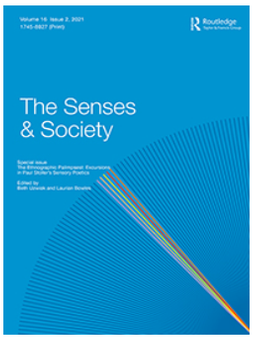

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The violence of odors: sensory politics of caste in a leather tannery

Shivani Kapoor

Centre for Writing Studies, O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat, India

ABSTRACT

Leather is a sensuous object marked by complex affects of desire and disgust. In India, this disgust is amplified due to the association of leather with caste. This paper examines the leather tannery as a space produced through the sensuous discourse of caste violence, which functions by marking leatherworking bodies with odors, that in turn perpetuate affectual and material possibilities of humiliation and discrimination. This violence of odors has no place in the deodorized discourse of law and yet in the sensuous ordering of caste there is nothing more repulsive than to carry the stench of tannery on oneself. The paper examines this intangible and sensual character of caste violence by closely following Paul Stoller's methodological argument that sensuousness forms the field on which phenomena play out and through which they can be understood. Keeping in mind the value-laden and subjective nature of sensuousness, the paper also reflects on the ways in which the sensory politics of caste frames the interactions between the field and the body of the researcher – both of which are determined by the norms of caste. The ethnographic descriptions of caste and violence in the tannery on which this paper is based are thus mediated by multiple sensorial perceptions, including those of the researcher.

KEYWORDS

Caste; senses; odors; sensory ethnography; leather

Sensorial ordering: bodies, spaces, objects

Odors are ephemeral, intangible and almost always difficult to describe and record. Yet, odors are also strongly indicative of the materiality from which they arise, and even more telling of the values and connotations which even their transient traces carry. It is perhaps this subversive capacity of odors to sneak and reveal which makes them an intensely political phenomenon. In 2015, wanting to understand the politics of odors and caste in the leather industry in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, I conducted several detailed interviews with the management and the workers of leather tanneries situated in the cities of Kanpur and Unnao, about their experiences of working with leather.

It was during one such visit to the Baig International Tannery in the industrial area of Unnao that a chance conversation with Chandar, a tannery worker, brought to fore the simultaneous ephemeral and material nature of odors.[1] Just as Ashok, the tannery manager with whom I was looking around the premises, got called away on an errand, I encountered a group of workers who were coming off their shift. As I approached them,

CONTACT Shivani Kapoor skapoor@jgu.edu.in

I realized that they were headed toward a series of narrow outhouses constructed along the boundary wall of the tannery slightly away from the main building. Taking advantage of Ashok's momentary absence, I tried talking to the workers about their day's work. Unable to garner an immediate response, I tried to enquire about the outhouses, which I had not seen in any other tannery. Chandar took me aside and responded enthusiastically that these were provided for workers to take a quick bath before heading home. This had, in Chandar's opinion, marginally taken care of a serious problem. Earlier, revealed Chandar, when the workers would go back home, the stray dogs would pick up the scent of hides and flesh on their bodies and chase them down the streets, thus revealing the true nature of their occupation to all those who witnessed this event in the neighborhood.

The putrid, rotting stench of hides, flesh and blood is ubiquitous in and synonymous with leather tanneries around the world. In India, however, the stench of leatherwork acquires a specific significance due to the association of leatherwork with caste pollution and which produces the permanently polluted state of the body of the leatherworker. The revelation that the odors of Chandar's body make are not simply indicative of his work in the tannery, but also signal the fact that he belongs to the "untouchable" Chamar caste[2] (comes from *"chrm"* which is the Sanskrit word for skin or leather).[3] Chamars have historically been forced to perform leatherwork under the norms of the caste system and this association also deems them to be considered as inherently impure due to permanent contact with polluted animal skin. This creates what Uri Almagor terms a "permanent context" that "identifies a certain group" with "enduring bad smell" because "smells and contexts become inseparable" (Almagor 1987, 117).

