



TEXTUAL LIVES OF CASTE ACROSS THE AGES

Hierarchy, Humanity and Equality in Indian History

Edited by Prathama Banerjee

BLOOMSBURY

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES IN SOUTH ASIAN HISTORY



Textual Lives of Caste Across the Ages

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES IN SOUTH ASIAN HISTORY

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Textual Lives of Caste Across the Ages

*Hierarchy, Humanity and Equality
in Indian History*

Edited by
Prathama Banerjee

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To the Dreamers of a Casteless World

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Rewriting life: Caste, body and time in Tulsi Ram's *Murdahiya*

Shivani Kapoor

In 1959, a young Tulsi Ram travelled about eleven kilometres away from his village Dharampur to a school in Babura Dhanhuvan to appear for his fifth standard examinations. Tulsi Ram's grandmother, Musadiya, had advised him to take a bath in a pond and pray to Chamriya Mai, the local deity of the untouchable Chamars, before taking the exams. On reaching the school, as Tulsi Ram walked towards the adjacent pond, his path crossed with Ramcharan Yadav, a senior student, who exclaimed, 'Nothing good will come of today, now that I have encountered this one-eyed boy!'¹ Outraged that Tulsi Ram was planning to take a dip in the pond, Yadav shouted, 'Go away from here, you Chamar, how dare you think you can use the pond meant for the upper castes?'²

Intimidated, Tulsi Ram walked away and performed the prescribed cleansing ritual at a handpump. In his autobiography, *Murdahiya*, Tulsi Ram recalls this incident as one of the most traumatic episodes of his childhood.³ But soon he also interpolates this memory with another one from two decades later. Tulsi Ram recalls having read Shudrak's *Mricchakatika*, where Shakara, a courtier, similarly encounters a Buddhist *bhikshu* returning from a bath in a pond.⁴ Shakara threatens the *bhikshu* with violence for polluting with his malodorous body and dirty robes a pond meant for domestic animals. 'Two decades later when I had fully immersed myself in Buddhist philosophy, reading this episode from *Mrichhakatika*, I felt as if I am that *bhikshu* from centuries ago,' writes Tulsi Ram.⁵ This compound memory about a complex self – non-linear, non-authorial, and 'dividual' – produced through an act of autobiographical writing is an important methodological intervention in our understanding of marginality, resistance and emancipation. Rahul Sarwate's chapter in this volume also elaborates how *Mrichhakatika* was an important text for Sharad Patil.

Dr Tulsi Ram, born on 1 July 1949 in Dharampur village in the Azamgarh District of Uttar Pradesh spent his early years pursuing school education first in the village and later in Azamgarh. In 1966, he moved to the Banaras Hindu University (BHU) for higher education. While he had experienced caste discrimination and violence in Dharampur, it was in BHU that he began to understand the complexity of caste and the resistance to it, in a more systematic manner. Tulsi Ram completed his doctoral studies in international relations at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and subsequently

taught there. At the time of his death, he was a professor of international studies at JNU. His area of expertise was the politics of the former USSR, contemporary Russia and the Trans-Caucasian region. His time in BHU and JNU introduced Tulsi Ram to several political ideologies, which he deftly held together. His association with the communist movement, a deep and intimate relationship with Buddhism as potentially an anti-caste world view, and a rootedness in everyday politics on the ground fundamentally shaped his life, and he allows these influences to speak through his writing, as is partly apparent from the opening anecdote.

The first of his two-part autobiography, *Murdahiya*, literally meaning a burial ground, was published as a book in 2010. This autobiography spans his life in Dharampur and ends with him leaving for Azamgarh. *Murdahiya* was initially published as a seven-part series in the Hindi magazine, *Tadbhav*, in 2007. *Manikarnika* (a famous burning *ghat* in Banaras), which followed in 2014, covered Tulsi Ram's life in Calcutta (now Kolkata) and BHU. A third and final part of the autobiography about his life in JNU and Delhi was never published due to Tulsi Ram's untimely demise in 2015. The incomplete narrative arch framed by two volumes on life named after death – one called a graveyard, the other a cremation space – and a profound complication of what it means to write one's own life gives us a methodological vantage on what it means to write caste, humiliation and emancipation through life forms as complex as these phenomena themselves. Death and transience also form the central problematic of precolonial caste criticism in Prathama Banerjee's essay in this volume.

