Corbusier 2008, 5).

But, if architecture and its creation and delimitation of spaces can lend itself to practices of control and order and optimisation, it also becomes the site of emergence of spaces that don't quite fit in, that are anachronous as it were, out of place and out of sync, and that resist in their very materiality precisely the orderliness of the city and its masterplan for beautification. It is these heterotopias that are Sukhatankar and Ribeiro's central concern, what they wish so eagerly to clamp down on, and it is these heterotopias – the *chawls* – and the resistances and petty malices they enact that are the focus of the rest of this discussion.

II

The shift from the old city's broad, tree-lined avenues with their art-deco and neo-gothic buildings to the jumbled mess of new residential and commercial constructions in the suburbs is sudden and jarring. Away from the metropolitan centre, the streets are cramped, every inch eked out to allow for another apartment block to be built. Buildings are densely packed together, barely enough room for the refreshing sea breeze to smuggle its way in. The windows are small and often closed to keep the dust, noise, and pollution out. Only a moment ago, I was admiring breezy verandahs and balconies, open maidans and sea-front promenades. Now, I can scarcely see past the unending river of traffic trundling along the narrow road. The transition feels almost instant. As soon as one gets on the bus, it is zooming along the crests and troughs of a seemingly endless series of bridges. These flyovers were built in the 1980s to facilitate quicker travel between the suburbs and the city. Sukhtankhar's project of beautification instantiated in steel and concrete; all that matters, all that the city is, is that circulation between metropolitan centre and suburban fringe. But, when peering out of the bus window, one sees, in a blur, the chawls and textile mills of the working-class neighbourhoods of Lalbaug, Girgaon, and Parel, with their terracotta roof tiles and crumbling mill compounds. Neighbourhoods, buildings, and communities in between, out of place and out of joint as they quickly disappear from view.

Out of place as they are, the chawls are still there. The products of a process of urban transformation quite different to the one seeking out their erasure. At the cusp of the 20th Century, as Bombay's textile industry grew ever larger, so did the need to house the thousands who left their villages and came to the city to run the looms, spinners, and gins. In response, farmlands and orchards at the fringes of the old colonial city were transformed into large, two or three-storeyed buildings with hundreds of rooms (Shetty 2011). Not orchestrated by master plans and grand designs, or by the banal intricacies of Development Control Rules (DCRs) and zoning laws, this was a process that moved informally; fitfully, a street or building at a time. The structures built through these processes had long lines of rooms – each about 8 to 12ft wide and 10 to 15ft deep – strung along a corridor. Communal toilets and water taps block-ended the corridors at each end (Finkelstein 2019, 90-91). These corridors, called galleries or *chaals* were, according to Shetty, "the spine of these buildings…[a] combination of public and private space connecting the street to the house…The buildings themselves came to be known after these corridors – *chal*, or chawls." (Shetty 2011). Chawls were designed for migrant male workers who lived in the city a few months every year, working in the mills while fields in their village were left fallow. The rooms, therefore, were spartan. Each occupant – between 6 and 8 lived in each room

– had one nail on a wall on which to hang all their belongings (Adarkar, Pendse, and Finkelstein 2011). The corridors were nothing but a passageway to get from the room to the toilets, to work to the water tap.

Over the years, however, these rooms came to house entire families as they left their village to settle in the growing city. And it is at this juncture that the chawls undergo a crucial transformation. The empty, barren corridors burst with life. Rooms get overcrowded. Intricate collages of old family photos, images of deities, idols, and posters from the latest films compete to fill up any empty space on the crudely painted brick walls. Shelves go up and are occupied by an assortment of food containers, pots, and utensils. A wooden or steel *almirah* (wardrobe) stakes claim to one corner of the room right next to a high bed (*khatiya*) - both probably having travelled from the village to the city. The water tap becomes a place filled with lively conversation, arguments, and fights. Along the corridors, right next to the laundry hung out to dry, boxes and chests house everything that doesn't fit in the room. Every evening, they become a comfortable bench to sit and chat with the neighbours – to sing songs, tell stories, discuss the latest happenings at the mills, or quarrel over someone's belongings occupying more space than they are entitled to. The chawls transform from residences into homes, becoming the site for the emergence of a whole fabric of life (Adarkar, Pendse, and Finkelstein 2011).

When I asked her about the chawls, my grandmother – I call her *dadi* – would say that it was hard work making a chawl room into a home; that it demanded constant negotiation, compromise, and resolve. Relationships had to be built and maintained even when fraying edges threatened to undo the whole weave.[126] These were the centrepiece of chawl life, its beating heart. Everything revolved around the straining and repairing of communal relations of friendship, solidarity, and care that developed between the residents; between one's own family and the one next door, and two doors down, and three, and the one in the floor above, and the floor below. *Dadi* insisted that what was at work was a shared and extensive sense of homeliness, extending outwards, beyond the confines of the small chawl room. A blurring of my house and your house into the chawl as our home.[127] Gupte notes in a similar vein, "The doors of the houses were always left open through the daytime and the evenings…People moved freely through these doors. An ailing couple, who would leave their doors open, would get multiple visitors through the day…" (Gupte 2018). Open doors led to open corridors. Every corridor was always overflowing, its narrow confines constricted further by the assortment of household

[126] *Dadi*, interview with author, Mumbai, 19 January 2024.
[127] *Ibid*.

furniture and other items piling up in one corner. Along the other edge, open to the courtyard (or the street below) make-shift clothes'-horses and bits of old rope roughly tied to steel beams held up a colourful patchwork of laundry – bright blue saris, white shirts dulled to a more earthy shade after years of use, a pair of pyjama bottoms in a striking pink hue having caught the red leeched by the *gamcha* hung next to it. In between the furniture and laundry, the corridor was a place to meet and chat, to take a pause and sip on a cup of tea. The airing laundry provided shade, and bits of old furniture offered a comfortable seat. Here, Shetty notes, "It was easy to find a person like old Dayanand Shetye discussing the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan or Yasser Arafat's strategy for Palestine with a less interested Atmaram Sawant, who rather enjoyed listening to [details] of extra-marital or inter-caste affairs between people of the chawl." (Shetty 2011, 61-62). In another corner, a group of young boys would play carrom while others discussed plans for celebrating the upcoming festival. For women in the chawls in particular, the corridors provided a space to meet with friends, with neighbours, with confidantes to share their worries or problems, to offer help and receive support.[128] Spaces where women "would share confidences", building lasting bonds of solidarity that were crucial to tiding over difficult times (Koppikar 2011, 124). The corridors in this sense became spaces of safety and security, sites where the divide between the domestic and the public was dissolved (Finkelstein 2019, 110). Where the very boundaries of home and outside that police the movements of women's bodies began to be blurred to indistinction. The corridor, in this sense, becomes the site for a complex layering of uses, occupations, and functions, extending into every room just as each home overflowed into it. That space that is all at once the storage room, the breezy bedroom on a humid summer night, the communal meeting room, the laundry, the party venue, and everything else.

A story narrated to me by *nani* expands on what is at work in such blurring of boundaries and the complexity it gives rise to. When guests would visit her chawl home they were offered the relative quiet and privacy of the rooms, while their regular occupants laid out mattresses in the corridor and slept there. The mattresses blocked the entire passageway and would often be laid out right in front of the neighbour's front door.[129] In the days before the guests' arrival, this arrangement had to be negotiated, and a suitable compromise reached with the neighbours. The extension of a home outwards always rested on these practices of negotiation. The corridor, in this sense, is not a site of complete fluidity and communal porosity; there is a regulation of who does what, where, when, and how. But this is a 'regulation' quite different from the kind of

[128] *Nani*, interview with author, Mumbai, 20 January 2024.
[129] *Ibid*.

policing of ways of being, doing, and saying constitutive of Sukhtankhar's project of beautification. There was a fundamental difference between the use of parts of the corridor in front of the neighbour's home and the neighbour's home itself. The corridor could be used to accommodate the neighbour's guests, but making one's own home similarly available was a different matter. Indeed, there was precisely such an elemental difference between using a portion of the corridor abutting the neighbour's room based on a negotiated arrangement and doing so (or trying to) without letting them know. Clear proprietary relations do exist, then, in the chawl, but the point is not how a certain exchange of proprietary rights is facilitated by practices of negotiation and adjustment. Instead, it is how such a proprietary regime is interrupted by informal arrangements always open to change. The chawl, then, is neither a normed space of regularity and certainty – of the privative and exclusionary order of property, nor is it a space of complete fluidity. Not an unregulated and chaotic space, but one that is "structured through various forms of extra-legal, social and discursive" practices (Roy 2009, 826). It is somewhere in between. A complex site of relative stability - of negotiation and compromise and adjustment. The chawl resists being divided up into discrete holdings, resists being enclosed into neatly bounded rooms and corridors, insisting on its complexity.[130]

Any sense of property in terms of an exclusionary and privative logic is always feeble in the chawl (Shetty and Gandhi 2023; Shetty 2011). Interrupted or undercut by the young child running into one's house to eat some snacks, by the neighbour's guests sleeping by one's front door, by visitors arriving unexpectedly and staying for dinner, by the accumulating pile of objects (games, bikes, old clothes, household furniture) with no clear owner that threatens to block the whole corridor. Attempts to institute clear boundaries, rigidity, or some form of separation through which formal and privative proprietary orderliness can be established are met with hybridity, juxtaposition, and sociality (Cruz 2000, 75; 2008, 95). The chawl is shared, but its sharing is the result of and always subject to practices of negotiation and compromise and claiming always open to contestation (Koppikar 2011, 126). The point is not that boundaries of