Caste, with its inherent reliance on norms of purity-pollution and occupational segregation is one of the most complex contemporary systems of graded hierarchies between labor and laborers (Ambedkar 2014, 234). According to this schema, all Hindus are divided into four broad *varnas* based on different kinds of labor – Brahmins, who produce and control knowledge; Kshatriyas, the warriors; Vaishyas, the traders; and lastly the Shudras, those who do manual labor. Every *varna* has several castes within them – subdivisions according to occupation, lineage, and habitus. In addition to these four groups there are the *atishudra* (the "untouchables"), who are considered to be outside the *varna* system but contribute to it by providing crucial labor. Thus, "unclean" occupations, which involve contact with human and other bodies and their secretions, as well as earth or soil, refuse of any sort, and especially with death, are thought to be the exclusive preserve of the *atishudras*.

In the relatively anonymous act of cycling back home through a crowded city street, where the possibility of someone calling out one's caste status is slim, the odors of the tannery which stick to Chandar's body, and which are announced to the public via a lingering miasma, do much more than reveal him as a tannery worker. Odors, in fact, categorize him, stripping Chandar of his anonymity and marking him with the indelible mark of caste. The fear of smelling bad is the fear of being called out as "polluted" and is also the fear of being humiliated. In his exploration of humiliation in the context of caste, Guru (2009, 212) argues that the "cultural construction of the human body into 'mobile dirt' is treated by the upper-castes as a source that creates a deep sense of nausea within the latter. This repulsive sense gets communicated to the 'object' of the nausea through deploying a sign language." It is this dialectical characteristic of caste and of humiliation that produces a systemic form of violence especially in contexts such as the tannery which

are predicated on the logic of caste. Caste is primarily experienced through a sensorial ordering of our perceptions and experiences of bodies, objects, and spaces according to the norms of purity and the threat of pollution. And like any other form of ordering, the sensorial ordering of pure and impure bodies and objects is also a deeply and structurally violent exercise. Article 17 of the Indian Constitution legally abolished untouchability as a practice in 1950. Untouchability is the practice of physical and social ostracization and discrimination by the upper-castes toward those considered to be the lowest in the caste system. The Untouchability (Offenses) Act, 1955, provides for penalties and punishments for those practicing specific social, economic, and religious actions amounting to untouchability. In 1989, The Scheduled Castes and The Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act was promulgated to prevent crimes of discrimination and violence against members of the scheduled castes and tribes.[4] Thus, while caste continues to be prevalent as a social category in everyday life, only the practice of untouchability was legally criminalized. The enforcement of anti-untouchability laws has faced serious issues in reporting, investigation, and subsequent implementation of penalties.

The conversation with Chandar came to an abrupt pause with this narrative. Apart from the shock which this utterance invoked, in myself and the other workers standing nearby, Chandar's story also squarely redirected the gaze onto the researcher, as someone akin to the witnesses who could detect Chandar's caste through the odors of leather. My social location as an "upper-caste", female body which could smell, and thus categorize the exclusively male tannery spaces and bodies, further complicated this conversational context. Speaking about the performativity of the ways in which the researcher represents herself in the field, Marsha Giselle Henry, makes an important argument about the unavailability of an "'authentic' position from which to speak and to represent oneself", while at the same time, recognizing that "hybridity is performative in that I often choose to occupy this nether space, and that my class privilege offers me shelter and safety from violent challenges" (Henry 2003, 233). This argument resonates closely with the experience I had as a researcher who could simultaneously occupy several concrete identities or choose to remain vague. The presence of caste complicates this position where my family name, residential location, language, and educational qualifications, can all be suggestive of my caste status. Yet, as Henry suggests, my caste and class position protects me from many forms of violence, and thus, it is always easier for me to foreground my identities than it is for some of my respondents. There was also a complex interplay between all my other identities and my gender position, especially given the largely masculine nature of formal leatherwork in northern India.[5] However, it was not as if the field did not try to discern my olfactory status.

During fieldwork, many respondents seemed to articulate the same concern – "Will you, an 'upper-caste', female body, be able to navigate the foul tannery space?" They often suggested that I either do my interviews by telephone or send a male relative or colleague with the questionnaire. These attempts designed to avoid a sensorial contact between the researcher and the field, I soon realized, were situated in the perceived inability of the "female, upper-caste" body to handle the sensuousness of this field.