In writing this complex self as an autobiography, but in challenging some of the most central tenets of the genre, Tulsi Ram produces not just an anti-caste text but also an anti-caste self in a textual form. By eschewing the simple act of recounting life, as autobiographies tend to do, Tulsi Ram allows space for rewriting his life as a life which challenges caste textually, even in the moments when his actual life could not or was not allowed to. This movement which *Murdahiya* makes from retelling to rewriting is the focus of this chapter. In rewriting, Tulsi Ram becomes the *bhikshu*. Separated by time, contexts and bodily confinement, it is through writing that Tulsi Ram embodies the *bhikshu's* world, that he invites the *bhikshu* into a moment in his life in Babura Dhanhuvan, opening the possibility of challenging Yadav's violence.

Writing is and has always been a political act. Writing which speaks to power through sites of marginality is even more overtly political in its effects and affects. Control over knowledge has been one of the fundamental ways in which the caste system has exercised its power. Writing, not just as a mode of expression, but also as a claim over knowledge, has thus been an important aspect of resistance to and emancipation from caste. Autobiographical writing by Dalits in the form of autobiographies, fiction and essays has produced a significant challenge to caste hegemony. By laying bare details of what it means to live under caste norms, Dalit writers have forced a conversation on caste and its attendant violence. Dalit autobiographical writing, with the 'I' at its centre, provides a powerful voice bearing testimony,⁶ functioning as a collective narrative of a community⁷ and producing resistance and counter-narratives to brahmanical caste discourse.⁸

This chapter argues that within this larger repertoire of writing, Tulsi Ram's autobiographies stand out for the ways in which they rewrite questions of body, time

and memory in order to not just disrupt the autobiographical genre but also disrupt caste itself. Tulsi Ram disrupts the two central autobiographical assumptions – of an individual author with a defined sense of body and self; and of a fixed, linear, biographical sense of narrative time. By thus redefining the self, he challenges the ascriptive and hegemonic power of caste to define his embodied subjectivity and his world. The following sections examine how autobiographical narratives deal with questions body, time and memory, followed by a discussion of how Dalit writing in general and Tulsi Ram's texts in particular mould these questions in order to be able to confront caste.

Body and time in writing life

Writing life is generally understood as an umbrella term for writings of diverse kinds which have a singular 'life' as its subject. As Udaya Kumar perceptively reminds us, life writing as a form predates as well as exceeds both the desire to publish such records for public consumption and the specific genre of the autobiography.⁹ The published autobiography, meant to be read by anonymous readers, is thus a specific form of life writing which arose only recently in South Asia. In Europe, the autobiographical genre emerged along with the influence of enlightenment philosophy which emphasized the autonomous and agentic individual.¹⁰ The autobiographical format in this context also derived significantly from the Christian religious ideals of confession, internal dialogue, conscience and accountability.¹¹ While writing about life has had a deep history in the South Asian context, the autobiography, in particular, emerges around the nineteenth century. The South Asian autobiographical genre borrowed some elements of the authorial and confessional genre, but ultimately the development of the autobiographical subject in South Asia followed a more complex path.

Who could think of themselves as a writing subject, capable of, and more importantly, allowed self-representation? Caste, with its inherent control over knowledge and knowledge production, fundamentally barred lower castes, women and those outside of the caste system from access to writing, listening and speaking. Writing about one's life assumes that one has some authorship over that life. In these contexts, writing itself emerges as resistance, as a challenge to the caste order. Writing about one's life for public consumption is thus only possible as the next step. Narratives of life centred on a marginalized caste identity are thus texts of resistance. Kumar, in examining life narratives in nineteenth-century Kerala, argues that 'instead of seeing the autobiographical act as a movement from the inner domain to the outer, we may see it as located from the outset in a public, exhibitionary space'.¹² For Dalit life narratives, I argue, this movement from the inner to the outer was never an option given the prohibitions on thinking, speaking and writing for and by oneself. Dalit autobiographical narratives thus start as 'testimonios' – as public documents bearing witness to caste and its atrocities.¹³ Yet these narratives borrow elements of the confessional, the religious and the spiritual and the individual authorial self from the western autobiographical discourse. The Dalit (autobiographical) subject, as M. S. S. Pandian reminds us, is and always has been simultaneously inviting and critical of

modernity.¹⁴ In fact, as Andrew Kaplan's argument concerning the strategies employed in negotiating with the 'truth' while writing autobiographies shows, the instability of the modern subject itself has rendered some doubt over the stability of the genre.¹⁵

Following this complex relationship with modernity, these Dalit narratives also fundamentally eschew the single authorial form, at least in some part. Various scholars have shown quite effectively how the 'I' in Dalit autobiographies, is a collective 'I', which represents the experience of the community rather than of the individual.¹⁶ On the other hand, scholars such as Sara Beth have argued how, with Hindi Dalit writing, this collective 'I' still comes across as a male, middle-class individual who claims universality and uniformity of experience, yet speaks in a particular voice.¹⁷ The Dalit autobiographical form and subject is thus fraught with complexities and loose ends, as any form dealing with 'bios' should be.

