

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

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Edited by
Prathama Banerjee

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To the Dreamers of a Casteless World

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Drawing caste to bind the nation

Prabhat Kumar

Cartoons were at the heart of reformist nationalism in colonial India. Early nationalist editor-publishers of Hindi periodicals saw *vyangya-chitra* (visual satire) as a powerful art form which could educate, reform and entertain the public without being overly pedantic.[1] This chapter explores the iconographic, configurational and social language of representation by which the 'problem of caste' was coded in cartoons to highlight the internal tensions of the Indian national-modern.[2] After colonial ethnographic sketches and photography, cartoons were one of the earliest forms that offered visual representations of caste.

It is important to keep in mind the specific stylistic, formal and communicative conventions of cartoons as we go forward. I approach the cartoon as an intermedial expressive genre that combine the visual and the textual. A cartoon draws its subject matter from a topical issue of the time, which is already widely known through news reports or public discussions. It then recomposes a compressed visual narrative around the issue in one or more short frames by simultaneously deploying two narrative-cum-figurative strategies – one, allegorically or directly invoking pre-established moral-social conventions; and two, highlighting the anomalies and contradictions in the said conventions via strategies of displacement, deformation, exaggeration, stereotyping, caricature and so on. Cartoons thus dramatize a contrast between the actual and the expected, generating laughter, amazement and disgust and inviting, by implication, the need to change the status quo. Thinking of the 'textual lives of caste' via the hybrid text-image format of the cartoon gives us a different insight into the long and changing history of caste and untouchability in India.

Changing the language of caste criticism

Caste haunted the Hindi public sphere since its very inception in the late nineteenth century. Through public *shastrarth* (textual exegesis), pamphlets, booklets and essays in periodicals, Arya Samaj activists argued that casteism based on *jati* identities was a corruption of the ancient Vedic ideal schema of the four *varnas*, which was based not on birth but on a universal division of human vocations and virtues (between knowledge, war, production and service).[3] The Arya Samaj's proselytization program of *shuddhi* – the reconversion of erstwhile low-caste Muslims and Sikhs to Hinduism

after necessary purificatory rituals – and unification program of *sangathan* – organization and consolidation – brought the questions of caste and religion within a single discursive framework in North India. Early scholarship on the Arya Samaj overlooked this entangled nature of the questions of caste and religion in colonial India, where Hinduism was accused of falling short of the religious ideals of universalism and freedom of worship owing to caste restrictions on religious practice. Arya Samaj champions of a caste-indifferent Vedic/Arya *dharma* thus saw Hindu proselytization as an exercise of religious freedom and religious universalism. Swami Shraddhananda simplified the hitherto humiliating ritual of *shuddhi* and converted/purified lower castes/untouchables, often Muslims and Sikhs, despite violent opposition by orthodox upper castes.[4] Noticeably, *shuddhi* was often organized at the initiative of local lower-caste leaders, in defiance of the top leadership of the Samaj. In these instances, *shuddhi* acquired strong caste-radical overtones as lower-caste Arya Hindus wearing the sacred thread asserted equality to upper castes.[5]

Post-1920s, as the anti-colonial non-cooperation/Khilafat movement waned, Hindu-Muslim communal tensions intensified. Colonial legislative reforms of 1919 predicated electoral representation on the numerical strength of religious communities. The Hindu Mahasabha, dominated by orthodox caste Hindus hitherto opposed to the Arya Samaj conversions, now began to underplay caste divisions in favour of the need to unify Hindus against Muslims. The short-lived but influential Bhartiya Shuddhi Sabha (Indian Purification Committee) was born of a new collaboration between the orthodoxy and the reformists to consolidate the electoral strength of the 'dying race' of Hindus, as U. N. Mukherjee had put it in his popular eponymous tract of 1909. And yet the anti-priest/anti-brahman rhetoric of the Arya Samaj never really went away, leading Shraddhananda to part ways with the Mahasabha again on the ground that the latter was only interested in elections and not the actual removal of untouchability.[6] But the *shuddhi* programs of 1923–7 had irreversibly changed the language of nationalist politics, both secular and religious, with respect to the caste question in North India.

Gandhi, once a qualified sympathizer of the Arya Samaj, eventually inverted the logic of *shuddhi*, saying it were not untouchables but upper-caste oppressors who must undergo penance and purification. He also said that proselytization was foreign to Hinduism, fomented communal riots and prevented national unity. Gandhi mobilized the discourse of Hindu tolerance, delinked *shuddhi* from caste reform and reduced it to solely the question of inter-religious relations. Consequently, the caste question came to be recast as a problem internal and exclusive to Hinduism rather than to India as a whole.[7] Gandhi also shared with proponents of *shuddhi* the imagination of the Hindu body politic as consisting of four different but equal *varnas*.[8] Increasingly both secular nationalist and religious reformist discourses came to share in the opinion that the nation was a whole consisting of different but equal (caste) communities, such that acts of caste discrimination came to be coded as anti-national acts. Orthodox proponents of caste hierarchy were lampooned and vilified. Henceforth, nationalist Hindi periodicals either maintained calculated silence on assertive 'separatist' lower-caste political voices (such as of Ambedkar, Achhutanand and Triveni Sangh), or openly criticized them for unravelling national unity, disobeying Gandhi and/or playing into the hands of anti-Hindu forces.[9]