Taking cue from Paul Stoller's methodological suggestion for "writing sensuously" by following Edmund Husserl's provocation to attend to and describe the "things themselves" rather than how they should be or must be experienced (Stoller 1997, xii), this paper examines the sensorial and experiential implications of working with the odorous

object of leather and explores the relationship between caste status, occupations, and olfactory politics. The paper argues that in spaces such as tanneries, the violence of caste takes on an olfactory expression which is produced by an intermeshing of objects, bodies, knowledges, and sensorial experiences. I suggest that studying the sensory politics of the tannery is an important factor in shifting the nature of the conversation about this violence from a primarily visual register to one which animates this "cultural anesthesia" (Feldman 1994, 405). Allan Feldman argues that cultural anesthesia is "the banishment of disconcerting, discordant, and anarchic sensory presences and agents that undermine the normalizing, and often silent premise of everyday life" (Feldman 1994, 405). An understanding of the odors of a tannery, I argue, brings to the fore the "disconcerting sensory presences" of caste and can produce a fuller and more complex understanding of caste violence.

Paul Stoller in his invocation of the scholar's body located in the ethnographic field argues that this body "wants to breathe in the pungent odors of social life … and bring scholarship back to the 'things themselves'" (Stoller 1997, xii). However, in a social life which is overdetermined by caste, to breathe in odors means more than producing "sensuous scholarship". By smelling the odors of the tannery, literally and conceptually, my body, produced as it is through caste, becomes part of the field that it is attempting to understand. The insertion of the scholar's body into the sensorium of the tannery through the act of smelling and being smelt provides crucial evidence for understanding the relationship between odors and own and others' caste status. It raises the question that: What is the difference between smelling hides and smelling of hides? In the context where both the field and the researcher are simultaneously part of the same ordering logic of caste, Stoller's provocative suggestion for producing "sensuous scholarship" acquires a different significance. This point is crucial not just to understand the workings of a tannery but also to open up the debates regarding caste and untouchability in general.

Odors and our capacity to sense through smell are physical, bodily phenomena but these phenomena are also laden with cultural meanings and symbols of power (Howes 2003, xi). Odors, whether real or perceived, are revelatory of internal physiological and external moral states since they function as an "internal-external" phenomenon (McHugh 2012, 3). Odors, by being spread and smelt by "others" produce knowledge about bodies, spaces, and objects by mapping a social and political classification onto physical states. It is thus that Alain Corbin argues that the "[a]bhorrence of smells produces its own form of social power. Foul smelling rubbish appears to threaten the social order, whereas the reassuring victory of the hygienic and the fragrant promises to buttress its stability" (Corbin 1986, 5). This esthetic judgment of odors is intimately related to caste, race, gender, and class positions. This is evident from the fact that the perfumed subaltern body is equally suspect. The use of perfumes is seen as an effort to mask or hide the bad odors emanating from the body. Thus, if the body did not stink, it would not require a perfume (Largey and Watson 1972, 1028).

In a further move, Constance Classen, Howes, and Synnott (1994) have argued that in modernity, individuals have increasingly deodorized their bodies and spaces to make this sensory anesthesia appear as the norm. The animal-like senses of smell and taste, deemed to be "closer to madness and savagery" have fallen through the cracks of this modernity and been "silenced" (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 1994, 3–4). In modern India, however,

those who smell, or are forced to occupy odoriferous contexts, such as the tannery workers are not simply "silenced" but instead marked as the outliers to the upper-caste sensorium. The act of smelling, in the context of caste, represents a double bind. It is through smelling that caste is, at first, constituted inside the tannery, and it is through smelling again that the transcoding of caste can be revealed. Gopal Guru argues that in order to understand caste, one needs to conduct an "archaeology" of untouchability – that is, one needs to excavate the layers in which untouchability functions within caste (Guru and Sarrukai 2012, 203). Taking a cue from Guru, I argue that within the realms of leatherwork, this archeology of untouchability can be performed through the act of smelling. It is here that we return to the scholar's body – the sentient, sensuous body which will smell, and be smelt to uncover caste. Thus, I argue that there is no "nether space" (Henry 2003, 233) or an Archimedean point from which sensory ethnography can be practiced. This brings us back to David Howes' (Howes n.d.) argument that the social and the sensible cannot be regarded as separate and in fact "the perceptual is cultural and political, and not simply … cognitive" (Bull et al. 2006, 5).