The contours of the authorial body in these autobiographies needs some investigation. Given that these autobiographies do not function as an internal conversation, being public by intention, one can argue that the body of the autobiographer here is located in and reacting to the larger social context.¹⁸ This is especially true of Dalit autobiographies, which specifically respond to contexts in which the author is forcibly thrown. Yet because of the peculiarity of the genre – the single name on the cover page – the body of the autobiographer comes to stand-in for the larger social and political body. While Dalit autobiographies might represent the communal experience, the authorial body remains that of the writer. It is through the physicality, materiality and sensuousness of this body that the readers experience the rest of the world produced by the writer. If this were to happen, and this is the main argument of this chapter, then this body needs to be a complex one which is able to accommodate within itself the experiences of the communal self. Pointing out how the Dalit autobiography in Hindi has not been able to precisely do this, Sara Beth argues that this Dalit subject has led to a 'normativization' of Dalit identity through writing.¹⁹

Dalit autobiographies in Hindi emerged only around the mid-1990s. Most are written by men who are from the untouchable Chamar/Jatav and Valmiki/Bhangi castes and are of similar class positions.²⁰ Hindi Dalit autobiographical writing, such as autobiographies by Omprakash Valmiki and Surajpal Chauhan, has not experimented with the questions of who is writing and how the author's body weaves in and out of the narrative. These works remain anchored in the apparently stable body of the autobiographer. Tulsi Ram's autobiographies deviate from this trend in significant ways. He writes from and about a flawed, marked and deeply fractured physical and social body.²¹ This body, not contained in his skin, allows the narrative to be truly free of who the author is. We saw an example of this in the opening anecdote where Tulsi Ram bypasses time, body and history to make sense of caste injustice through the body of a long dead *bhikshu*. In *Murdahiya*, Tulsi Ram performs this act over and over again, as we will discuss in the next section.

The body is also the locus of memory. Since Dalit autobiographies claim to represent the community rather than the individual, autobiographical memory here is a complex configuration. Autobiographical narratives, because they inherently attempt to convince the readers of the veracity and authenticity of lives, represent a unique configuration of truth claim and memory. Memory and forgetting are both exercises in

politics and are thus 'an inescapably intersubjective' and 'collective' act.²² Recalling and reproducing these thoughts in the public sphere or choosing not to reveal them are ways in which people understand the past and make claims about their versions of the past.²³ How can autobiographical writing represent this 'collective' and the 'intersubjective', memory and forgetting, while retaining the voice of the autobiographer?

Pandian notes, how in Bama's autobiography, *Karakku*, 'Bama's own presence is merely anecdotal', while she is writing about the life and labour of others.²⁴ By stepping aside from the authorial 'I', such writing enables memory to inhabit a collective space. In Bama's case, perhaps a gendered sense of the self also contributes to such a move.²⁵ Within the texts produced by male Dalit writers in Hindi, the authorial 'I' is never really effaced or overwritten, with the exception of Tulsi Ram's autobiographies. Tulsi Ram expands what constitutes 'truth' and 'memory' and gathers a plethora of voices, human and non-human, which speak through his writing. Ghosts, animals, places, myths and literary characters all constitute the 'truth-claim' of Tulsi Ram's world. Within this writing, while the author 'Tulsi Ram' seems to recede in the background, the person 'Tulsi Ram' seems to be holding together this universe. In fact, it is his presence which makes the universe of spirits, Musadiya, vultures, Nataniya and the *murdahiya* exist.

Along with the body, the ways in which Tulsi Ram plays with time, while maintaining a certain teleology of unfolding, is a significant departure from the conventional autobiographical structure. Autobiographies have typically been structured along the trajectory of life itself – from childhood to adulthood, from home to the outside and following some sort of development of consciousness. In some senses, the autobiographical genre is framed by the assumption of mortality, which seems to structure a linear life narrative building up to death. Writing about time in autobiographical narratives, Burton Pike argues that in the post-Renaissance period, with the priority given to the uniqueness of the individual, his death also became a far more significant event than it previously was.²⁶ It is thus in the shadow of this death that the rest of life is framed in time. Dalit autobiographies in Hindi, including *Murdahiya*, have followed this teleology in writing. This also includes a transformation of the pain and humiliation of caste into an emancipatory politics, a 'concluding point at which some kind of self-understanding through reflection upon past achievement takes place'.²⁷ In the case of Dalit writing, though, 'past achievement' is often replaced by hurt and anger. And this provides the teleology its push – the movement from hurt to emancipation is what triggers the autobiographical trajectory. The linear time narrative is thus important for this movement to make sense.