[130] In their discussion of slums, Bhan articulates a similar point. Drawing attention to the informal proprietary arrangements constitutive of slum life they ask after what, in the context of the slum, "is a 'property right'? Is it ownership? A right to sell and buy? A title? Is it the right to use? The right not to be evicted? Is the right necessarily individual? Can it be communal, co-operative, or common? What rights does on have to land that is 'public'? How are 'property rights' related to security of tenure – the ability (in many ways as important to the poor as ownership) of being able to stay in place?" (Bhan 2011). Across my discussion here and Bhan's questions is the registering that informal housing arrangements are not isolated and independent of the proprietary orders in which they are situated. The chawl is – even as it disappears from view underneath the fly-overs – a part of the city and as such is embedded in its proprietary order. Its complexity, as I point out above, is precisely in the overlaying of its proprietary situation by an informality that surrounds and interjects it.

home and outside, of what is one's own and what is another's, dissolve entirely. Instead, these boundaries are blurred; they are blurred and sharpened from time to time. Open doors are open for some, but closed to others – on some days, at some times. At other times, on other days, they are open for yet other people. A neighbour's laundry can be hung to dry freely on my side of the corridor, but it is still *my* side, and should an argument ever break out, it will be marked as a privilege they enjoy. In this sense, chawl life is a refusal of propriety and its orderliness in the interest of a relative stability, a negotiation and adjustment that is nothing other than the nurturing and navigation of relations of care and sociality as they are reinforced by the everyday practices of living in the chawl. Its impropriety is the destabilisation of the city's proprietary order and its proper subject by introducing to it an unruly and disorderly interject.[131] In the cramped corridors and even more cramped rooms, the subjective imaginary of the beautified city is refused in and by the complex negotiation of care and sociality. This is the complexity of chawl life, the ways it becomes a site for a sociality in the shadow of the beautified city's fly-overs and skyscrapers.

But complexity and the blurring of boundaries in chawl life is simultaneously the site of conflict and acrimony. On the one hand, the cramped confines of the chawl intensified extant practices of discrimination and oppression. Even as the corridors became safe spaces for women, the erasure of privacy meant a hypervisibilisation that amplified modes of patriarchal control and policing of women's bodies (Koppikar 2011, 120). Access to and use of the communal toilets, doing the laundry, going out to watch a film, or meet friends, indeed even the consumption of water from the communal taps was all subject to constant scrutiny and surveillance.[132] Small rooms, large families, and thin walls meant sexual activity was communal knowledge, and subject to communal control through the ridicule, derision, and condescension directed at women.[133] Moreover, relations of care and community in the chawl were always embedded within networks of caste and its system of separation and discrimination (Koppikar 2011, 122). Sociality in chawl life is not an unbounded cosmopolitanism in this sense. Throughout our

[131] Finkelstein reads this as the elliptical nature of chawl-time. A mode of living elliptically which is constitutively the refusal of forms of temporal progression internal to capitalist productivity and the laws of development (Finkelstein 2019, 26). Chawl time is a place of waiting, of standing still that in doing so resists the drive to conform to the contemporary urban trajectory of development and displacement (Finkelstein 2019, 95-96). What I am trying to locate here is akin to what Finklestein identifies as the chawl's time. But where, for her, this is a temporal question, one that leads her to think chawl time as a lively ruin – an elliptical mode of living situated in a space that no longer makes it possible – my discussion here moves in the opposite direction, trying to locate these ellipses precisely in the space of the chawl itself. The shift is significant to understanding the politics of the chawl, and I return to it towards the end of this discussion.
[132] *Nani*, interview with author, Mumbai, 20 January 2024.
[133] *Ibid*.

conversations, *dadi* mentioned to me over and over how a key part of the communality of her chawl was a result of the fact that all the residents belonged to the same three or four castes.[134] In more cosmopolitan chawls, families from the lowest castes "would be allotted, if at all, the last *kholi* (room) on a floor, possibly in the darkest corner or near the toilet blocks in a brahmin-dominated (upper caste) chawl" (Koppikar 2011, 122), and *nani* notes how Muslim families in her chawl were always kept at a distance; invited to communal festivals and celebrations, but never part of idle conversations in the corridors.[135] Arguments and fights were never far away – over inches of the stone floor, a bicycle parked too far to one side, a chair irresponsibly left in the neighbour's 'area'.

On the other hand, and more fundamentally, as much as chawl life points to practices of sociality and care, it points to forms of living that are the result of, and subsist despite, neoliberal deprivation. Chawl life was hard, *dadi* tells me, because there was always a shortage of something. Koppikar, for instance, draws out through her interviews how confrontations were often focused on the use of water and toilets (Koppikar 2011, 122). As municipal authorities withdrew from maintaining basic public infrastructures, chawls were left without any recourse. Relying on one another, on one's neighbours and other residents, made life possible in these conditions of enforced precarity and insecurity (Parthasarathy 2022, 168). But precarious life also placed chawl residents in cruel bargains. If the water only ran for 2 hours every morning – as it did in *dadi's* chawl – one had to be willing to wake up mid-sleep and take their place in the queue, then fight their way to the tap, and help friends and family also get access.[136] In a situation where neoliberal beautification reconfigures the city, chawl life and its complexity reflects both the attempt to survive, to live, in a space that does not allow for it, and an attempt to build and sustain forms of sociality and care that fill the craters of absent public infrastructures. The complexity of chawl life is as much the complexity of the proprietary relations within the chawl as it is the complexity of life in a place designed to not foster it. Chawl life is not some happy romanticism. Its complexity, in this light, is not the opposition of a communal and rural idyll to the city's proprietary order. It is instead an unhappy, restive, and restless accommodation (or situation) within it. The city forces chawl life - both physically, in the denial of space, in the denial of property, and in the denial of basic public services like water, sanitation, safety. Chawl life is a response to this disappearing act, to this enforced invisibilisation by, and forced disappearance of, the state.

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[134] *Dadi*, interview with author, Mumbai, 19 January 2024.
[135] *Nani*, interview with author, Mumbai, 20 January 2024.
[136] *Dadi*, interview with author, Mumbai, 19 January 2024.

And in this sense, the care that chawl life and its complexity is the site for is not an allusion to communality - smooth, unfettered, and endlessly plural. It calls attention, instead, to these urgent practices of solidarity and sociality that take place in precisely the gap the neoliberal city leaves behind. Work in the mills was always precarious, and as the state withdrew its social safety nets, being able to draw on or fall back upon the sociality of chawl life made living in the city possible. In the idle moments in between work, in the lonely monotony of being out of work in a city where one is out of place, chawl life provided space to engage in conversations that kept spirits up and distracted for a short while (Shetty and Gandhi 2023). Practices of care and sociality in the chawl are the building, sustaining, and repairing of life and its conditions at the very sites where the neoliberal city takes them away. To sit in the corridor and sip tea and gossip is not idle - it is the claiming of space, a space denied by the city, to sit and chat, to share. To greet and have a conversation with one of the old mill-workers on strike is to fill in the gap left by the neoliberal city - by the closure of its mills, by the collapse of the local working men's clubs, by the decimation of social security and welfare systems.

Another of Patwardhan's films, *Occupation: Mill-Worker* (1996), stages the performance of such care and sociality. The film documents how, after four years of lock-out during which they had all been made redundant, workers of the New Great Eastern textile mill break into and occupy the mill compound. Throughout the film, the workers say, 'we are not here to break in, we are not here to loot or to destroy, we only want to clean our machines, oil them and make sure they are in working order'. "Come all of you, start cleaning", one of them says as they enter another cavernous room full of mechanised looms. The mill compound is transformed from a barren, sun-baked patch of earth into a communal kitchen and dining room. Old *saris* and bedsheets become makeshift tents to provide shade to the workers during the day and shelter at night. One of the large white bedsheets becomes an impromptu screen as every evening films are screened and discussed in the previously unused mill compound. The tents in the compound of New Great are the performance of care in this sense - to care for the machines, to care for each other, for the mill, to do precisely what the neoliberal city has recused itself from, and that it now does not allow anyone to do. In occupying the mill compound, the workers refuse the proprietary order of the city – this order that entails the demolition of textile mills to make way for shopping centres, which entails thus also, the dismantling of the conditions that make life in the city possible. They point to a different possibility, to the mill compound and its ramshackle buildings becoming the site of performances of sociality and care and their own cinema screen.

In the film, the arc of the workers' refusal culminates in the New Great Eastern mill being reopened. The grounds of their refusal, in the tents and kitchens and cinemas that all occupy

the same space in the mill compound, draw back to the complexity of chawl life as the site that energises and makes possible their performances of care and sociality. Performances that are out of place, that from such a place facilitate forms of saying, doing and being that respond to and resist the privative and exclusionary logic of the project of Bombay's beautification.