The sense of the tannery

The leather tanning industry in northern India is largely comprised of tanning units in Kanpur and the neighboring district of Unnao. Once a major center for textile production, Kanpur is now a declining industrial city sustained mainly by the small and medium tanneries, located in Jajmau on the banks of the river Ganga, which cater to the domestic leather market. The larger export-oriented tanneries have been relocated to the industrial area in Unnao or, to the Banthar Leather Park situated on the Kanpur-Unnao highway. From the outside, the tanneries look like any other industrial structure with slanting roofs, exhaust pipes jutting out from the top and with an air of purpose and discipline. Inside the gates, however, as several respondents noted, the air hangs heavy with the bitter odors of burnt skin mixed with the pungent odors of chemicals which clings resolutely to their bodies and clothes, traveling back and forth with them.

Along with leather, these odors circulate through a large part of Kanpur. The city's prominent leather goods market in Meston Road has shops filled to the brim with leather products. While the heavy smell of finished leather overpowers one's sensorium here, many shopkeepers and customers noted that this odor is nowhere near as unbearable as that of the leather tanneries in the other part of the city. Perpendicular to Meston Road lies the long stretch of Nai Sadak, the city's slaughtering hub and local meat market. It is difficult to discern the odors of raw flesh or rotting carcasses here, given the busy intermixing of the odors of spices, medicines, books, and other commodities being traded on the roadside. One can, however, catch the whiff of *kebabs*, mutton and chicken curries and hot *naans* coming from roadside eateries, especially as dusk begins to fall. The sensorium of the Nai Sadak stretch is a marked shift from the relatively inodorate middle-class habitus of Meston Road. Although these roads intersect, people and goods rarely do. As someone who was crossing over this unmarked boundary quite regularly, I began to be noticed, especially by the shopkeepers located on the edges of the two roads. Some upper-caste shopkeepers located on Meston Road advised me to avoid crossing over to "the other side". They informed me, with discernable disgust, that many butcher shops have now been removed or moved to the back alleys. However, not so long ago, one

could see rivulets of blood flow from these shops onto the main road when animals were slaughtered.[6] It is important to note the difference that the shopkeepers are enforcing between the sensorium of the butcher shops and tanneries on the one hand, and their own shops on the other, which sell a processed by-product of the slaughtering industry, leather.

Hides and skins are regularly collected from the butchers by tannery agents and are transported to Jajmau. In contrast to these markets, tanneries are often closed, guarded spaces. A sense of intense competition in a small industry compounded by recent political tensions concerning slaughtering and consumption of meat have come together to ensure a level of secrecy in the industry. Most tannery owners and a large proportion of workers in Kanpur and Unnao are Muslims. Their religious identity and their occupation put them at odds with the central and state governments currently run by the same Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party. Many of these spaces became accessible to me through a middle-aged man, Rakesh, who identifies as a Dalit (ex-untouchables) and was once the owner of a small tannery in Kanpur. Falling upon hard times, he now works as an agent to organize contractual labor for tanneries. Rakesh introduced me to Abdul, a Muslim man, who is an experienced tannery worker, popularly referred to as *"ustaad"* (master) in Jajmau. Unlike Chandar, Abdul has a permanent position as a technician in the dry section of a medium-sized tannery in Jajmau. In spite of not being formally educated, Abdul has acquired a mix of scientific, practical, and colloquial knowledge about tanning which complemented what I had experienced and observed during my fieldwork.

In tanneries, hides often arrive after having been salted to prevent rotting. Leather production consists of three stages inside the tannery. The first two stages occur in the "wet-section" of the tannery; "wet" because of the abundant presence of water, blood, fat, flesh and hair in these processes. This section almost exclusively employs workers from lower-caste Hindu and Muslim communities.[7] The beamhouse operations begin with "knifing", or removal of excess flesh and fat from hides with large hand-held flat knives. Next, hides are de-salted by washing them repeatedly in water, followed by "liming" (addition of sodium sulfide and lime to the hides to dissolve the hair and loosen organic matter like fat). Then, hides are de-limed by processing them in a bath of ammonium salt and proteolytic enzymes. In the second stage, called tanning, hides are treated with hexavalent chromium or Chrome-6 which converts them into wet-blue leather. The third stage happens in the "dry-section" where "finishing" neutralizes the pH balance of wet-blue and the hides are dyed to give leather its characteristic brown appearance. In the dry-section, I found some workers who come from various caste and community contexts; the majority of them being still from the lower-castes.