There are also other notions of time in these autobiographies – the time of the nation and that of the community – especially in texts where the narrative starts during the mid-twentieth century. For many of these authors growing up in newly independent India, the notion of personal time frequently collated itself with the time of the nation. Births, deaths and graduations are often remembered through national events, something which Kumar argues is the reason that most male self-narratives in India do not 'speak of private interiorities'.²⁸ The self is often pegged to the larger collective. In terms of caste, this also means that in following the time of the nation

and of the community, the autobiographer is responding to the fact that for this nation, 'caste always belongs to someone else; it is somewhere else; it is of another time'.²⁹ By pegging one's self to this time, Dalit autobiographers make two simultaneous moves. One, they fit themselves and their politics of resistance into the caste-defined time of the nation, which, as Pandian perceptively notes, is always already obfuscating the reality of the persistence of caste. Two, they push against this distorted perception of time by marking their presence in it, by writing about and forcing readers to bear witness to their experiences of archaic forms of caste violence. In his autobiography, *Jhoothan*, Valmiki writes about coming across an incident in 1984, where a brahman schoolteacher asked his students to tear out pages mentioning Dr. B. R. Ambedkar from a textbook.³⁰ Valmiki writes that for him, this episode served as a stark reminder that he is a Dalit, and that he belongs to the Dalit movement. Eventually, Valmiki also wrote a poem, '*Vidrup Chehra*' ('Crooked Face') on this incident.³¹ Valmiki's act of writing, inserting himself into the time of the nation which is continuously consigning him as the 'other', is thus also an act of bearing witness.

While following linear narrative time, Tulsi Ram goes a step ahead and further complicates this dominant sense of time by creating obstructions to its flow. For instance, he offers a curious insight about how many Dalits tend to retire from their employment on the same dates – 1 January, 1 March, 1 July. Given the lack of literacy and thus practices of modern timekeeping amongst Dalit communities, he writes, birth dates were seldom recorded. At the time of school enrolment, the teachers would record standard dates based on the rough season when the child was supposedly born – 1 January for winters, 1 March for summers and 1 July for the rainy season.³² Record and timekeeping is still a very fluid activity in the South Asian context in general. Yet, by reading this fluidity through the lens of caste and by making us think of caste, every time we consider someone's date of birth, Tulsi Ram disrupts the dominance of calendar, chronology and time ascriptions. We will examine this moment in greater detail in the next section.

Rewriting caste, body and time in *Murdahiya*

At the very beginning of his autobiography, Tulsi Ram tells us that he was born on 1 July 1949.³³ Because of his observation about birth dates amongst Dalits, which comes a little later in the text, one is compelled to turn back and check his date of birth again. This standardized date of birth warrants a pause and a re-reading of the pages in between these moments in the text. Where else did Tulsi Ram subtly lay out the contours of how caste determined his life, but left us to decode it? Along with telling us about when he was born, Tulsi Ram also leaves us with a question: 'What would be the inheritance of a child born in the haunted habitus of Dharampur village in Azamgarh on 1 July 1949?'³⁴

The question is pertinent and carries within itself many clues to some possible answers. Eastern Uttar Pradesh, comprising districts from Varanasi to Azamgarh, was a politically and socially active region during the national movement against colonial rule. The Congress, Kisan Sabha (Peasant League) and the Socialist Party were all

influential in this region during the 1940s.³⁵ With the establishment of BHU, the region was also seeing significant political mobilization amongst the youth. Social, economic and caste power, however, still rested with the landlords. Both the colonial and the postcolonial state exercised its influence in large parts of Uttar Pradesh (erstwhile United Provinces) through the landed elite leadership.³⁶ The Zamindari Abolition program of the 1950s, largely left these landlords untouched, especially in eastern Uttar Pradesh. Lower-caste groups constituted a large part of the sharecroppers and landless labourers in the region. On the other hand, Uttar Pradesh also saw large-scale political and social mobilization based on caste.