III

It is the terms of this refusal, situated in the chawl and its complexity, that a strand of ethnographic research on the chawls of Bombay fails to fully account for. Specifically, I have in mind a set of works by Shetty and Gupte where each, in their own ways, marks the process of urban reconfiguration in which chawls and textile mills are replaced by luxury apartments and corporate offices. Their careful studies of chawl life aim to register how it responds to and resists the institution of a new proprietary order of the city. Across my discussion here and their works, there is a shared concern with the ways in which residents of the chawl navigate proprietary orderliness and its subjective imaginary. However, where I locate the bearings of such navigation in the complexity of chawl life, Shetty and Gupte draw out a binary operation in which the chawl stands opposed to the city and its proprietary order. For them, the city is identified with the institution of a privative and exclusionary spatial order, just as the chawl becomes the site of uninterrupted fluidity, porosity, and communality.

In Shetty's work, for instance, any sense of property in the chawl is always "feeble", with bodies, objects, and everything else moving freely across corridors, homes, and doorways (Shetty 2011). The point, when Shetty discusses one of the men he meets in the chawl who loves to sit in the corridors and gossip, is not just a description of the corridor as a place for such discussions, but equally to point to that blurring and making porous of boundaries between home and outside in and by which, for example, who flirts or spends the night with whom, how frequently someone goes to the toilets, and how much water they use become communal questions. The chawls stand apart from the city – for Shetty – precisely because they instance this radical communality. Similar porosity and fluidity are also at the centre of Gupte's studies of chawl life. Open doors, open kitchens, the sharing of recipes and food, are central to her accounts of the chawl (Gupte 2018). Indeed, as she points out, such porosity was elemental to chawl life and "the idea of what a home is, often making the entire chawl building into one large house" (Gupte 2018). More than simply a sense of communality and communal ownership, for Gupte, the porosity of chawl life was constituted equally by the relations of care and sociality built and developed there. Yet, these are practices of care and sociality that can only be understood in terms of the fluidity by which the chawl is blurred into a nearly homogenous wholeness. A site where the boundaries of home and outside, of family and other, and of ownership and sharing are again blurred to indistinction. For Shetty and Gupte, then, chawl life is constituted by a rich and deep communality. Having recently migrated from their villages to the city, chawl residents drew on a repertoire of practices of sociality and care situated within imaginaries of village life that made life in the city bearable. People drop by and have a chat,

everyone takes up the task of looking after that elderly couple, and everyone shares work and gets a share of all its benefits. And all of this takes place with almost no conflict or strife. Grudges are never held for long, and arguments are quickly resolved, ancillary and incidental to the robust communality of chawl life. The chawls become communal idylls, the thick sociality they are the site of counterpose a fluid and porous shared-ness to the city and its proprietary order.

There is a smoothness to this description of the chawl that papers over what I have called its complexity. In *dadi* and *nani's* stories, fights and arguments happened all the time. Grudges and slights went generations without being forgiven. Not just anyone could go anywhere; it was not a place of fluidity and porosity, but a carefully sustained assemblage of relations - some more 'porous' than others - held in a state of relative stability; always open to change, question, and transformation. But more fundamentally, this is a smoothness that ignores how the chawl and chawl life are a response to the neoliberal city and its proprietary order. A response to the erosion and withdrawal and collapsing of the conditions of life in the city. To absent public services, vanishing social welfare, plummeting wages, industrial collapse, demolitions, and evictions. The concern is that in the fluidity and communality of their descriptions of chawl life, and in drawing these back to an imaginary of rural idyll, they romanticise chawl life. And in such romanticisation, what is forgotten is precisely how the conjuncture their work marks contorts, and conditions forms of life in the chawl. Which is to say, the porosity of chawl life fails to acknowledge how these performances of sociality are a result of, conditioned by, and responding to, the operations of beautification – to neoliberal deprivation. The operations that mark, in other words, precisely the moment of transformation in which their work is situated.

What is more, in romanticising chawl life in this way, Shetty and Gupte are not attentive to how performances of care and sociality situated in the complexity of chawl life enact a resistance to the city's proprietary order in staying still, refusing to fall into line, to capitulate to the beautified city. Identifying living in the chawls with repertoires of rural life, they situate it along the contours of a binary developmental movement in which the chawls' fluidity is ossified by the city's propriety. Shetty argues, for instance, that the enactment of the 1948 rent control law in Bombay froze chawl tenancies such that processes of eviction and transfer became increasingly difficult. As a result, a new sense of property – of holding and owning one's own house to the exclusion of neighbours and everyone else – began to emerge in the chawls over the following decades (Shetty 2011, 2010). In a closely related manner, Gupte notes how poor state support for maintenance of old chawl buildings alongside the promulgation of new regulations that encouraged replacing chawls with apartment blocks (called 'redevelopment')

led to a fundamental transformation of the architecture of housing in Bombay from the 1980s onwards (Gupte 2018). As much as it led to an architectural transformation, it also led to a shift in the imaginary of property within the chawls as the regulations required residents to be compensated in accordance with the area they occupied in the chawl (Gupte 2018). Indeed, Adarkar, Pendse, and Finkelstein supplement such a reading by pointing to the acute economic and social crisis that emerged in the aftermath of the textile workers' strikes of 1982 (Adarkar, Pendse, and Finkelstein 2011, 6). Facing economic uncertainty on the one hand, and a relentless project of urban reconfiguration and beautification on the other, residents chose to leave the complexity of chawl life in favour of more stable ownership in far-flung suburbs (Adarkar, Pendse, and Finkelstein 2011).

These accounts set up a developmental story about the chawls of Bombay. In counterposing the chawls as the negation of the city's proprietary order, Shetty and Gupte seek to mark the ways in which they resist the demands of urban propriety. Yet, what their studies simultaneously do, I suggest, is point out how any such political operation of the chawls and chawl life dissipates. Because, for them, it is a binary question – chawl or city; communality or privation. The chawl for them can either be the site of an unadulterated communal wholeness or a space utterly enclosed. Chawl life either stands as the total negation of a proprietary order and subjective imaginary or collapses into it. There is no third way. Conceived as the site of a fluid multiplicity, in other words, the chawl can only stand in opposition to and remain utterly incompatible with the city and its order. It either resists the city's imposition of privation by way of its own porosity or collapses into it. Registering the ways in which the chawl and its complexity interjects and interrupts proprietary orderliness is constitutively foreclosed. More pointedly, their accounts cannot register the multiplicity of ways in which practices of sociality and care in the chawl continually and persistently respond to beautification and its impositions. In the rigid binaries of chawl and city, the vital and ongoing work of building, repairing, sustaining, adapting, and augmenting relations of sociality in the chawl – that chawl residents undertake every day – in response to and in the shadow of proprietary order are concealed and ignored.

As I point out above, care and sociality in the chawl are performances that take place in the gaps left by the neoliberal state and collapsing public infrastructures. Its repertoires don't counterpose forms of village life and its communality to the city, but emerge in the context of the city, of its enclosures, its privation, its withdrawal; adapting to it, and accommodating within it. To read into these practices the performance of a communality that is fluid, overflowing, and endlessly plural, is to fail to attend to the grounds of its emergence as a response to neoliberal

orderliness. Fail to attend, that is, to the chawls' political potency. To ways in which the chawl stays there, not moving, refusing the city's orderliness not in the interest of a communal idyll but in terms of those urgent and critical practices of care and sociality that make living in the city, in the surround of its proprietary order, possible.

Turning to Honig's work on public things and reading the chawl as such a public thing allows for a fuller appreciation of its political potency and gestures.[137] Public things, Honig tells us, are objects, places, institutions, buildings, and infrastructures that are central to – indeed, constitutive of – democratic life. Democratic politics is inescapably rooted to these public things, to the attachment towards, resentment against, and conflict over them (Honig 2017, 4). Much more than a banister for democratic politics grounding procedural and institutional frameworks in a necessary materiality, Honig suggests that public things are the condition of possibility for democratic and collective subjectivity. They are sites, she argues, that "bring peoples together to act in concert. And even when they are divisive, they provide the basis around which to organise, contest, mobilise, defend, or reimagine various modes of collective being together in a democracy." (Honig 2017, 24). In this way, "public things [underwrite] our collective capacities to imagine, build and tend to a common world collaboratively" (Honig 2017, 38). Reading Winnicott's object-relations theory alongside Arendt, Honig's work tries to locate the ability or force of things to form a sort of adhesive ground, to engender a certain attachment to the world and each other, and to become those anchor points around which the enactment of a collective subjectivity (or its imagination) becomes possible.

Central to Honig's account is the relation between the thingliness of public things and the bodies that move across/within/through/on them. The politics of public things emerges, for her, in the intertwining of these two, of the ways in which things modulate and condition forms of bodily comportment and formation, and the corporeal practices by which public things are built, sustained, repaired, and rebuilt. On the one hand, then, the politics of public things arises from how such things are "a kind of democratic holding environment, a laboratory for citizenship"

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[137] Speaking of the chawl as a public thing raises the immediate concern of its publicness since, at one level, it is neither publicly owned, nor (for most of Bombay's chawls) is it the object of public oversight. Yet, even if largely built by private land-owners, it is possible to suggest that the chawl is nonetheless built *as* a public amenity –a response to a demand for public housing, social housing. And in a similar vein, it *is* subject to public oversight – both through government regulations and controls, and through the tenants as an assembled public. While these lines of argument are important, my concern is not so much the public-ness of the chawl as what follows from postulating a similarity between the chawl and Honig's public things. Chawls may perhaps not be straightforwardly public in the way some of the spaces Honig discusses are, but my wager here is that the ways in which the chawl is an intertwining of a holding environment and practices of care, makes it akin to public things in the Honigean sense – enough that this dialogue can be engaged in, noting how each speaks to and displaces the other.