Before the 1920s, Hindi public discourses referenced caste in both explicit and implicit ways. Implicit references involved the generalization of upper-caste and middle-class gender and social norms as the national norm and the stigmatization of lower-caste cultures and customs.[10] Explicit references consisted of (1) a normative version of caste as a harmonious division labour that prevented class antagonism and nurtured cultural unity; (2) reportage on reformist caste associations led by upper castes to modernize their communities and/or ridicule of upwardly mobile lower-caste groups under the influence of new-age deculturized reformers;[11] and (3) moral-sentimental appeals to upper castes to refrain from humiliating untouchables so as to prevent them from converting out of Hinduism.[12]

The 1920s saw critical shifts in these three idioms of engaging caste. A new pluralist opinion proposed that while Hinduism was indeed a constitutive whole of different *varnas*, these four groups had to be made equal if national unity was to be achieved. Discussions of caste associations increasingly became marginal, and moral-sentimental writings describing the plight of untouchables proliferated. Sketches and essays by upper-caste writers, identified as 'progressives' or early 'feminists' in literary history, inverted the Brahmanical stereotype of untouchables as ugly, dirty, docile and immoral and recast them as the epitome of morality, industry, bravery, innocence and beauty amidst poverty and violence.[13] Upper-caste oppressors like priests and landlords came to be depicted as grotesque figures. This would become the dominant mode of seeing and showing caste in the largely upper caste Hindi print sphere.

Caste in the Hindu body-politic

Let us begin our story with four selected cartoons – *Hindu Sangathan* (Hindu Unity),[14] *Chhut aur Achhut* (Touchable and Untouchable),[15] *Hindu Samaj ki Vartaman Awastha* (Present State of Hindu Society)[16] and *Achhutoddhar* (Redemption of Untouchable)[17] – all of which referenced *shuddhi* and *sangathan* activities.[18] *Hindu Samaj ki Vartaman Awastha* (Figure 15.1) depicted the present state of Hindu society as being in crisis. In the background, two temples are shown being vandalized, Shiva's *linga* and Krishna's *chakra* destroyed by flag-bearing men. Two angels with the faces of Madan Mohan Malaviya of the Hindu Mahasabha and Swami Shraddhananda of the Arya Samaj ring the alarm bell and airlift a figure who looks like a brahman but references the primordial human of the *Purushashukta* of the Rig Veda, with his head, arms, torso and legs as brahman, kshatriya, vaisya and shudra, respectively. This figure, holding the cane of *sangathan* (unity) and a water-pot of *shuddhi* (purity) in each hand, appears agitated but helpless and passive. He sits atop a box full of explosives – shackles of orthodoxy, sectarian quarrels, social oppression, disunity and recklessness, untouchability and slavery. The box is flanked by two diminutive devils. One is Khwaja Hasan Nizami, author of the much-debated 1923 tract *Da'i Islam* which argued for the pressing need for *tabligh* (missionary work) in India, ready to light the fire of *dai-i-Islam* (the invitation of Islam) to the box of explosives. The other is a Christian missionary, in military uniform, sitting in the shadow of the tree of colonial bureaucracy, with its many fruits of propaganda, schools, dispensaries, orphanages and charities, drilling