Tulsi Ram places himself in this 'haunted' context as a child of two Dalit agricultural labourers, Tersi and Dheerja. Tersi, his father, was exceptionally skilled at catching fish and wished that his child would acquire the same skill.³⁷ Contracting smallpox at the age of three left Tulsi Ram without vision in his right eye, and with several pox marks on his face, an epithet, '*kanva*' (signifying one-eyed) and the mark of the inauspicious.³⁸ At several points in the narrative, Tulsi Ram compares himself to other 'inauspicious' characters in the village, such as 'childless Jangu Pandey, a brahman widow, owls at the pond (considered to be the sign of brahman ghosts) and a bird considered to be the announcer of death'.³⁹ His grandparents were bonded labourers in fields owned by brahman landlords. As a child, Tulsi is told that his grandfather, Jhoothan (the name means 'left-over food', also the title of Om Prakash Valmiki's autobiography), was beaten to death by a ghost while guarding crops.⁴⁰ His grandmother, Musadiya, a woman of exceptional knowledge and experience, had a formative role in Tulsi's life.⁴¹ Tersi's elder brothers had done better in life, since their sons worked in coal mines, jute mills and iron foundries in neighbouring West Bengal. One of Tulsi Ram's uncles was the head (*chaudhary*) of the Chamars of twelve neighbouring villages. Two other uncles were preceptors in the Shiv Narayan *panth* (sect), and one of these also worked in a jute mill in Calcutta.⁴² The fourth uncle, who managed the household, was a deeply religious and superstitious person.

Tulsi Ram's autobiographical body carries all these inheritances within itself, creating what Joanne Latimer (following Marilyn Strathern) has called the 'dividual': 'persons as made up of the parts of others, never to settle completely into wholes but forever in extension, partially connecting and disconnecting'.⁴³ The autobiographical Tulsi morphing as a 'dividual' thus contains within itself people, animals, spaces and events, which form a part of his narrative but also stand out as distinct voices which carry their own weight in the narrative.⁴⁴ These 'parts' are distinct from the person, 'Tulsi Ram', yet in the act of writing, Tulsi Ram is able to create an autobiographical self which presents these as a coherent and embodied whole. It is this rewriting of body and time which is quite exceptional in Hindi Dalit autobiographical writing.

In this section, we will discuss four such 'parts' in *Murdahiya*: Tulsi Ram's grandmother, Musadiya; his friend, Nataniya; *murdahiya* (the burial ground); and his relationship with Buddhism. Often these parts are inextricably interwoven with each other, and it is thus difficult to delineate them separately. Instead, in the following discussion, we will attempt to read these 'parts' of Tulsi Ram through the lens of 'rewriting' in order to understand how *Murdahiya* becomes a text against the ascriptions of caste.

As someone who constructs her world through nurturing, teaching and protecting a young Tulsi Ram, Musadiya is one of the axes of his identity in *Murdahiya*. Tulsi Ram records how as a young bride in the village, Musadiya, along with other Dalit women, had to fight dogs, vultures and jackals to procure the meat of dead cattle. While women were often tasked with collecting meat, men would skin the carcass to obtain the hide. Some of the meat would be cooked immediately, while Musadiya would dry the rest to store them for lean periods.⁴⁵ Tulsi Ram also records how his grandmother would collect horns of large animals such as bulls. Musadiya would store medicinal items such as the seeds of the Palash tree and dried intestines of the porcupine. She would also store loose change in these horns. 'Dadi was also like a *vaid* (physician),' Tulsi Ram writes.⁴⁶ But Musadiya's narrative does not end here. As with himself, Tulsi Ram also proceeds to connect his grandmother to a larger historical narrative. Years later, when Tulsi Ram read the Buddhist *Tripitaka*, he came across the fact that around 2,400 years ago, when the learned *bhikshus* were revisiting Buddha's preachings, they added ten amendments. The first of these amendments stated that while going for *bhiksha*, the monks can carry salt in an animal horn, the reason being that salt was often not a part of the ritual offering made to the *bhikshus*. Tulsi Ram writes, 'My grandmother's practice of using horns for storage, are proof, that centuries ago our family would have been pure Buddhists.'⁴⁷