(Honig 2017, 54). Public things are holding environments in the sense of being sites that engender a certain affective attachment or commitment. That is, public things are not only sites that bring people together physically but commit them – or commit to contesting – a collective imaginary of what it means to be a collective materially *and* symbolically. A holding environment, then, is as much the site of a direct meeting as it is the site on which and around which the figuration, or gesturing of a collective subject first becomes possible, in which the collective affective investment needed for such an imaginary is held. And public things can do this precisely because they are those stable moorings to which are tied the more ephemeral enactments of our bodies, and to which are attached the remembrances of those performances. Discussing Kiess' reading of Arendt's example of the table as thing, Honig notes how the table holds by folding within it that which is more transient – the food, the meals which families have together every day sitting around it, the laughter and tears, but equally the jokes and pranks criss-crossing the table. The table's capacity to hold is tied to its "capacity to bring us together…to the fact that it holds the food we have eaten, are eating, will eat. All of this helps the table be what it is – a dining table, a family table, a homework table, a meeting table…" (Honig 2017, 52). Holding environments, in this light, are sites of durability; repositories of the forms of life that they both occasion and are the site of.

But, on the other hand, public things do not become holding environments by themselves, nor do they remain so. The capacity of things to hold is dependent on the willingness and inclination to care for them; to maintain and repair them. Dependent, that is, on a certain attachment to them that comes from the bodies that use, occupy, and traverse them. Thingliness and its potency as a site constitutive of a certain imaginary of a collective subject, for Honig, rests on the practices of care by which these things are constantly "remade, reinterpreted, reset…in its use and reuse, in its remakings." (Honig 2017, 53). Taking the example of the table, its holding is only possible if the table as a thing and object is cared for, the wood is maintained and repaired – if the family chooses to sit around it and share a meal. Indeed, the same is true of the other examples of public things Honig draws our attention to. Public phones are only public things insofar as they are maintained, funding for them secured, and the lines kept open. Care, attention, and attachment are a necessary supplement to public things, giving to them the capacity to become holding environments.

Along the corridors and stairwells and courtyards of the chawl, in their cramped confines, the chawl becomes such a holding environment, bringing people to a direct meeting, brushing shoulders while walking past each other in the corridor. From first light to dusk and even after, the chawl as built form puts people into conversation and contact. Restless waiting in the long

queues for the water taps and toilets every morning leads to friendly banter, catching up on the news, or discussing the events of the previous night (perhaps someone played music too loud, or another was seen coming home late from the local pub). Conversations that enable building and sustaining lasting friendships and networks of solidarity.

It pushes people into proximity, making possible all these forms of interface, precisely by way of its thingliness. The corridors, courtyards, stairwells, and toilet blocks condition and modulate these very practices and the forms that their performances take. The bricks and mortar of the chawl generating indents in the forms of sociality performed there, just as these performances transform the chawl one dent, chip, or scratch – one wooden banister, smooth like glass from all the hands sliding along its grain, one brick and plaster wall with a set of cricket wickets roughly etched into it – at a time. In a city caught in a fundamental reconfiguration, in the shadow of a withdrawing state, the chawl is a point of stability, anchoring human activity and experience. And in this holding, it brings together. Our identity came from our chawl, *dadi* said at multiple points in our conversation, you knew people because of the chawl they lived in.[138] In this city where they were out of place, the chawl generated a sense of shared belonging, a feeling of being in place because this is where one's family, friends, and relatives were; where one's parents had lived, and their parents, and theirs. But, as with Honig's examples, the capacity of the chawl to be such a holding environment is conditioned by the practices of care and attention that it is the site for (that it enables and is enabled by). Chawl life, as I show in the preceding section, is constituted by practices of care and sociality that require constant negotiation and compromise, attention, and cultivation. Idle gossip or casual chats over cups of tea are never just that, they are practices by which bonds of communal solidarity are built and reinforced (Finkelstein 2019, 108). The fraught negotiations over how much furniture one is allowed to place in 'their part' of the corridor, or how many mattresses one can lay out there for guests, or how long one takes to fill water at the communal taps enable in a certain sense the navigation of the cramped spaces of the chawl. These are practices that are constitutive of the care and sociality that makes the chawl a holding environment. Drawing out these resonances between Honig's discussion of public things and the chawl allows us to mark, I suggest, how things – places – become sites for the imagination and practice of novel forms of collective subjectivity by bringing together and by building and sustaining relations of care, attachment and agonistic solidarity to that togetherness. For Honig, this becomes the basis to think a

[138] *Dadi*, interview with author, Mumbai, 19 January 2024.

radical politics of public things, and in reading the chawl as such a public thing it becomes possible to mark its own radical political gesture.

But this is a gesture that, even as it is illuminated by Honig's account of public things, intervenes in and augments that account. Because, as I discuss above, the chawl is not simply opposed to the city and its proprietary order.[139] It is a refusal of such orderliness in terms of an unhappy accommodation within it. A refusal to capitulate, to fall into line and forget, to just pack up and leave. Or to collapse into the new beautified order of the city. The chawl refuses to be drawn into that game, refuses to become entangled in that system of circulation between order and chaos, between beauty and messiness. In its refusal to circulate as part of that operation, in its standing still in the middle of the city (like the workers at New Great), between metropolitan core to the south and suburban fringe to the north, the chawl is not an alternative to, a mirror image, or opposite to the proprietary order of the city. It moves along its own tangent, inflecting and augmenting that order with its own rhythm. One by which chawl life places itself in suspension. In a suspension that is the suspension of the very terms of the discussion (Moten 2018). Somewhere in between.

There is a sense in which, then, the chawl is incomplete. Not incomplete in the sense of being unfinished, or partial or premature. But an incompleteness in the sense of being always underway, always in the process of negotiation and settlement and reconfiguration (Harney and

[139] Of course, Honig is careful in her account of public things to not transform them into sites that are too smooth and homogenous. Public things are not simply those sites that make possible the articulation an endlessly accommodating and plural wholeness. Every public thing underwrites a form of life, and every collective it constitutes, or becomes the condition for, excludes and privileges (Honig 2017, 24). The publicness of public things, in this sense, is perpetually in question, constantly open to contestation. Indeed, this is precisely why Honig locates public things at that intersection between a holding environment and practices of care, because nothing is guaranteed, because the magic of public things does not by itself smooth over social divisions but demands care and work. Note here the ways in which this Honigean account resonates with the chawls and the complexity of chawl life, against and in response to those anthropological studies that smooth over such complexity and identify chawl life with the institution of a fluid and totally porous communality.
My aim, then, is not only to locate a gap in Honig's account. Instead, it is to amplify what is already implicit. When Honig notes how public things are constitutive of a demo that is always open to contestation, what she is simultaneously noting is precisely the necessary impropriety of public things, the necessarily improper collectives that they become the sites for. Because the point is not the whole that public things generate or make possible, but the wholeness which any such whole leaves out. It is in this operation by which public things open static imaginaries of wholeness and ossified figurations of the demos to contestation and challenge that their impropriety can be recognised. In providing the basis "around which to organise, contest, mobilise, defend, or reimagine" (Honig 2017, 24), public things becomes the labs where radical visions of collective subjectivity can emerge – in the surround of the proper subject and proprietary order. In making explicit what is latent there, by way of putting Honig's work into dialogue with the chawl, I aim to draw out more clearly what is at stake in both the politics of the chawl and a politics of public things. To note how a certain displacement of her work introduces to it a crucial supplement that draws it out along a different, still complementary vector.

Moten 2022). On one day, it is alright if someone locks their bike right by one's front door. On another, a few weeks later, it is completely unacceptable. Bits of furniture encroaching on the corridor can be the source of fierce arguments or can become the basis on which two households get drawn close to each other, opening their doors and their space to each other. In its incompleteness, this relative stability that is constitutive of chawl life, the chawl becomes the site for a kind of generosity that is as much about care as about an elemental generativity. The complex incompleteness of chawl life is in this interlacing of generosity and generativity; the creation, figuration, and enactment of forms of living and being together built, repaired, and sustained in and through relations of care and sociality (what Moten calls generosity). The chawl is incomplete not in pointing towards a ceaseless plurality, but in pointing towards a practice that is never completed. There is no definite process of which these practices of care are a part, no ultimate community or universality that is their goal. Only the perpetual possibility of being put into question. An incompleteness that is generative of the chawl's impropriety, its refusal and rejection of the choice it is offered and into which it is sought to be retrofit. And it is in this incompleteness – this complexity that leads it to always remain open to negotiation – that the radical politics of the chawl on its own tangent is situated.