The floor in the wet section is often hidden under layers of salt-covered hooves and horns discarded from the hides, especially in smaller tanneries where hides are both stored and cleaned at the same place. The continuous flow of water mixed with fat and blood makes the floor slippery. Due to sweat, the salt sticks to the bodies of the workers almost permanently. Workers double up over the heavy hide, scrapping off the excess fat with knives, washing away the salt, and then stand in pits filled with water and chemicals to tan the hides. In large tanneries, these pits are replaced by huge rotating drums, but the workers still manually handle these heavy hides. The smell of blood and flesh dominates

this section with an overlay of the stench of rot. The smell of chemicals, especially ammonia, sometimes intersperses these organic odors but never quite becomes overwhelming.

Once the hides are converted into "wet-blue" by being "cooked" during tanning, they are no longer considered to be organic in nature, and thus they cannot rot anymore. The elimination of rotting is also then supposed to eliminate some of the caste pollution caused by animal bodies. Large stacks of "wet-blue" – sheets of pale blue colored, almost odorless material marks the beginning of the dry section. Here, we also begin to see machines – like the roller press, paint sprays, hot press, and cutters. Organic odors are fewer here and mix with those of paint, varnish, and polish. There is also the familiar smell of finished leather as we move toward the end of the production process.

The sensorial and physical separation of the two sections and their workers makes sensible the stench of caste in the tannery. Abdul was insistent that I record the fact that he has never worked in the wet sections, though he knows enough to supervise its operations at times. It is interesting to note that Abdul's claim of distancing himself from the wet-section workers mirrors the distancing done by upper-caste shopkeepers on Meston Road, although Abdul himself, being a Muslim tannery worker, continues to be an outlier for the upper-caste Hindu publics.

In a later conversation, when I asked Chandar about his experience of working in these pits, he showed me the sores and the peeled skin of his legs which were caused by years of contact with lime. "Every evening, I rub a little oil on my legs and hands. It provides a little relief, but then the next day I have to go down the same pit," he explained. It is the forced availability of an already-always "polluted" workforce, that has allowed the industry to not invest in mechanizing the wet section (Bhattacharya 2018, 338). In large tanneries, most workers are on short-term contracts ranging from a few weeks to a few months. In smaller tanneries, most of the workforce is employed on a day-to-day basis depending on the amount of work available. The managers or owners who double-up as managers in smaller tanneries are usually permanent employees. At the beginning of each workday, the tannery manager assigns workers to the sections and to processes within each section. Most managers I spoke to confirmed that unskilled or semi-skilled workers, like Chandar, especially for the wet sections are hired through caste-based kinship networks of the existing workforce. It is thus widely assumed in the industry that one already knows and is capable of "handling" this malodorous work by being born in leatherworking caste. Further, in the daily work allocation, wet and dry section workers are never interchanged, a fact that Abdul reiterated. One owner reported that when they tried shifting workers from the dry to the wet section, there was strong opposition from the workers.[8] When I explored further, he claimed that he did not think of this as a caste-related issue but simply that the dry section workers opposed the move because they were not used to doing the "dirty" work of the wet section.

The separation between the wet and the dry; the organic matter and the wet-blue; the odor of flesh and that of paint; and between the workers of the two sections, are euphemisms to talk about the presence of caste inside the tannery. M.S.S. Pandian argues that "transcoding caste and caste-relations into something else" is often used as a strategic device by the upper-castes, thus "acknowledging and disavowing caste at once" (Pandian 2002, 1735). It is this act of transcoding of caste which needs to be read into labor recruitment from "kinship networks"; classification of work as "dirty" and into the spatial divisions in the tannery. It is also this coding that reveals to us the ways in

which a shared understanding of the meanings of odors produce structures of humiliation and discrimination within the tannery.