Musadiya was also a chronicler of the world of spirits. Tulsi Ram calls her 'an encyclopaedia of unsolved puzzles.'⁴⁸ He writes about a cholera epidemic which affected his village sometime in the 1950s. Many people died and the village burial ground, *murdahiya*, overflowed with dead bodies. Musadiya was of the opinion that women who had died in the epidemic would turn into snakes (*naagin*) whose bite no one could survive. A young Tulsi Ram, who regularly had to cross the *murdahiya* on his way to and from school, was scared. Musadiya told him that when crossing an area of dense vegetation, he should recite '*jai ram jamedar*' to ward off the snakes. Tulsi Ram followed this ritual strictly, though no one knew its origins. However, it was only when he read the *Mahabharata* as an adult did he realize where his grandmother got this knowledge from. In the *Mahabharata*, Arjun's great-grandson, Janamejaya, conducted a snake sacrifice in order to avenge his father's death at the hand of the snake Takshak. Tulsi Ram concludes that the 'Janamejaya' of *Mahabharat* had become *jamedar* in his grandmother's compendium of textual references.

Musadiya also possesses something more material: thirty-seven *bistoriya* – one rupee silver coin with the image of Queen Victoria, thus *bistoriya*. Musadiya and her husband had collected these coins over their lifetime and now she guarded them with great care. Often, she would ask Tulsi Ram to count these coins but was unable to understand 'thirty-seven' (*saintees*) as a concept. Musadiya knew how to count from one to ten and so knew multiples of ten. Ten would be two-five, twenty would be two-ten and so on. Tulsi Ram thus learned to translate thirty-seven into 'three less than two-twenty (*do bis mein teen kam*)'.⁴⁹

In Tulsi Ram's autobiography, Musadiya, a female Dalit landless agrarian labourer, born somewhere in mid-nineteenth century in an orthodox caste society, becomes or rather is recognized as a bearer of knowledge, money, expertise and skill. Further, she is located as a participant in history, myth and literature against all caste injunctions

against the lower castes and women partaking in any of these. She can equally claim the *Tripitaka* and the *Mahabharat*. Her knowledges are not set aside as superstition or hearsay. Tulsi Ram proactively connects her to times and histories which override her caste, class and gender restrictions.

Tulsi Ram does something very similar, yet perhaps more poignant with Nataniya. Lalati, a young Nat girl who loved to dance, lived with her family in Dharampur and was called 'Nataniya' by the locals. Tulsi Ram and Nataniya form an unusual deep friendship when Nataniya asks him to teach her English. Largely unsuccessful in this enterprise, Tulsi Ram however manages to teach her one phrase, 'Vultures are sitting on *peepal* tree'.⁵⁰ For Nataniya, this phrase almost becomes an abiding thread of life. She clings to it as if life depends on this sentence, uses it in every context possible and then forgets it in a moment of deep sadness when she meets Tulsi Ram in the *murdahiya*, leaving the village permanently to go to Azamgarh. '*Pipra pe gidhwa baithal hauve*' (Vultures are sitting on *peepal* tree), she utters as Tulsi Ram is departing. Her vacant hut becomes Tulsi Ram's secret refuge, as he slowly collects his certificates, books and some food in a box left behind by her. Their friendship raises many questions in the village, and it prompted Tulsi Ram to write that Nataniya held the same place in his life, as Amrapali had held for Buddha.⁵¹

The entire narrative in the autobiography is framed by the *murdahiya*, the village burial ground. In constituting his textual life through death, Tulsi Ram does two things simultaneously. One, he constantly reminds the reader of the marginality of Dalit lives, closer to death than to life. Second, and more importantly, he transforms death from the impure, untouchable aspect of caste society into the very basis of life and labour. 'In fact, the *Murdahiya* was the life of the Dalit *basti*,' writes Tulsi Ram in the preface to the book.⁵² He goes on to write how this burial ground was actually a *karmsthal* (place of work and labour) – one had to cross it to go to the fields, to the city, to school. If anyone in his Dalit *basti* wrote an autobiography, Tulsi Ram asserts, it would be named '*Murdahiya*'.⁵³ In replacing the signification of death with life and labour, Tulsi Ram fundamentally reverses the time, body and memory of caste. Even when he leaves the *murdahiya* behind at the end of the first book, he does not leave behind death. In *Manikarnika*, he writes that 'although life ends at Manikarnika ghat in Benaras, for me it was the opposite. My life started from there.'⁵⁴

Conclusion

M. S. S. Pandian, in writing about the significance of Dalit autobiographies aside of their empirical and aesthetic claims, argues, 'Not bound by the evidentiary rules of social science, the privileged notion of teleological time, and claims to objectivity and authorial neutrality, these narrative forms can produce enabling re-descriptions of life-worlds and facilitate the re-imagination of the political.'⁵⁵ The above discussion follows the suggestion made by Pandian, in order to show how through rewriting his life in a textual form, Tulsi Ram is able to produce an anti-caste text.