What the chawls introduce is the necessary impropriety of public things – not only that they are not, but that public things in any sense cannot be imbricated within proprietary orders and their exclusionary and privative logics. If public things are constitutive of subjectivity insofar as they become sites for the emergence of a collective subject suffused with relations of care and sociality, then these sites must be necessarily improper. The politics of public things proceeds from rendering improper, which is to say, to make a site or an object out of place, to transform it from its embedded situation into a site that resists and refuses. The point is to return to that intertwining of a place and form of life that is central to my discussion here. Indeed, Honig's work already notes this possibility of transformation, that things can become and be transformed into public things; everyday, mundane objects, forgotten and disused are reconfigured into sites for radical reimaginations of a collective subject. This is central to her argument. What Honig's account glosses over, however, is how in this transformation something of the relation between the thing and the proprietary order in which it is situated is fundamentally altered. That in imagining a novel collective subject or enabling practices of imagination by which such a subject can take shape, the public thing must interrupt the privative and exclusionary schema of propriety as a spatial and subjective configuration. It is only in its refusal of propriety that it becomes possible for the public thing to become the site or object of a collectivity. In this sense, and the chawl makes this clearer of Honig's whole argument, public things demand impropriety. These things aren't just there – but in their being

there, are an interruption of proprietary order and its proper subject. The political valence of public things, in other words, as the chawls and chawl life show us, is precisely in their impropriety – or, at the very least, is inconceivable without their impropriety. The care and sociality performed in the chawl, which are so central to Honig's account of public things, are performances that interrupt and dismantle the infrastructures of the city's privation and exclusion.[140]

The chawl is a site for the emergence of such an incomplete, improper collective. See, that is, the ways in which the chawl becomes a site for resisting and refusing the city's proprietary order, borne of and rooted in a generative generosity that is nothing other than the sociality and care that emerges in response to such order and its striations of urban life. During the textile workers' strikes of 1982, Shetty tells me, the chawls were crucial sites for the sustenance and repair of solidarity. Marches, demonstrations, and speeches carried on outside the chawl, but these depended on practices of care and solidarity inside the chawl. Practices that kept spirits up, kept hope alive, and sustained a vision of community, of a collective constituted there in the chawl. As the strikes drew on, with mill-owners and municipal authorities trying to wait out the workers' resolve, savings dried up, and these practices became crucial to survival. Shetty notes an example of a resident in one of the chawls he often visited. Having worked his whole life in the mills, this resident had lost his job when the mills shut shop in response to the strikes of 1982, and with later changes to employment laws, had also lost his guarantees of a pension and social security. Out of work and out of place, he spent his days reclined on the bed in his chawl home, reading the news, listening to the radio, gazing out of the tiny window into the corridor. An active member of the strikes, he now sat silenced, Shetty tells me. Immobilised by a city that had rendered him out of joint, that had allocated to him the place of no place. Yet, Shetty also tells me how the chawl was a place that sustained and cared for these people out of place (Shetty and Gandhi 2023). Throughout the day, he would receive a steady inflow of visitors asking after his health, bringing him a meal or a snack, listening once more to his stories of the mills, discussing the news and latest political controversies, and sharing the latest happenings of the chawl. Some stayed for a cup of tea, others were more fleeting visitors. But they all stopped by.

[140] Honig might suggest that this question of property and propriety does not really apply to her discussion of public things. Public things are, by definition, public. But this is precisely the central political problematic at the heart of her work. That public things are no longer public, that they are owned, and privatised and become exclusionary. This is a part of Brown's critique she doesn't pay enough attention to. To insist on the impropriety of public things in this context, then, is not to state what is already obvious, but to reinforce an elemental political claim, to make it clear and explicit.

The question is not only of this one resident or of an isolated example; it is of the collective, of a 'we' that the chawl was the site for and that it energised. Underneath the collective of the workers' marches was the 'we' of the chawl that made it possible. The complexity of chawl life and its performances of sociality become, in this sense, the site for articulations and enactments of novel political projects and forms of organisation. The *Girni Kamgar Sangharsh Samiti* (GKSS; Mill Workers' Action Committee) is one example. Faced with the rapid closures of textile mills across the city, with the withdrawal of social security and welfare entitlements, the privatisation and commodification of public infrastructures, and aggressive redevelopment laws threatening the chawls where mill-workers lived, the GKSS took to resist the activities of builders, mill-owners, local authorities and the municipal corporation (Menon 2012). Caught between precarious work and precarious living, the GKSS articulates an imaginary of solidarity that extends beyond the mill compound, a vision of a collective anchored to and embedded in the chawl. Unruly visions that the workers at New Great can say something more about. Returning to them and their activities as they enter the mill buildings gestures towards those unruly and improper performances of care, towards that sociality that is not claiming in the name of any fullness, or any whole, but in the name of that which is left out. The whole that is outside and underneath any claim to wholeness; the machines and their caretakers. 'So, you insist on breaking the locks?', a police inspector asks the workers assembled at the gates of the mill. 'No, we are not breaking in, we only want to go in to clean the machines, to care for them.', they respond. Once inside, they sweep and dust, they set up tents to cook for everyone, and lay out mattresses to rest on. Workers' unions from other mills bring lentils and rice and oil – and they are all welcome to stay in the New Great compound for as long as they want. For the urban planners and authorities in charge of Bombay's beautification, these out-of-place workers are a nuisance, dangerous squatters that need to be evicted. But this group of workers not only resists the city's order in demanding the reopening of New Great, but also refuses the logic of its proper subject in the care they perform, the sociality instanced in the mill compound. In their unwillingness to move – to stand still, refusing that system of circulation into which the city attempts to embed them. Refusing even its rejection by way of a counter-movement; choosing instead, in staying still, something else entirely. What is set into motion is a practice that imagines and enacts a radical vision of subjectivity – one suffused with care, that is never fully formed, never fully stable and coherent, but that is always open to contestation and negotiation, that is always open to another augment. An improper sociality and an impropriety in sociality where the passer-by on the street can join in the dance, grooving to the rhythm as the New Great textile mill is finally reopened. A rhythm negotiated, navigated, and nurtured in the chawl.

Conclusion

In her fascinating study of the chawls of Bombay, Maura Finkelstein asks, “what does it mean to be active in a site of inert erasure?...what is happening at the lively ruin? At that place that is at once dead, deserted, yet bears the markers of vitality and liveliness?” (Finkelstein 2019). Her work was fresh in my memory when my mother suggested I visit the Kalyan Moti chawl in Bombay. It was where my *nani* had lived, and the chawl was one of the biggest in its neighbourhood. The next day, I made my way through overflowing traffic on the narrow roads of Bhuleshwar towards Kalyan Moti chawl. Soon, I was in the large courtyard of the chawl, standing in the shade of one of the many *peepal* and mango trees. There, I met one of *nani’s* distant relatives, and she led me through the corridors of the chawl, patiently answering my questions. As we walked through the chawl and then sat in one corner of the courtyard sipping tea, I found it difficult to reconcile the staticity and inertia that Finkelstein writes about with what I saw around me. This is not just liveliness and action laid over a site that is dead and deserted. The chawl is active, lively. Not in some quaint nostalgic sense, but in a here-and-now way, it is not just a ruin, nor is it simply a remnant of a different era, these are sites where a certain resistance to and refusal of the city’s proprietary order has been and is still underway, every day. It is a liveliness and action that is both breathing life into and drawing breath from this place that – however forgotten and hidden beneath fly-overs it may be – is nonetheless here, in all its impropriety and unruliness. Refusing erasure; refusing inscription into a narrative or story of its own erasure. Finkelstein is right to point out the generative and critical import of the chawl as exemplary of a certain refusal of the city’s order (Finkelstein 2019). But where, for her, such exemplarity derives precisely from the fact that the chawl is lost, the discussion above suggests that the question is really of the generativity (the generative generosity) of that which is still here, all around – in the surround. It is a question of listening to such generosity, to its generative force, and to the political operation it sets under way.

In returning, throughout this discussion, to that moment of complexity that is constitutive of chawl life, the aim has been to tune in to this generative generosity, to the practices of care in and through which it is performed at precisely those points where the city forgets and leaves to ruin. Focusing on this complexity of chawl life allows for marking the multiple ways in which the chawl resists proprietary order and its proper subject. The chawls do not recede into or get co-opted into the proprietary order of the city. They stand in a specific relation to such propriety – one that refuses the terms it is offered. In this refusal, in its various performances from the everyday practices of care that build and sustain chawl communities, to the workers cleaning their machines at New Great, the discussion above also points to the ways in which the chawl

speaks back to a theoretical apparatus with which it is put into dialogue. Tuning in to this refusal of the city's order allows us to register the unruly augment the chawl introduces to that which has been introduced to it. Even as the chawls can be read as public things, they point out the ways in which public thingliness demands – or necessitates – a certain impropriety.

As much as the chawl resists the city and its propriety, the discussion above has also drawn attention to the ways in which the chawl resists capture by imaginaries of rural communality and its forms of life transposed to the city where today it is nothing but ruin. To these narrative arcs into which the chawl is sought to be situated – to all those interpellations of the chawl into a narrative of progress or ruin in which the specificity of chawl life, its practices of care and sociality are not given primacy – the discussion above points out how the chawl interjects by introducing an interruption, an indent, an intonation or inflection. This is important to the story about the chawls, to the ways in which they have been read, and are being read. My argument is that the chawls are not ruins – neither dead nor deserted – but are vital and vibrant sites; they are the 'labs for citizenship' Honig talks about, in which the orderly subject of the city, an orderly vision of urban space and urban life, of the city as a collective, as a whole, is (being) problematised. The chawl refuses the city along a trajectory unbound to the compact offered by the city, unbound to that binary of order and chaos, beauty and messiness; along a path that leads it somewhere else, on to something else altogether. Such is the radical political gesture constituted in the chawls and chawl life: the democratising possibility that is internal to the chawl as the site for the imagination and enactment of new forms of being, saying and doing together, rooted in care, sociality, and solidarity.