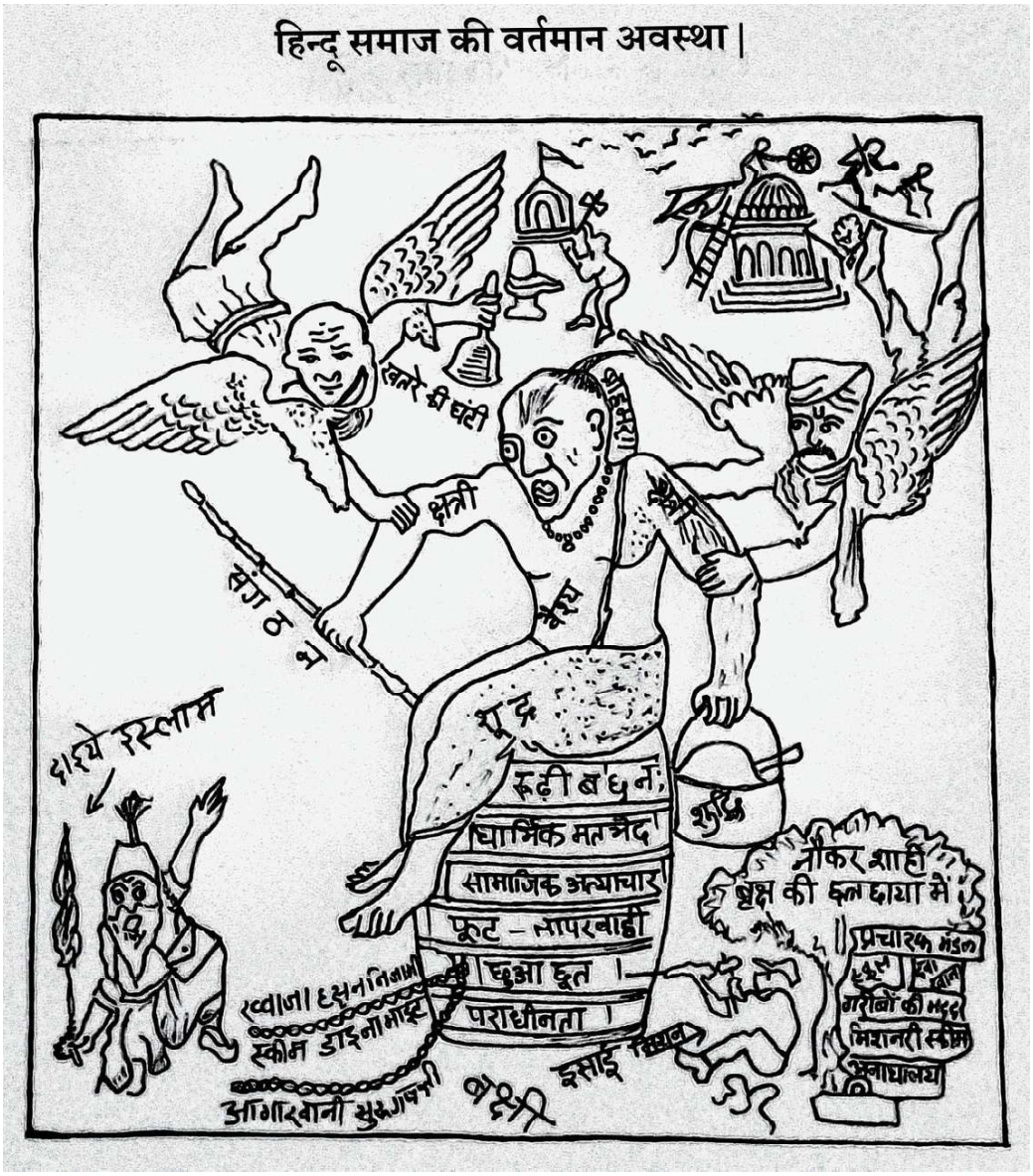

Figure 15.1 Hindu Samaj ki Vartaman Awastha (Present State of Hindu Society).

into the box. Both are seen as targeting the same weak spot in the box, the part labelled 'untouchability'.

The cartoon is self-explanatory. Hinduism has created its own crisis by practicing caste and untouchability, making it an easy target of its enemies, Muslims and Christians, who are flourishing under the protection of the colonial state. Of the many vulnerabilities of Hindu society, untouchability is the most volatile. The cartoon warns of an imminent explosion. Rendering the untouchable as an explosive and inflammable material, the image recreates a tense and urgent moment, demanding that immediate rescue attempts by the Hindu reader/viewer must go beyond the social reform activities of *shuddhi* and *sangathan* and emulate the political activism of Malaviya and Shraddhananda.

Interestingly, this endangered Hindu figure, invoking the (in)famous *Purushsukta*'s archetypal conception of *varna* hierarchy, looks like a quintessential brahman in its visual rendition. Identification of the Hindu with the brahman visual-type continues to this date in popular publications. This cartoon, unlike contemporary textual expositions of the issue, unwittingly gives away *shuddhi* (purification and readmission of the fallen) as a caste Hindu project. When it visualizes a 'dying' Hindu body to be blown up into inconsequentiality, the body in question becomes a caste Hindu body. In other words, the cartoon betrays the tensions and fractures built into the discourse of *shuddhi*: while it names brahmanical oppression as the chief source of the present crisis, the rescued/re-formed Hindu body remains that of a brahman.

The cartoon *Hindu Sangathan* (Figure 15.2) too deployed the same archetypal *varna* physiognomy to showcase the re-formed Hindu body and the political project of Hindu consolidation. In the cartoon's re-figuration of the *Purushashukta* imaginary, the Hindu body has two right hands, holding a book and a sword, symbolizing the brahman and the kshatriya, respectively. Two left hands hold a sack of money and a broom symbolizing the vaishya and the shudra-untouchable, respectively. The figure has four legs, three wearing footwears of brahmin, kshatriya and vaishya styles, and the fourth remains shoeless as are the servile classes. The body and its joints are fastened tightly by a long piece of ceremonial cloth (*angavastram*/shawl) and the face once again is Madan Mohan Malaviya's – a modern brahman professional, Hindu educationist and nationalist missionary.

The image reconceives the unified Hindu social body as made of four vocationally separate *varnas* but now mapped horizontally, unlike in the previous cartoon where the *varnas* appeared to be still organized in a vertical hierarchy. Yet, the cartoon suggests that such a reconstituted body may need to be fastened tightly together, lest its multiple limbs fall apart. Perhaps such a body would be grossly dysfunctional. No matter how sincere the intentions of the modern and progressive upper castes, epitomized by Malaviya, such a figuration of equality might never become operationalized in the real world. Clearly, these cartoons, which saw caste as an essential aspect of Hindu society while also being a problem before Hindu unity, repeatedly underlined the fragility, tension and perhaps even the redundancy of the reformist project. Hoping for a new dawn, the cartoon *Chhut aur Achhut* (Figure 15.3) imagines a future of Hindu unity. The demonstrable site of this unity is the public well. A well-dressed caste-Hindu wearing a nationalist cap and an untouchable in his loincloth are seen drawing water side by side, unthinkable in earlier times. The well is a modernized and mechanized one, operated by Malaviya, and appears to be located in a temple courtyard, traditionally closed to untouchables. Future Hindu unity is thus imaged as a utopia where caste-marked and unequal social bodies will cohabit the national space without apparent conflict.