In his autobiography, Tulsi Ram's 'dividual' self is deeply caught between the viciousness of caste and emancipation from it. Death, the Buddha and the *murdahiya*,

along with the other 'parts' of his self like Nataniya and Musadiya, constantly provide Tulsi Ram with an opportunity to rewrite his life by tilting the balance in favour of emancipation. Autobiographical writing is an act of retelling life through a balance between memorializing and forgetting. Very few autobiographical texts, though, are able to rewrite life such that the future and the past are put into a conversation with each other across time and across historical bodies. By doing this, Tulsi Ram takes away from the power of caste to define his past. Caste is not forgotten, but the antidotes to caste are made available even while past life is playing out. Thus, *Murdahiya* is not a narrative of teleological progression from caste to emancipation, or from superstition to knowledge or from a humiliating and violent condition into some sort of enlightenment. In fact, the future knowledge – communism and socialism, Buddhism, critiques of caste – is made available to the young Tulsi Ram by the autobiographer, 'Tulsi Ram', in order to confront caste in the here and now. A young Tulsi Ram is made to inhabit a very different body from what he would have had in the past. The pox-marked, inauspicious body is now made fluid in order to accommodate Musadiya, Nataniya, the *bhikku* and the communist leader Dange, along with vultures, ghosts, spirits and death, so that this world can be rewritten and not just recounted. This rewriting ultimately enables *Murdahiya* to mount a 're-imagination of the political' as being composed of fluid bodies, time and memory.

Notes

1. All translations from Hindi to English have been made by the author.
2. Tulsi Ram, *Murdahiya* (New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 2010), 82–3. Under the caste system, Chamars are required to work with animal carcasses and hides, and thus they came to be associated with leather tanning and production in parts of Northern India. Many members of the caste group still take part in these occupations, though as Ramnarayan Rawat (*Reconsidering Untouchability: Chamars and Dalit History in North India* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011]) has argued, Chamars are also agricultural labourers, tenants and even landowners in parts of Uttar Pradesh. Since animal bodies and its products such as leather are deemed as polluted under the caste discourse, Chamars are thought to be 'untouchables'.
3. Tulsi Ram, *Murdahiya*, 83.
4. *Mricchakatika* is a Sanskrit play written by Sudraka around the fifth century CE.
5. Tulsi Ram, *Murdahiya*, 84.
6. Pramod Kumar Nayar, 'Bama's Karukku: Dalit Autobiography as Testimonio', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 41, no 2 (2006): 83.
7. Manager Pandey quoted in Sarah Beth writes, 'If it is an autobiography, then it is not of an individual but of a community. Putting community in place of the individual ... the past and present of the community itself becomes the ploy of the story' (Sarah Beth, 'Hindi Dalit Autobiography: An Exploration of Identity', *Modern Asian Studies* 41, no. 3 [2007]: 551).
8. Sharmila Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2013), 16.
9. Udaya Kumar, *Writing the First Person: Literature, History and Autobiography in Modern Kerala* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2017), 1–2.

10. Ibid., 3; Sidone Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 2.
11. Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 50, 70, 88.
12. Kumar, *Writing the First Person*, 20.
13. Nayar, 'Bama's Karukku', 87.
14. M. S. S. Pandian, 'One Step Outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere', *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 2 (2002): 1739.
15. Andrew Kaplan, 'The Rhetoric of Circumstance in Autobiography', *Rhetorica* 10, no. 1 (1992): 71.
16. See Nayar, 'Bama's Karukku'; M. S. S. Pandian, 'Writing Ordinary Lives', *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, no. 38 (2008): 34–40.
17. Beth, 'Hindi Dalit Autobiography', 563.
18. Kumar, *Writing the First Person*, 14.
19. Beth, 'Hindi Dalit Autobiography', 563.
20. Jatavs are a subcaste within the larger Chamar group in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Because of their strong association with the leather industry, Jatavs as a group were able to secure a relatively better socio-economic status amongst the other Chamar castes. For more on this see Sudha Pai (*Dalit Assertion and the Unfinished Democratic Revolution: The Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh* [New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002]). Within the caste discourse, Bhangis were considered to be manual scavengers and sanitation workers. They continue to be one of the most marginalized Dalit castes in Uttar Pradesh. The epithets 'Bhangi' and 'Chamar' are also used as derogatory words in everyday parlance in this region. Valmiki, a subgroup within the Bhangis, have refashioned their identity to move away from these connotations. For more on this see Maya Suzuki ('Socio-Spatially Segregated Experience of Urban Dalits and their Anti-caste Imagination', *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion* 4, no. 2 [2023]: 196–212).
21. For more on this, see Shivani Kapoor, 'A Pox on Your House: Exploring Caste and Gender in Tulsi Ram's *Murdahiya*', in *Dalit Text: Aesthetics and Politics Re-imagined*, ed. Judith Misrahi-Barak, K. Satyanarayana and Nicole Thiara (New Delhi: Routledge, 2020), 138–50.
22. Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 20–1.
23. Ibid., 20.
24. Pandian, 'Writing Ordinary Lives', 35.
25. For more on gender and autobiography, see Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley (eds), *Speaking of the Self: Gender, Performance, and Autobiography in South Asia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).
26. Burton Pike, 'Time in Autobiography', *Comparative Literature* 28, no. 4 (1976): 328.
27. Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 121–2.
28. Kumar, *Writing the First Person*, 14.
29. Pandian, 'One Step Outside Modernity', 1735.
30. B. R. Ambedkar was one of the foremost social and political thinkers and leaders of India. He was the chair of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution and independent India's first law minister. His anti-caste writings and politics have been foundational in our understanding of caste.
31. Omprakash Valmiki, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, trans. Arun Prabha Mukherjee (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 129.
32. Tulsi Ram, *Murdahiya*, 23.
33. Ibid., 10.