The projects of urban beautification do not stop with Sukhtankhar. In the decades since then, the operationalisation of a neoliberal urban reconfiguration has continued unabated. Carrying different names – the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM), the Slum-Free Cities Project, the Slum Rehabilitation Scheme, and amendments to the Urban Land (Ceiling and Regulation) Act – these are projects that nonetheless seek out the reinforcement and expansion of beautification's proprietary order. The demolitions and evictions accompanying these processes also continue apace. And alongside the privatisation of land, ever larger parts of Bombay's public infrastructures are privatised or dismantled, curtailing access to the city and constraining the possibilities of living in it for its poor. Yet, the chawls are still here – refusing collapse, refusing eviction. They continue to respond to the city's propriety, to the increasing violence of its orderliness, to its attempts to forget by building overpasses and underfunding public services, with a sociality that is all improper, gestures of a collective underneath, beyond and all around the orderly wholeness of the city's proper subject.

Chapter 5 Lessons of an unruly genre

I want to begin this conclusion by drawing attention to two poems from the period of India's postcolonial transition. The first, Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali*, written in 1910, voices a utopian vision of the postcolony as it emerges from within the terrain of anticolonial struggle. Neither Gandhian nor Ambedkarite, these are visions of enlightenment and prosperity that find their echo in imaginaries of development and progress sedimented in the postcolony's developmental state. The second, Sahir Ludhianvi's *Jinhe Naaz Hai Hind Par*, written in the late 1950s (originally for the film *Pyaasa*) problematises these official imaginaries. Working from the margins of postcolonial order – the orderliness Gitanjali envisions – Ludhianvi draws attention to those marginal places and marginal people left by the wayside in the march to postcolonial development. In moving from the one to the other, in the contrasts and tensions between them, I want to stage what I have suggested is at work throughout this thesis.

Gitanjali, the stanza that I am particularly interested in, speaks of India's freedom and of the form that such freedom will take. The poem is aspirational, evincing an imaginary of the postcolony as a land of reason, industry, and prosperity. Where the brutality and darkness of colonial domination are replaced by the blinding light of modernity, the heaven Tagore has in mind,

> Where the mind is without fear
>
> And the head is held high;
>
> Where knowledge is free;
>
> Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow walls;
>
> Where words come out from the depth of truth;
>
> Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;
>
> Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;
>
> Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action-

Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.[141] (Tagore 2024 [1910])

Writing from the postcolony, Ludhianvi's poem is more ponderous, more anguished. The postcolony, much less than a land of reason and prosperity, is fractured, trundling. The violence of colonial domination and its destitution of human life is not transcended but only substituted by the brutalisation of life in the postcolony, the failure of its promise – the promise of those who led the postcolonial transition. Ludhianvi writes,

By-lanes heaving with centuries of despair

Half-blossomed buds crushed in this throng

This empty trade of hollow festivities

Where are they who pride themselves on this India?

[...]

Bring round the guides leading this country

Show them these homes, these streets, these miseries

Bring round those defenders of India's pride

Where are they now? (Ludhianvi 2011 [1957])

I want to draw attention to what is taking place in the shift from Tagore to Ludhianvi, what these shifts point toward in the imaginaries of postcolonial India, and what is revealed, or brought to light to us, as readers, when we undertake this traverse. What is at work, in other words, in the shifts made here from an imaginary of the postcolony as fullness and unity, as the finding of utterance – the very utterance Nehru announces at midnight in August 1947 – to an imaginary where it is constitutively divided, partitioned. From, that is, this place where the world has not been broken up into fragments, to the site of that separation between the defenders of India's pride and those in its streets of despair. From Tagore's 'my country' to Ludhianvi's 'they who pride themselves on this India'. And in the same way, what is taking place in this shift from minds that are without fear, heads that are held high, the striving for perfection, and streams of

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[141] For both Tagore and Ludhianvi, I only present the English translations of their respective works. The translation of Gitanjali is Tagore's own, first published as *Song Offerings* in 1912. Ludhianvi's translation is mine.

reason, to the crushed, half-blossomed buds lying by the wayside. From the rousing dream of postcolonial progress and utopia to the wary angst of not knowing what it means anymore.

What is at stake in these shifts, for us as readers I suggest, is a certain aspect-change. Between Tagore and Ludhianvi our attention is drawn to how imaginaries of postcolonial India shift as new features and new dimensions come to light. Underneath seeming universality and fullness, we come to realise the partitions that cut through the postcolony. Our focus is shifted from the happy romanticism of Tagore to these divisions in which some speak of pride, some stay silent, and yet others ask after those gone missing. The aim of this thesis, in one respect, has been to provoke such an aspect-change, to show that underneath and in the surround of postcolonial order – of the orderly visions of the postcolonial subject, visions of development, fullness, progress and modernity – is a partitioning of modes of action and response, speech and enunciation, appearance and manifestation. Postcolonial order distributes subjective capacities arrogating to some – these guides leading the country – the capacity to think, to know, and to act; to have their words come out from the depths of truth, and have their arms strive towards perfection. By drawing attention to what is in the surround of such order, in the place of no place, and to the utterances that take place in the vernaculars emerging from these surrounds, this thesis has attempted to stage those moments where postcolonial order is refused and resisted by the restive and recalcitrant impropriety of unruly bodies. And in such staging, in the genre of unruliness it has attempted to thus evince, and the aspect-change engendered by such a genre, this thesis has aimed to teach us something of radical democratic politics and radical democratic subjectivity.

I do not mean teaching in terms of explanation or revelation. This thesis has not aimed to explain how unruly practice, despite appearances as it were, is in fact a form of radical democratic politics. Even less has it intended to provide any instruction on how unruliness as a form of radical democratic politics can be operationalised. Such an explicative approach would amount to returning the gesture marked by this thesis to the very hierarchies it seeks to step away from. As I pointed out in the introduction, a key commitment of this thesis is to not have a theoretical apparatus speak for and on behalf of, to not have it explicate, unruly practice. Instead, throughout, my attempt has been to proceed from that point where the very distinction between thinking and doing, between those who know and those who simply do, is evaporated. To explicate, as Rancière points out, is to stultify (Rancière 1991). To constrain and inhibit the rhythms and relief of unruly practice as it is captured and ordered by modes of interpretation and forms of knowledge external to it. The lessons of an unruly genre refuse precisely this explicative task.

Instead, its point of departure is the presupposition that everyone already knows; the presupposition of Jacotot's universal teaching (Rancière 1991). The presupposition that shifts the practice of teaching – of what these shifts from Tagore to Ludhianvi can teach us, of what this unruly genre teaches us – from one that reveals something unknown, something hidden and impenetrable that demands the unique expertise of the teacher to, as Cavell points out, "something in principle familiar to us" (Cavell 2012, 208). We always-already knew, on some register, of the streets heavy with angst and despair on the banks of the clear streams of reason. We always-already knew that the Dalit man scribbling on tiny scraps of paper sitting in his taxi late into the night, that the old woman sipping chai with her friends in the chawl corridor, that the village meeting deep in the Narmada valley were never just that. The pedagogical task of a genre of unruliness, in this light, is not to clarify or bring something to light but to compel us to approach what we already know differently. To make us see unruly practice differently; rearranging what is given, by recomposing and reconfiguring its elements (Cavell 2012). And in such rearrangements to draw our attention to what is taking place there in the surround, to the cadence of its vernacular. For it is this work of paying attention – *you must pay attention!* – that is so central to Jacotot, too (Rancière 1991). Pay attention, or have it drawn, to the ways in which such a genre recomposes itself to introduce changes in our modes of perception and interpretation. To the ways in which its exemplary members compel us to look at them and others, to understand them all, in a different way. That is to say, elicit a certain aspect-change. The pedagogical work here is not one of imparting and acquiring new knowledge and information, but of a transformation in the processes and forms by which knowledge is acquired, enquiring after what such knowing and thinking can be.

In *Senses of Walden*, Cavell underscores the transformation that is the object of this pedagogical work, suggesting that the education of the grownup "requires strangeness and transformation" (Cavell 1992, 60). But in noting the import of strangeness, of an estrangement, Cavell here is also saying something of the nature of the rearrangements by which genre elicits aspect-change. Even as it takes what is given, what is already known, available to everyone and anyone, the work of rearrangement is not to fit the parts into a new whole, template, type or design that is known beforehand. It works to compose anew, in some new arrangement, placing together those things that don't belong – or are said to not belong – together, drawing attention to the conversations between its members that are thus made possible. In this respect, it stages a scene in which "the speaker and those that hear [them] are invited to share – as a spectacle, a feeling, a phrasing, a mode of intelligibility." (Rancière 2009, 117). But these are sites and forms of sharing that cannot be known and identified before the encounter is staged. There are no prior justifications, in this light, for the right recompositions, the most appropriate forms of

rearrangement. Only the vindication of those that engender some aspect-change. No way, that is, for the instrumental use of such rearrangements to correspond to the expression, representation, or illumination of a particular set of features. Or no way, more accurately, for such instrumental use that does not at once return the work of such a genre to the explicative operation, to matching and repeating of criteria and features that are known (by some) beforehand. In this sense, the success or failure of a genre to carry out its pedagogical task cannot be apprehended from the extent to which it conforms to a template or vision or given imaginary. Its 'metric' is only in the provocation made in its presentation, in the scene it sets up, in what it draws our attention to, and in the recompositions it performs of what is given.