The cartoon *Achhutoddhar* (Figure 15.4) lampoons the absurdity of this project. Here, a dark, emaciated old man in a loincloth is shown sweeping the road and picking garbage in his bamboo sack– a typical untouchable/sweeper at work. But the figure also wears the standard insignia of the brahman – *chandan*, *choti* and *janeu* (sandal paste marks, hair lock and sacred thread). The argument is that *shuddhi* leads only to cosmetic changes. The untouchable-sweeper remains the same sun-burnt, emaciated



Figure 15.2 Hindu Sangathan (Hindu unity).



Figure 15.3 Chhut aur Achhut (Touchable and untouchable).



Figure 15.4 Achhutoddhar (Redemption of untouchable).

and overworked body but is now allowed to wear a brahman's make up. That is the limit of the Hindu nationalist project of caste reform and Hindu consolidation!

The anti-national or the 'bad brahman'

Shuddhi and *sangathan* projects withered away by 1926–7 in the Hindi public sphere, but the caste question had irrevocably become the primary moral question before nationalism. Increasingly, the Hindi reformist press assumed a harsh, even violent, anti-brahman/anti-priest pitch. Brahmans were depicted as violent, insular and opposed to the nationalist demands of self-transformation, as evident in the following three selected cartoons, *Matri-bandhan* (Mother in Chains) (Figure 15.5),[19] an untitled cartoon on 'temple entry' (Figure 15.6)[20] and *Achhuton ka football* (Untouchable as Football) (Figure 15.7).[21]

In *Matri-bandhan*, Mother India is chained to the dead wood (of tradition). Listening to the cry of her dark, untouchable children, she is desperately trying to embrace them. But a brahman who has her ensnared keeps pulling her back, even



Figure 15.5 Matri-bandhan (Mother in chains).



Figure 15.6 An untitled cartoon on the question of 'temple entry'.

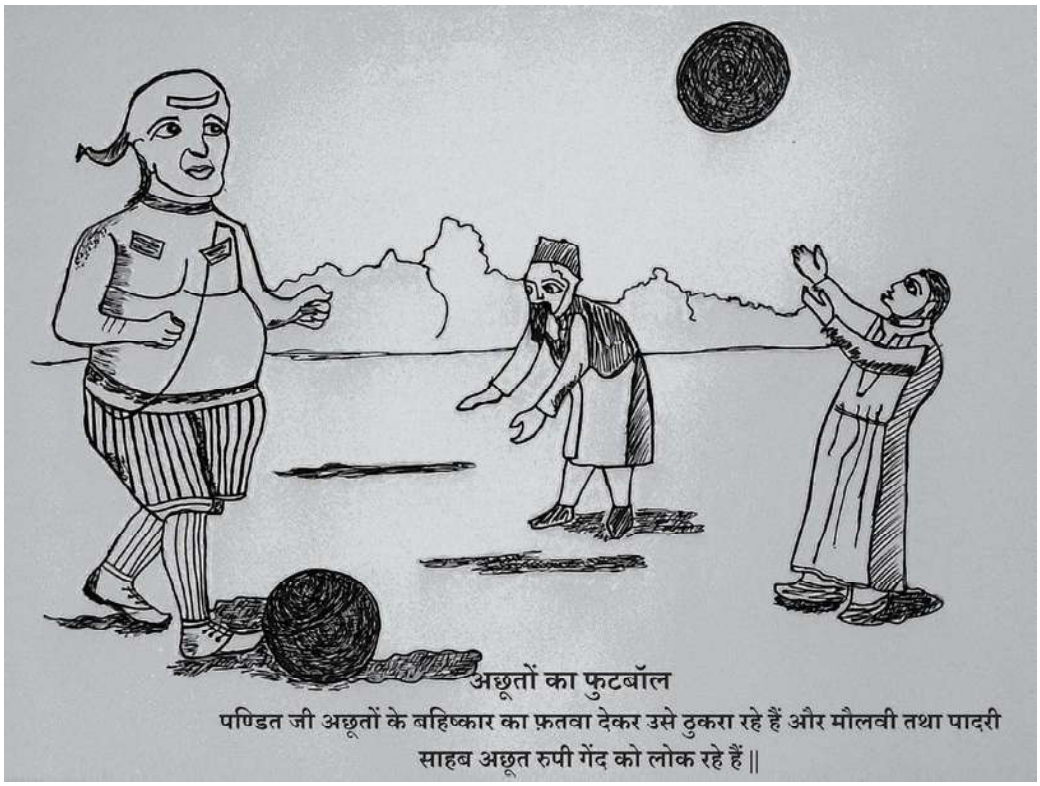

Figure 15.7 Achhuton ka football (Untouchable as football).

threatening to strangle her if she dares embrace the untouchables. By imaging the brahman as not only anti-national but also one with no understanding of motherly love, the cartoon elicits an intense and affective response from the viewer.

In the next cartoon on temple entry question, the brahman priest prevents an untouchable from crossing into the temple courtyard, where ironically women are dancing to the music made by bearded (Muslim) men. In an implicit reference to the courtesan culture of Muslim India, the cartoon suggests that debauch brahmans encourage blatantly erotic and immoral practices while debarring the untouchable from worship, while respectable common Hindus watching the performance inside the temple give it a tacit approval.

Likewise, in the cartoon *Achhuton ka football*, the untouchable is figured as the football being violently kicked around by monstrous, pot-bellied brahmans. While the brahmans treat him like an inert object, Muslim and Christian missionaries reach out to him in apparent empathy. The image invites the (Hindu) nationalist viewer-reader to intervene in this gruesome game that defeats the project of Hindu national unity.