34. Ibid., 10
35. Uma Shanker Singh, 'The Politics of Mass Mobilisation: Eastern Uttar Pradesh, c. 1920–1940', *Social Scientist* 43, nos 5/6 (2015): 93.
36. Gyanesh Kudaisya, *Region, Nation, "Heartland": Uttar Pradesh in India's Body Politic* (New Delhi: Sage, 2006), 28. According to Singh, 'The colonial administration had established permanent land revenue settlement in the Benaras division, parts of Azamgarh, Gonda and Bahraich, giving land titles to whom it recognised as *zamindars* (landlords)' (Singh, 'The Politics of Mass Mobilisation', 94).
37. Tulsi Ram, *Murdahiya*, 10.
38. Ibid., 13–14.
39. Ibid., 48–9.
40. Ibid., 9–10.
41. Ibid., 13.
42. The Shiv Narayan Panth is an anti-caste sect influenced by the Bhakti tradition. For more on this, see Maren Bellwinkel-Schempp, 'From Bhakti to Buddhism: Ravidas and Ambedkar', *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 23 (2007): 2177–83. One of his uncle's followers in the Shiv Narayan sect, was a textile mill worker in Bombay (now Mumbai). During the run-up to the 1957 general elections, this worker visited his uncle in Dharampur. During this visit he narrated how a communist leader (*lal jhande wala neta*, literally meaning the leader who follows the red flag), Dangariya, along with his comrade, Namariya, had organized mass worker strikes in Bombay. Tulsi Ram writes that it was years later that he understood that 'Dangariya' and 'Namariya' were actually Dange and Namboodiripad (probably referring to Amrut Dange, founder of the Communist Party of India [CPI] and a trade unionist and E. M. S. Namboodiripad, communist leader who broke away from CPI to form Communist Party of India [Marxist] and was the first chief minister of Kerala from 1957 to 1959). Tulsi Ram attributes his eventual inclination to communist politics, partly to these influence of these childhood encounters (Tulsi Ram, *Murdahiya*, 38).
43. Strathern, quoted in Joanne Latimer, 'Unsettling Bodies: Frida Kahlo's Portraits and In/dividuality', in *Un/knowning Bodies*, ed. Joanna Latimer and Michael W J Schillmeier (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 56.
44. For instance, the reason to send Tulsi Ram to school was so that he could read the letters sent by his relatives in Asansol and Calcutta in West Bengal. Tulsi Ram was the first in his family to get an education. Letters would otherwise be read by the Brahmins in the village, who, Tulsi Ram writes, would often insult the Dalit families when asked to read (Tulsi Ram, *Murdahiya*, 21).
45. Tulsi Ram, *Murdahiya*, 15.
46. Ibid., 49.
47. Ibid., 50.
48. Ibid., 43.
49. Ibid., 27–8.
50. Ibid., 117.
51. Ibid., 162–3.
52. Ibid., 5.
53. Ibid., 5.
54. Tulsi Ram, *Manikarnika* (Delhi: Rajkamal, 2014), 5.
55. Pandian, 'Writing Ordinary Lives', 35.

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