Throughout the discussion in this thesis, these are the provocations it has attempted to produce. In its evocation of a genre of unruliness it has aimed to show how the question of postcolonial order is taken up across multiple sites in the life of the postcolony. Rearranging these sites and the performances taking place there, this unruly genre has worked to provoke a transformation in how unruly refusals of postcolonial orderliness are seen and heard. Transformations that have drawn attention to the radical imaginaries of democratic subjectification performed in these refusals; to the improper vernacular of these practices that does not remain in the surround from which it emerges but performs a disruption and distention – an interjection and interruption – of the orderliness that assigns to it the place of no place. As I suggest above, the scribblings of the Dalit man in his taxi, his stories walking through the squalor of the Matunga labour camp where death is becoming cheap are not words simply written as responses to the strictures of Indian literature and its propriety. Nor are they only impassioned words ready to be used by a political project that is external to them. The singing and dancing of village meetings in the Narmada valley are not only practices that keep up spirits and energise resistance to the dam, not only an entertaining end to a conversation about submergence. Chatting and socialising in the corridors of the chawl is not only the sharing of gossip and building of friendships in the voids of neoliberal deprivation. They are all, in the scenes staged through this thesis, performances of an improper and democratising subjectivising gesture; reimagining what it means to live in the postcolony, in the distribution of parts and places instituted by postcolonial order, in the interest of a sociality that is in its surround. Across differences in time and place, in the modes of postcolonial practices of policing and control, in the forms of speech and action that resist such order, in the vernaculars through which such refusals are enunciated, the unruly genre this thesis works through teaches us to see the articulation of a singular gesture as it problematises postcolonial order and its proper subject.

And in this gesture to teach us to see how it energises contemporary political practice in postcolonial India. As I write this, bulldozers are razing the homes of Muslims, Dalits, and Indigenous peoples across the country to the shrill and perversely cheery notes of '*Bulldozer Baba Aaya!*' ('The Bulldozer Man is here!'). Activists, authors, and artists are locked up in prisons without trial and without bail. Journalists and news organisations are subjected to arbitrary raids from police and tax authorities. Some of them are assassinated. Political opponents are jailed on trumped up corruption charges, and those responsible for the most brutal forms of sectarian and sexual violence – lynchings, rape, and hate crimes – are garlanded by government officials and ministers as they are released from prison for 'good conduct'. By their own admission, the Hindu-nationalist project, with Modi at its helm, operationalises these practices of control and violence to institute and reinforce a new vision of the proper subject of postcolonial India. Throughout the past decade, they have held up the 'past 70 years' as a euphemism for continuing oppression that mirrors colonial rule. Time and time again, we hear Modi's acolytes – on the evening TV news cycle, on social media, in the newspapers – proclaim that freedom, true freedom, only came to India in 2014. Everything before that was only colonial rule in another form. Yet, in the genre this thesis traces, and in the practices of control and orderliness that it responds to, what we come to see is that this Hindu-nationalist project, whatever its dubious anticolonial claims, relies on and operationalises itself through the very machinations of postcolonial order discussed here, and that it decries as colonial continuity. The generous use of colonial-era sedition laws to arrest and imprison without trial or bail political dissidents, artists, and activists across the country is only one striking example. The performances through which the evocation of an unruly genre has taken place here do not respond to Modi or his Hindu-nationalist program. At least, not directly. Yet, insofar as Modi's Hindu-nationalism draws on an imaginary of order rooted in India's postcolonial transition, an order that is precisely what is problematised by the unruly performances of a democratic surround, the exemplary gestures through which such order is resisted teach us something of the persistent possibility of another way, another world.

In suggesting the contemporary relevance – or, put differently, the political urgency – of the exemplary practices of unruliness that compose this thesis, my aim has not been to present them as authoritative or conclusive scenographies of unruly performance. These are some sites, some rearrangements; there are also others. The wager has been that the performances staged here exemplify a democratising gesture that draws us to approach them, and with them every other instance, every other practice claiming membership of this unruly genre, in a different way. To discover in the rhythms of Dalit rap in the slums of Mumbai (as it is recorded and shared on Spotify and YouTube) the same gesture of unruliness that worked its way through

Dhasal and Bagul's art of writing. To see in the indigenous peoples' struggles in Hasdeo Arand (and elsewhere, too), in the placing of stone pillars signifying belonging to their land, the very performances of unruly sociality that emerged in the Narmada Valley. To locate in the blockade of the national capital by tractors, harvesters, and millions of farmers setting up their kitchens, bedrooms, living spaces, and cinema screens under makeshift tents on the motorway, the practice of a care and sociality that emerges in the chawls of Bombay.

In drawing attention to the exemplary moments pursued through this thesis the aim has thus been to see and to hear not only their refusals and rejections of postcolonial order, but how their refusals teach us to see other similar refusals. The lessons of an unruly genre have been to learn something of this way of looking and listening to what is on the lower frequencies. A method or path along which the partitions that stultify are erased just as the boundaries of unruly practice and unruly thought are blurred. To partake in such a genre is to partake in a practice of reading, a strange reading, estranged reading that from its estrangement makes possible some transformation in our approach to unruly practice. To come to see something that is taking place, always taking place, in all those practices exploring, exploiting and augmenting the features of this unruly genre. In every other performance as it claims to speak in this unruly vernacular against those visions that continue to see in unruly performance the mischief of those that do not belong threatening postcolonial order.

Appendix A Matters of Taste: *Rasa* and the Dalit Body

Rasa, the central category of classical Indian aesthetics is a slippery and intractable term. Even in its earliest formulation, in the *Natyasastra* of Bharata, *Rasa* is described only by analogies, hints and suggestions. Yet, it is the centrepiece of Indian aesthetics, its experience orienting every activity of artistic production, and aesthetic receptivity (Chakrabarti 2016, 3). At its broadest, *Rasa* can be understood as a unique emotion or sentiment evoked through the art-work that constitutes its essence. But, such a description fails to fully account for its experience. In his treatise on drama, Bharata says,

> "The [*Rasa*] is produced from a combination of Determinant, Consequent, and Transitory States. Is there any instance parallel to it? Yes, it is said that, as taste (*Rasa*) results from a combination of various spices, vegetables and other articles, and as six tastes are produced by articles such as raw sugar, or spices, or vegetables, so the [Determinant] States, when they come together with various other States attain the quality of the [*Rasa*]. Now one enquires, what is the meaning of the word *Rasa*? It is said in reply to this that *Rasa* is so called because it is capable of being tasted. How is *Rasa* tasted? In reply it is said that just as well-disposed persons while eating food cooked with many kinds of spices enjoy its tastes and attain pleasure and satisfaction, so the cultured people taste the Dominant States while they see them [by an expression of the various States]" (Bharata 1959, 105, VI.31)

What is immediately apparent here is that *Rasa* is not a straightforward property of the art-work that can be appropriately described and delineated. Instead, it is that which is produced in the aesthetic encounter by the combination of aesthetic and emotive elements embodied in the work. Their combination results in *Rasa*, without *Rasa* itself ever being objectified, or represented in the work. It can only be felt and experienced by implication or suggestion – that which is foundational yet absent, which grounds the entire work, yet is never explicit. So, *Rasa* is a particular kind of sentiment or emotion, but one that cannot be directly expressed or written in the work for it is not ordinary emotions that *Rasa* expresses, but their essence. What is experienced is not a particular emotion or emotive response – fear, for instance – but the essence of fear as such. And this introduces a phenomenological divergence between ordinary, everyday experiences and emotions, and those of *Rasa*. Where the former are blind (in the sense of non-contemplative), impulsive and embodied, the emotional essence in *Rasa* is

experienced in a mode such that "it has none of its usual conative tendencies and is experienced in an impersonal, contemplative mood." (Chaudhury 1965, 145). The theory of *Rasa* draws a sharp divide between the domain of everyday emotive experience, which is erratic, chaotic, and discordant, and the domain of serene (*visranti*) aesthetic experience. Indeed, in the experience of *Rasa*, ordinary day-to-day emotions are elevated and transformed into a transcendent essence and experienced as such (Chakrabarti 2016, 6). In other words, *Rasa* is a unique and exceptional form of experience – *alaukika* – not reducible to the everyday and, indeed, constitutively demanding an elevation above the mundane in order to be sensed (Mukherjee 1965, 92).