The sensorial politics of caste

Valmiki (2009, 13), an acclaimed Dalit author, writing about his childhood says,

> … if I wore clean clothes to the school, my classmates would taunt me for dressing up. However, if I wore dirty, old clothes they would taunt me for being born of an untouchable and thus smelling bad. (translated from Hindi by author)

Valmiki's experience illustrates how, to the upper-caste person, smelling bad is considered to be a permanent state for the "untouchable" body irrespective of its physical condition. Chandar's invocation of bathing as a "marginal solution" of the problem of tannery odors is indicative of this permanence. While bathing may take care of the immediate physical odors of leather, the upper-caste perception that Chandar always smells foul remains. After the initial meeting with Chandar in the tannery, Rakesh incidentally took me to Chandar's home in Ambedkar Nagar near Jajmau. Chandar had just come back from his shift and was about to prepare his evening tea as we entered the house. Recognizing me from the earlier conversation, Chandar lost no time in picking up the threads. Offering Rakesh and me some tea and some chairs to sit on, Chandar pointed to his house. "See, how clean I keep this place. You will not smell anything. I bet my *maalik* (tannery owner) does not think I am so clean just because I work in those filthy conditions all day. My body always smells bad to them," he argued forcefully.

It is here that the full import of the violence of caste can be understood as a totalizing system which functions like an omnipresent atmosphere. It is not only difficult to disentangle one's self from this omnipresent system of caste; it is also difficult to have an alternate imagination to it in my field. I borrow the concept of "atmosphere" from the legal scholar Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalpoulos, who argues that law and sensory perception both work as an atmosphere – "there but not there, imperceptible yet all-determining" (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2013, 36). Following this, I propose that caste functions in the same way. Much like an atmosphere, caste seeps into every aspect of social life within the tanning industry. It is so intrinsic to the ordering of life that it is largely unacknowledged unless it breaks down or is challenged. Material odors and their social manifestations are important signifiers for ordering and controlling this atmosphere. The "untouchable" body threatens to break down this closely guarded system by contaminating the upper-caste bodies and spaces within the tannery and beyond.

Caste and its attendant practice of untouchability is thus a far more complex discourse than a simple denial of touch or contact as the term "untouchable" is commonly taken to imply. In some South Asian traditions, smell is considered to be a contact sense since they are detected through close contact with other people and objects (McHugh 2012, 6). Odors further require the intermediate medium of wind to be carried and wind is closely associated with the sense of touch (McHugh 2012, 6). One could then argue that for upper-caste persons, smelling rotting hides or the bodies of tannery workers means touching the "untouchable" and thus "polluting" one's own caste body. This is similar to Almagor's contention that in the Dassanetch society of Southwest Ethiopia, fishermen are

considered to be inferior to the pastoralists "on the belief that their bad smell is "contagious" and can bring disaster to cattle . . . " (Almagor 1987, 110).

Sundar Sarrukai (Guru and Sarrukai 2012, 164–165), writing on the phenomenon of untouchability, has argued that one needs to differentiate between *sparsh* (touch) and *samyoga* (contact), and the latter is a much broader category than the former. While touch is material and tactile, contact could be understood as an engagement, that extends beyond the physical. Taking forward Sarrukai's contention, I argue that *asparshyata* ("untouchability"; "*sparsh*" in Sanskrit means touch) does not operate simply on the capacity of touch to pollute, but converts every other sense, even the senses of distance into a contact sense by regulating engagement. Thus, the caste system and practices of untouchability follow a complex multisensorial system where one can be "touched" through sight, smell, taste, and sound. Within the context of caste, smells and odors thus become material objects which can tangibly touch or come in contact with bodies and objects > material media.

The violence of odors

The odorous body of the leatherworker is located in a complex matrix of signification and power. It is not so much the absolute smell of this body, as the meanings assigned to this odor that determines one's position in the caste hierarchy. In Chandar's case these invisible odors are materialized in the form of dogs who give away one's occupational and caste status even without others having to sniff the body or come in contact with leather. In his study on tanneries in Japan, Hankins (2013) similarly brings out the way in which odors of leather have left their trace on localities deemed "tainted settlements," where "*burakumin*" (derogatory word for leatherworkers) once lived.