The demonization of (unreformed) brahman figures working against the nation became even more evident in contexts where caste oppression was depicted as entangled with the oppression of women – something which we can only demonstrate in passing with a random set of examples. In *Padaskhalit Hindu Ramani* (Fallen Hindu Women) (Figure 15.8),[22] a young Hindu woman (likely a widow) is seen apologizing for a sexual indiscretion. The angry brahman priest shoos her away, while Christian and Muslim priests respectfully welcome her with the promise to care and hospitality.

Dharm-sand (Bull of Religion) (Figure 15.9)[23] is more direct. It shows a lustful Hindu priest chasing a young woman, who would perhaps escape into the fold of another religion. *Dughdha-pan ya rakta-pan*? (Drinking Milk or Blood?) (Figure 15.10)[24] depicts a greedy brahman priest at a pilgrimage centre, who is literally sucking the blood out of common Hindus, here symbolized by the body of the holy cow. As the cow gets more and more agitated, the foolish brahman fails to realize that he is in imminent danger of being trampled to death, as the text below the image explains.[25] Depicting brahmans as cannibals who devour the vitality of Hindu society by exploiting women and repressing untouchables, the cartoon suggests that brahmans are the enemies of the nation.[26]

The much-maligned figure of the orthodox brahman drew on the premodern literary tradition of, to refer to Christian Novetzke, the 'brahmin double': the construction of the 'bad brahman' (foolish, greedy, lustful, oppressive, etc.) as the opposite of the 'good brahman'.[27] In the brahman-dominated Hindi public sphere, the presentation of two kinds of brahmans, good and bad, provided an important moral strategy to discursively distinguish between Brahmanism and brahmans. An upper-caste cartoonist could legitimately speak up against Brahmanism as an anti-modern, unreformed, even anti-national, orientation. The visual rhetorical trope of the bad brahman veiled everyday and unspectacular caste practices of common Hindus, educated or otherwise. Very rarely is the perpetrator of caste violence depicted in cartoons as a Hindu 'common man'.



पदस्खलित हिन्दू रमणी।

हिन्दू रमणी—प्रभो, भूल से मेरा पैर फिसल गया है, मुझे समाज के किसी कोने में सर रखने को स्थान दो।

हिन्दू समाज के ठेकेदार—राम, राम, तेरा तो मुँह देखना भी पाप है। तू अब क्या समाज को भी अपने साथ रसातल ले जायगी ?

ईसाई—बहेन, आ, परम पिता क्राइस्ट की शान्तिदायिनी गोद में आ !

मुसलमान—खुदा के लिए इस्लाम पर ईमान ला, हम तेरा सब इतज़ाम कर देंगे !

Figure 15.8 Padaskhalit Hindu Ramani (Fallen Hindu women).

The bad brahman and the common Hindu

In this section, we shall explore the figure of Hindu 'common man'. The cartoon 'Achhutoddhar!' (*Chand*, February 1930), was an exception to the general trend (Figure 15.11).[28] Depicting a scene at a public well in the countryside, it shows a brick well encircled by an ambiguous boundary. Standing inside the boundary line is a bearded man in checked wrap-around *lungi*, suggesting a Muslim, drawing water from the well. On his right is a young man in *dhoti* and *choti*, a brahman, standing inside the boundary and pouring water from his brass pot (*ghada*/*lota*) into a tin-pot placed outside the boundary line.

Waiting patiently outside and at a safe distance is a dark man, waiting for the tin pot to fill. He is the untouchable who cannot cross the boundary to get water for himself and hence a kind brahman boy gives him water while observing the rules of