Two things enable this transcendentalisation that is constitutive of *Rasa*. One, the precise organisation and objectification of emotions and emotional states in the art-work. The three states that produce *Rasa*, in Bharata's view, represent three distinct forms of emotional expression. The Determinate states or *Sthayi-bhavas*, define the fundamental emotion or mood and feeling of the art-work (Higgins 2007, 45; Cooper 2013, 338; Mukherjee 1965, 93). It is these basic or foundational emotions that are transformed in the aesthetic encounter into *Rasa*. Within the art-work, the Determinate states are complemented by and expressed through the Consequent states, *anubhavas* (Higgins 2007, 45). These include both secondary emotional states that reinforce the foundational mood of the work, as well as gestures and other means of expression used by the artist or performer to express the latter. Lastly, Bharata identifies the Transient states, or *vyabhicarin*, which are ephemeral and fleeting emotions, often responses to particular and immediate stimuli, that while not essential to the work, contribute to the expression of the basic emotion (Higgins 2007, 45; Pandey 1965, 65). Assembled in precise constellations – provided for by Bharata and later Abhinavagupta in elaborate charts - these States generate the conditions for an experience of *Rasa* which at once is excessive to them all.

Two, that by moving beyond the work, beyond being objectified in the work, *Rasa*-experience traverses the three moments of aesthetic production and enjoyment – the artist, the work and the viewer. A traverse across "the seed-experience in the poet, through its objectification in the body of a poem, to the consummation in the reader's enjoyment" (Thampi 1965, 76). It is an experience that encapsulates all three into a single moment, a singular feeling. The artist producing a work objectifies within it, its basic emotion which is experienced by the viewer, before they encounter a transformative moment of elevation where all three nodes collapse into a singular transcendental plane or field in which *Rasa* is experienced. There is a certain alchemical element here – perfectly measured and controlled, generating a sudden and unexpected transformation. A breakthrough or some sort of opening through which the viewer

(and artist) are elevated onto an altogether different register of experience. The stable emotion of the work, the basic emotional substance experienced in it is transformed all of a sudden, from a particular expression into an essential one. This alchemical moment is central to the theory of *Rasa*, where the *Sthayi-bhavas* in their performance are heightened to a point where they transform from emotions to transcendental experiential states. *Camatkara* – wonder, magic – comes to form the essence of *Rasa*. An experience of bliss and joy (as their essence) at the encounter with this transcendental plane.

The image of *Camatkara* as the essence of *Rasa*-experience also reveals how, *Rasa* not only entails a transcendentalising experience, but indeed, demands it. The subject must 'set-aside' day-to-day, routine feelings, emotions and experiences in order to 'open' themselves to the experience of *Rasa*. Such an aesthetic 'repose' is constitutively depersonalised, as Abhinavagupta suggests. The aesthetic subject escapes itself, elevates itself beyond the embodied register of the mundane, and "through the mysterious mechanism of universalisation, a cognitive state distinct from [everyday] experience or memory or appearance, *Rasa* quickens, spreads, and overflows like a liquid" (Chakrabarti 2016, 10). Such universalisation is essential to *Rasa*, for it is what constitutes both its exceptionality as a register of experience, and the possibility of an experience that is wondrous (*adbhut*). An experience of wonder that is not specific to a given work, production or encounter, but is universal in precisely the sense that it is "the transpersonal experience potentially accessible to all mankind" (Thampi 1965, 78). The embodied subject – what Bharata and Abhinavagupta call the ego, the subject embedded and imbricated in day-to-day existence and its reproduction – is shed and a transcendent, disembodied, universal subjectivity is instituted in its place: the disinterested, depersonalised halo that is the aesthetic subject of *Rasa*.

But what this also means is that the viewing subject is as central to the experience of *Rasa* as the work and the stable emotions it expresses. *Rasa* demands – constitutively and structurally – the well-disposed individual capable of such experience. It is not only the work, or the act of artistic production, but equally the capacities, dispositions and qualities of the viewing subject that define the possibilities of its experience. Not everyone is capable of *Rasa*-experience; only those predisposed to it can enter into that blissful state, and this is a subject disposed towards *Rasa*-experience in a very particular sense – a very precise shape of the subject. Bharata, in his foundational text, identifies the qualities of the optimal aesthetic subject (*rasika*),

> "Those who are possessed of [good] character, high birth, quiet behaviour and learning, are desirous of fame and virtue, impartial, advanced in age, proficient in drama in all its six limbs, alert, honest, unaffected by passion, expert in playing the four

> kinds of musical instruments…are very virtuous, experts in different arts and crafts, and have fine sense of the [*Rasas*] and the States…" (Bharata 1959, 519, XXVII.49)

A comprehensive image of the aesthetic subject – the *rasika* – emerges from here. The subject capable of *Rasa*-experience must be moulded and formed in a particular way, through regular training and the cultivation of artistic sensibilities, techniques, and forms. But note also the other set of qualities enumerated in that short passage: good character, high birth, virtue, unaffected by passion, having a fine sense of the *Rasas*. What is striking here is the centrality of qualities and dispositions that the *rasika* cannot cultivate but is born with. They are innate and instinctual (Thampi 1965, 76; Mukherjee 1965, 92). Their sharpness, and refinement can be honed, improved and enhanced by practice and training, but their existence in the first place – which allows the subject to 'have'/hold/(*bhava*) aesthetic experience – is secured *a priori*. Indeed, the existence of these innate capacities is the condition of possibility of appropriate cultivation of aesthetic capacities, so that neither subsists without the other; innate capacities that determine the possibility of aesthetic cultivation, which in turn strengthen and reinforce precisely those capacities. The disembodiment constitutive of *Rasa*-experience draws simultaneously on practices of training and preparing the self for such experience, and on the disposition and capacity of the subject that makes possible such experience in the first place. *Rasa*-experience presupposes therefore, not only a capacity to escape from the body, to elevate oneself above it, but also that any such capacity is coded in the subject through inherited, innate and instinctual dispositions or modes of action and response.

The shape/contour of the *rasika* that slowly begins to rear its head here, is then created in the interstices of this double movement; elevation and birth. Or, what is the same, (the possibilities of) disembodiment, and caste. The instinct and intuition of the *rasika*, its natal and originary character is tied fundamentally to birth, lineage and inheritance – that is, to caste. For those not twice-born, not *Dwija* – for those, that is, that are not of the upper castes (not *Sa-varna*, having or possessing a caste), this instinctual quality is absent. To be *Dwija* (twice-born) is crucial here, because it is a term that carries within it the disjunction or splitting of the self between a visceral and spiritual birth. A physical, corporeal self (what Bharata and Abhinavagupta call the ego), and a spiritual self that is transcendent to this corporeal fetter. The structure of *Rasa*-experience is then already immanent in this order of birth, in the distribution of corporeal and spiritual births. Those who are not twice-born do not fit within the structure of *Rasa*-experience, their corporeality is too overwhelming, their bodies too present. Their birth forecloses any aesthetic capacity; training achieves nothing, for the essential kernel of aesthetic subjectivity is unavailable. The Dalit 'subject', the *a-varna* (without and outside caste), possessing only one

birth – a physical one – has none of the 'spiritual' instincts and innate capacities that enable *Rasa*-experience. The absence of a 'spiritual birth' – a second birth – precludes the possibility of *Samskara* – of an aesthetic culture, or cultivation – readily available to those who are twice-born. In other words, birth – its singularly physical, visceral, embodied character – prohibits the possibility of *Rasa*-experience for the Dalit 'subject'.

The point is deeper than simply an axiomatic exclusion of the Dalit that draws back to the verses of Bharata. What is denied to the Dalit body is precisely the capacity of disembodiment and escape. Being twice-born constitutively enables a way out of the body, a way above it, beyond it – to leave it behind, ignore it, forget it. These *rasikas* are split, a divergence or gap is internal to them, and it is this expanding chasm that enables the experience of *Rasa*. What is truly internal to the *rasika*, then, is not some innate faculty or capacity (or at the very least, not that alone), but this split between corporeality and a transcendental escape from it. , For those whose bodies define and delineate their being, demarcate being as such, for whom the body becomes the limit of possibility, there is no escape. Dalit existence within orders of caste is circumscribed by the untouchable body. Its pollution and its marks define boundaries, of villages, streets, houses, wells, establishing always a regime that polices not just spaces but the conduct of bodies, their movements, gestures, habits and stylisations within the spaces that they generate.

Within the orders of *Rasa*, the Dalit body is incapable of universalisation, unable to elevate itself from its 'baser desires', to "free [itself] from being a slave to emotions which are generally chaotic, blind and powerful." (Thampi 1965, 77). This untouchable body – this Dalit body – is too closely tied to its viscerality. Too deeply embedded in its flesh, and too much a slave to its desires, worries and disturbances. It is incapable of sufficiently stepping outside the chaos and blindness of everyday emotions – hunger, pain, carnal pleasure – in order to experience *Rasa*. Slowly but surely, a particular order of the aesthetic subject is taking shape here. Transcendentalised and disembodied on the one hand, and equally, embedded by/in caste on the other. In this pincer movement, the Dalit body is not only invisibilised and muted, but becomes the detritus, that (animal) otherness that is not sufficiently human for aesthetic experience. A register of artistic judgement and experience is transformed into an anthropology of the human, a regime of the human and the animal, an order of subjectivity. The *rasika* is given a certain form, a shape, a birth and status; boundaries and limits are established, frontiers and barriers erected. A whole distribution of the capacities for aesthetic enjoyment, and consequently for subjectivity is carried out. Including the delimitation of the empty place, the place of the Dalit, whose only part is that of no part. An aesthetic regime of *Rasa*.

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