The transference of the sensorium of the tannery to the outside through odors which cling to the bodies of those who work there and its coding into the discourse of caste is a crucial part of understanding how odors produce caste. In an interesting flip, it is the worker's homes which then become a "public" space, made visible for scrutiny and for potential humiliation through the transference of odors. In the larger map of the city these spaces get marked as the odoriferous spaces where the lower-castes live and work, marking them forever with the smells of leather. Factory spaces, such as the tanneries, on the other hand, become private, cloistered compounds where one's caste status is always already evident due to the work that one performs. It is here that the industrial worker, who was supposed to give up sectarian, communal identities of caste, class and religion to become a "worker", whose identity is carved out of labor alone, becomes an "untouchable worker" through their malodors.[9] This is then the humiliating and dehumanizing violence of caste which finds its ground in practices of labor and industrial production.

The olfactory narrative of the tannery does not turn on a simple division between the malodorous workers and the deodorized or "pleasant-smelling" management, as my upper-caste respondents often described. The tannery managers, the selectors and purchasers of hides, and the owners of these tanneries, mostly come from the upper-castes amongst both Hindus and Muslims. The managers are mostly trained in technical colleges in leather engineering or leather chemistry, where they were implicitly trained to supervise or manage leatherwork, rather than actually do it. The ample supply of untouchable labor to run the tanneries means that the managers will rarely, if ever, get

into a tanning pit or handle raw hides with their bare hands. However, they do smell leather and this odor leaves its traces on their bodies, clothes and hair. When asked about their experience of working in the tanneries, upper-caste persons reported feelings of disgust and nausea similar to the response of the Dalit workers. Many of these managers, who came from the Brahmin castes, reported being ridiculed in their personal circles for "smelling bad", for doing a "dirty job", and for "causing shame to their family".

While the managers' narratives seem experientially similar to those of "untouchable" workers, the implications of an upper-caste body being perceived as being malodorous, by other upper-castes is not the same. The malodorousness of the upper-caste body is temporary, since unlike the leatherworker's body, their bodies are not perceived to be intrinsically impure. Their foul state is thus a matter of restoring hygiene. However, these accounts are extremely important because of the way in which they are indicative of the depths of the sensory violence of caste. Because the caste-based relationship between objects, occupations and bodies has been left unchallenged in the industrial discourses, the odors of leather were allowed to signify filth, disgust, and impurity. The crucial step of delinking leather production from the stigma of caste was missed, and thus leatherwork staunchly remained the arena for "untouchable" workers alone. The upper-castes, on the other hand, were allowed to continue their caste privileges by not doing leatherwork, but instead supervising it. By shifting focus to the odors of leather, one is thus able to look past this visual practice of "supervision" to examine the ways in which the odors of leather violate caste boundaries to convert all bodies inside the tannery into bodies which smell bad irrespective of their caste status.

In the course of this research, there was another body present in the tannery – that of the researcher. During many of these interviews the managers and the workers, aware of my caste status, asked how the tannery smelled to me? When I proceeded to say that it smelled bad, as it should because of the material conditions of the space, there was almost always an awkward pause. It is this pause which makes me return to the implications of what Stoller calls, "sensuous scholarship". Stoller is pulled into the sensuousness of his field on many occasions, most notably falling seriously ill when trying to learn Songhay sorcery and later being called upon to participate as one of the "Europeans" present during a Songhay spirit possession ceremony (Stoller 1997). Stoller responds to these events by accepting this embodied insertion with a sense of "humility" (137) and "a fuller sensual awareness of the smells, tastes, sounds and textures" (23) of his field. What does this mean for researchers and fields, like mine, framed through "graded hierarchies", instead of absolute "Otherness"?

The question of how the tannery smelt to me proved to be one of the most difficult epistemological and ontological challenges that the field posed. There was no way for me to answer this question solely as a researcher devoid of my caste embodiment. By smelling the field, as Stoller provocatively asks ethnographers to do, and by providing an answer, I was producing another classification, another set of meanings of the odors of the tannery mediated by my caste knowledge and sensorium. Some of these meanings I have attempted to write about here. Embodied research in this context thus meant simultaneously participating in the sensory discourses of caste while attempting to decode them.