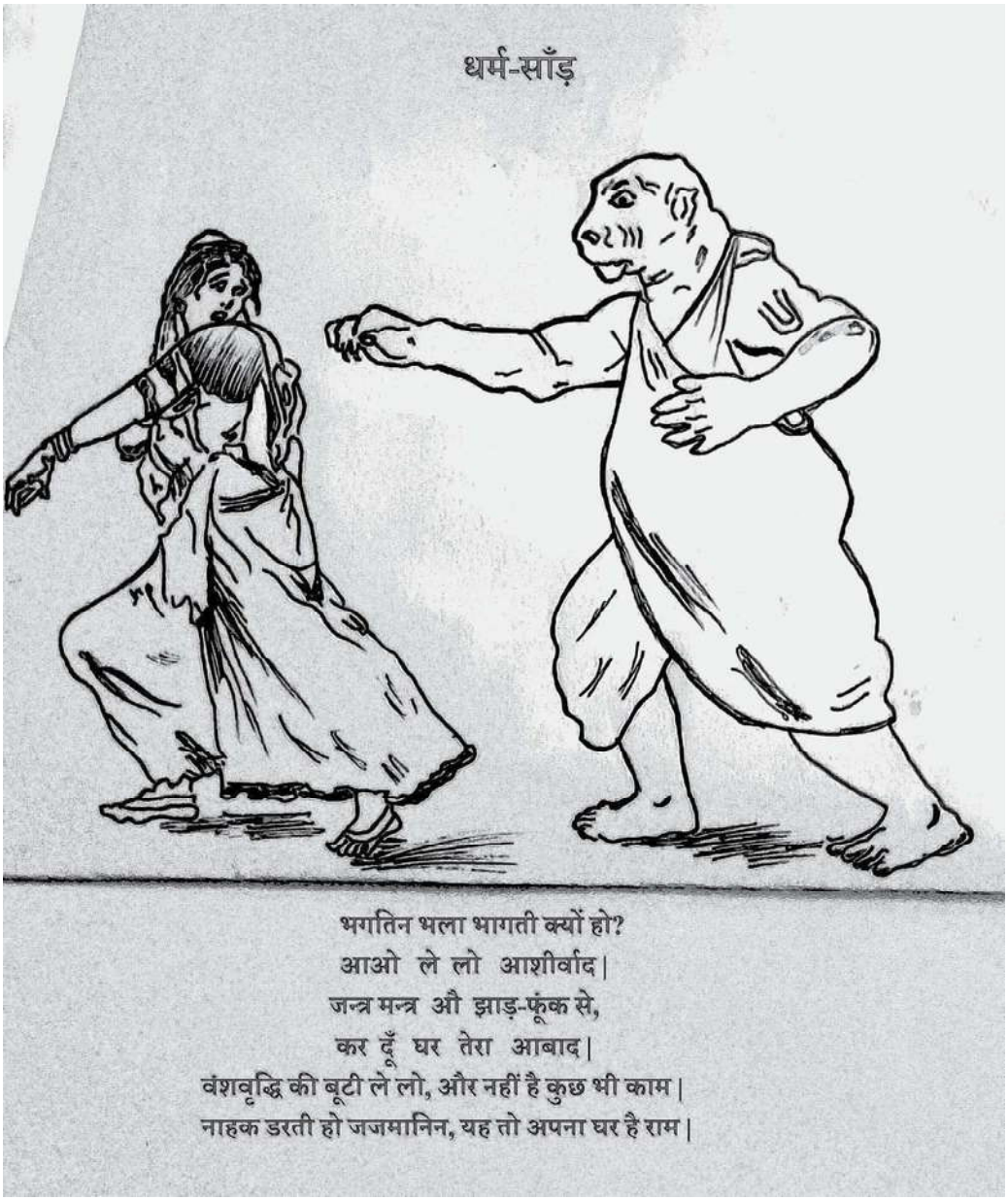

Figure 15.9 Dharm-sand (Bull of religion).

caste segregation. On the left, another dark man, an untouchable, is about to be hit violently with a bronze *ghada* by a common Hindu man. Inside the boundary line stands another tin pot, presumably placed there by the audacious untouchable who dared transgress the boundary to get water for himself and hence is being threatened with violence.

The cartoon questions the much-hyped Hindu reformist programme of *achhutoddhar*. More importantly, it puts the figure of a common Hindu man in the dock, instead of staying with the conventionalized bad brahman. The cartoon, though quite typical in its theme and locale, is relatively rare in its characterization.



Figure 15.10 Dughdha-pan ya rakta-pan? (Drinking milk or blood?).

Note that the sites of caste violence in most cartoons are 'traditional' spaces – temple thresholds, water tanks, wells and so on, located in rural spaces and ambiguous landscapes. City spaces – roads, buses, offices, factories, shared municipal hand pumps and taps – are rarely depicted. When they are, the bad brahman becomes the centrepiece. On occasions when commoners are depicted as oppressors and the location is the city, the language of class seems to take over the language of caste.

Pani ki samasya (Problem of Water) (Figure 15.12)[29] highlights the differential access to water in the city. The city has water enough to sprinkle the streets of the civil lines, wash cars, water private gardens and shower and soak inside the electrified private mansions of rich city dwellers. For commoners, there is only a hand pump in open public space, where untouchables cannot fill their buckets but Muslims can. A cane-wielding brahman goon is hitting the thirsty and emaciated untouchable. Predictably, gleefully watching this spectacle of caste humiliation are Muslims and Christians.

Two things are relatively novel in this cartoon. One, the untouchable figure has a *choti*, marking him as a Hindu, probably a symbolic consequence of the Poona Pact, which formalized untouchables as part of Hindu community rather than as a separate electorate as Ambedkar had wanted. Ironically, despite the untouchable's identification as Hindu, there is there is hardly any change in practices of caste discrimination.