There is no denying the fact that despite caste status, tanneries are foul smelling places. However, this observation highlights that the subjective description of odors is not the primary issue here. Nor was the question about inherent way in which certain objects and

bodies smelled. The questions we were asking each other had to do with the significance and the meanings that these odors provided from the perspective of our respective caste positions. The idea of "humility" is then replaced here with the simultaneous and graded location of the researcher, respondents, and the field in complex matrices of power and often competing identities. There is no escaping the political violence of smelling.

Conclusion

Leather is a sensuous object marked by complex affects of desire and disgust. In India, this disgust is amplified due to the association of leather with caste. This paper examines the leather tannery as a space produced through the sensuous discourse of caste violence, that functions by marking leatherworking bodies with odors, and in turn generates the material conditions for discrimination and humiliation. This violence of odors may not be included in the formal understanding of "untouchability" or "atrocities" as framed by law and yet there is nothing more repulsive than to carry the stench of tannery on oneself in the sensuous ordering of caste. I examined this intangible and sensual character of caste violence by following Stoller's methodological argument that sensuousness forms the field on which phenomena play out and through which they can be understood. However, bearing in mind, the value-laden and subjective nature of sensuousness, the paper also reflects on the ways in which the sensory politics of caste frames the interactions between the field and the body of the researcher – both of which are determined by the norms of caste. The ethnographic descriptions of caste and violence in the tannery, on which this paper is based, are thus mediated by multiple sensorial perceptions, including that of the researcher. The paper thus argues for undertaking an "archaeology" of the perception of untouchability (Guru 2009) or inquiry into the "sensory regime" (Corbin 1986) that undergirds the epiphenomenal exercise of "evoking" odors in writing. An engagement with their meanings, in fact, allows the scholar and her field to explore how odors and the act of smelling produces knowledges about bodies, objects, and spaces.

Notes

1. Names of people and places have been changed to maintain anonymity.
2. The name "Chamar" is used by some members of these castes as well as in academic literature for the traditional leatherworking castes in parts of North India. However, the word is also used in popular parlance with a derogatory connotation. Many among the Chamar castes, prefer to be called "Jatavs" – a subcaste group which has made claims to social and class mobility.
3. According to Ronki Ram another etymological root of the term "Chamar" "is derived from the Pali word, 'Cigar' (bhikku's robes)", indicating the Buddhist origins of Dalits (Ram 2012, 667).
4. Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are historically marginalized caste and tribe groups respectively who are included in the Constitution (Order), 1950. Inclusion in this list provides them with affirmative action in state sponsored programs in higher education, public jobs and welfare schemes.
5. See Bell, Caplan, and Karim (2013) for debates about the interplay between gender, power, and other identities such as race and ethnicity in the field.
6. Sharan (2014) has argued that since slaughtering has historically been categorized as a "nuisance" trade in India there have been strict controls over the visibility of not just the process of slaughter, but also that of cut meat (Sharan 2014, 89). The slaughter and

consumption of meat, especially beef, is a heavily contested religious and political issue in contemporary India.

7. Though predominantly a Hindu system of gradation, through religious conversions and sharing of social habitus caste is now a part of many other religious contexts such as Islam, Christianity, and Sikhism.
8. Field interview conducted with Asif Iqbal (name changed), owner of a large export-oriented tannery in Unnao in October 2015.
9. See the work of scholars like Chandavarkar (2002), Gooptu (2001) and Joshi (2003), who examine the worlds of industrial labor in cities like Bombay and Kanpur to argue that the post-independence fervor and faith in the capacity of the scientific-industrial regime to overcome "traditional" and "feudal" practices like caste has largely failed. The forces of caste and religion have mediated the relationship of the worker to her labor and, also with the other workers, in ways that the category of labor itself seemed to have altered.

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Notes on contributor

Shivani Kapoor is an Assistant Professor at the Centre for Writing Studies, O.P. Jindal University. She has a doctorate in Political Science from Centre for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Her work is located at the intersection of caste, sensory politics and labor and examines the relationship between caste and the senses in the leather industry in contemporary Uttar Pradesh. Her earlier work examined debates around the representations of "untouchable" selves through self-writing and its circulation of Hindi Dalit autobiographies from Uttar Pradesh.

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