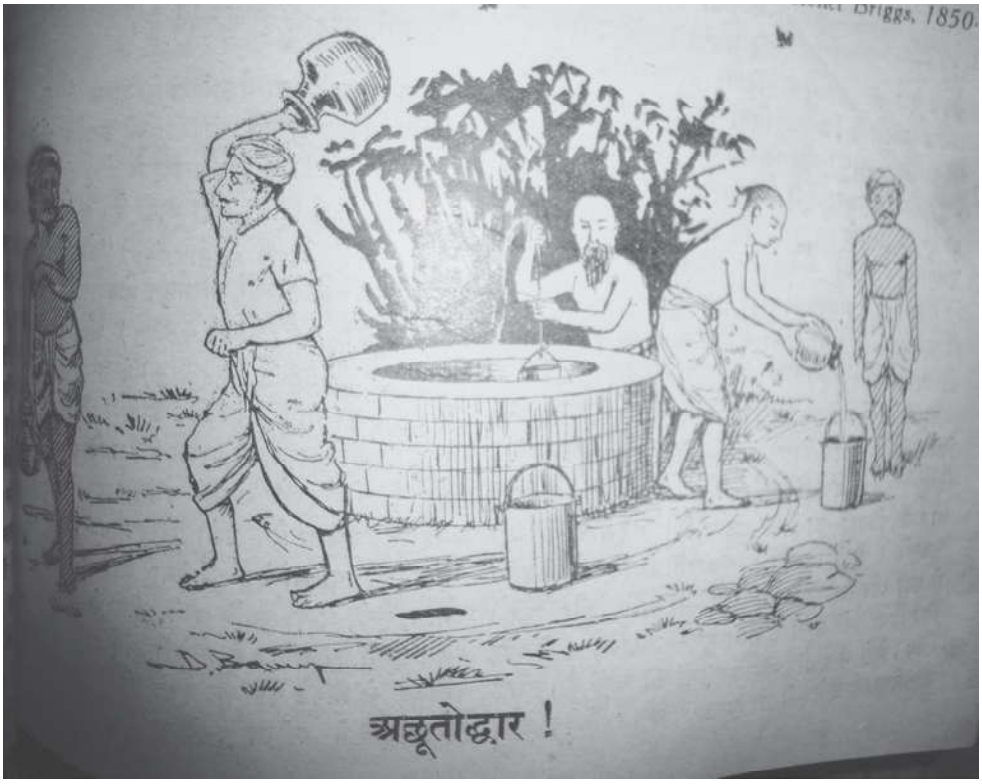

Figure 15.11 Achhutoddhar! (Redemption of untouchable!).



Figure 15.12 Pani ki samasya (Problem of water).

Two, the language of caste is augmented by the language of class to explain exclusion of untouchables in the urban context, that is, untouchables are shown to be doubly deprived by social and economic exclusion. The (upper caste) urban elites of the civil lines, while being clearly depicted as common Hindu men and women, are also represented as modernized, caste-neutral and socially unmarked, unlike the urban poor who are visually distinguished as untouchable, brahman and Muslim.

Sakar krodh (Anger incarnated) (Figure 15.13)[30] is even more interesting in its deployment of the vocabulary of class in conjunction with codes of caste and gender. At the entrance of an urban mansion are two beggar women, one prostrate and the other standing with an infant in her arms. Annoyed by the proximate presence of lowly creatures (untouchable beggar women and a barking street dog), the stout educated man in *dhoti-kurta* rises in fury, dropping his glasses and toppling his study chair. Adding the colour of caste to class hatred, the visual amplifies the heartlessness of the educated common man – putatively the vanguard of the Indian nation. Apart from underlining the ironies of middle class-upper caste hatred towards the poor and the untouchable, the iconography of this cartoon expresses the logic of the subsumption of caste into the capacious category of class. It is notable that most cartoons which thematize the issue of class exploitation depict subaltern figures as domestic servants, petty criminals, coolies, agricultural labourers, rack-rented peasants and so on – all dark-skinned, emaciated, half-naked and subservient. There is no difference in the graphic representation of the poor and the untouchable. Darkness is the colour of subalternity, emaciation the characteristic of a labouring body.[31] Be that as it may, it appears that the complicity of 'common Hindu man' was only seldom acknowledged in the reformist discourse on caste.

National taboos and recalcitrant castes

Opposed to the figure of the atrocious and ugly bad brahman was the quintessential figure of the untouchable victim, black, emaciated, under-clothed, silent and suffering, waiting to be rescued by the conspicuously absent good brahman, or alternatively, the nationalist reader-viewer present outside the frame. An active, empowered, assertive and transgressive untouchable speaking the language of rights was visible only as deviant. If and when such an untouchable figure is found, s/he bore the burden of nationalist suspicion and turpitude. Broadly, we find two types of recalcitrant figures: one who defies the religious boundary and the other who questions the political framework of the Hindu/Indian nationalist project.

In this cartoon published in a special issue of *Chand* on untouchability, a fat black man in western dress and cigar in hand proudly takes his evening stroll, a presumably a converted untouchable who has become Anglicized and deculturalized (Figure 15.14). A thin man, equally black, follows him in a servant's dress, pushing a baby's pram. The text asks the viewer to register the fact that the master and the servant look the same: 'Open your eyes and see, their faces are the same/ Mark the posture of an untouchable and note the majesty of a Christian!' The cartoon, in other words, suggests that once the untouchable converts to Christianity and exits caste-ridden

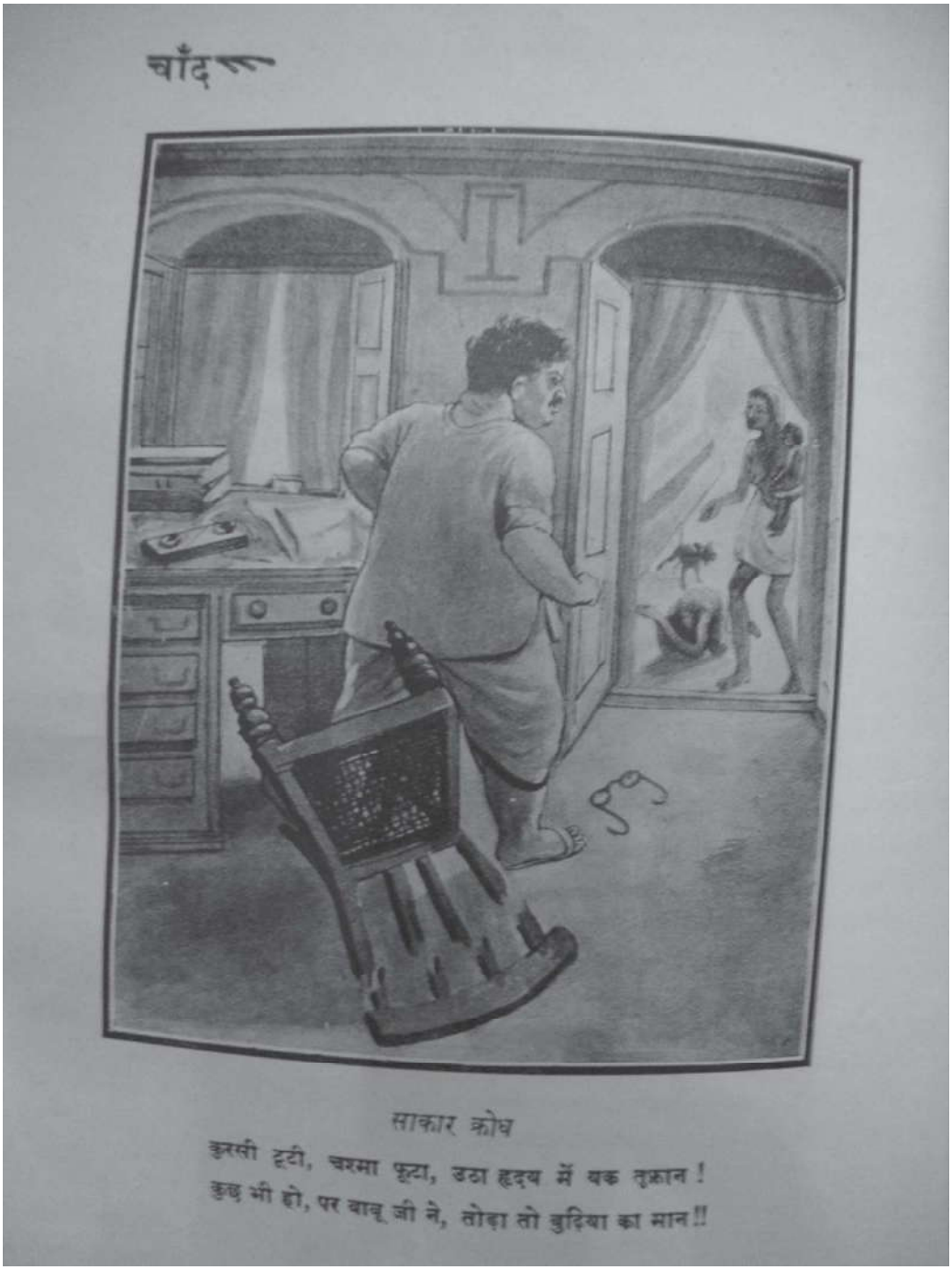

Figure 15.13 Sakar krodh (Anger incarnated).

Hinduism, he loses his subservience and becomes equal, and acquires a dignified body language. After conversion, he could even raise his social status, become an opulent anglophile sahib and live a pompous life. If he does not forsake Hindu social order, he would remain an untouchable and at most achieve the status of a poor Indian peon/servant. Such is the sacrifice an untouchable makes by choosing to stay in the Hindu



Figure 15.14 An untitled cartoon on untouchable converted to Christianity.

fold, struggling with caste humiliation and resisting Westernization. In contemporary nationalist discourse, the Indian sahib is invariably a negative character, deracinated, comprador and scornful of fellow Indians. Surely, an untouchable who becomes a Christian would misbehave with other Hindus, of both upper and lower castes. An untouchable convert was thus a suspect figure.

But more dangerous than a religious transgressor was an untouchable who became a political rebel. The cartoon *Desh-dasha* (*Chand*, September 1931) (Figure 15.15) shows the chaotic condition of contemporary India. Already under attack by the British imperialist lion, the country is threatened by the Japanese imperial beast crouching at the border. Unmindful of imperialist designs, Hindus and Muslims fight each other openly. A Hindu woman (Mother India) is assaulted by three men: a pot-bellied brahman representing Hindu caste law drags her by her hair; another brahman representing *sanatana dharma* or orthodox Hinduism is joined by a dark muscular *achhut* (untouchable) in flogging her like *lathiyals* (bouncers). This cartoon is reflective of the secular nationalist desire that a united Indian nation would take on her primary enemy, foreign imperial powers. It is a variant of the standard nationalist formulation that India has been enslaved because it is deeply fractured along caste and community lines. Staging the spectacle of internal conflict, the cartoon underlines the farcical nature of identity politics.



Figure 15.15 Desh-dasha (Country's condition).

However, the cartoon is particularly significant for the exceptional characterization of the untouchable figure. Instead of the usual docile victim, here he is powerful, energetic and active, although his action is shown to be self-injurious because injurious to the nation. He is no different than the anti-national bad brahman in being self-interested and without concern for national unity. Given that this cartoon was published at the time of the Second Round Table Conference, we may speculate that this figure is perhaps symptomatic of politically assertive untouchables, like B. R. Ambedkar, speaking in the language of rights and demanding from the colonial state a separate electorate for their own community and thus dividing up the nation.[32] Thus, the untouchable as a recalcitrant figure, whether defying religious boundaries or questioning the nationalist consensus on caste as the internal social matter of Hinduism irrelevant to the primary struggle against colonialism, was a suspect in the eyes of anti-colonial secular as well as Hindu nationalist discourses.

Conclusion

Hindi cartoons fuelled anti-colonial nationalism in North India by foregrounding the problem of untouchability as that which obstructed the formation of the nation as a collectivity of equals. In the process, cartoons re-sourced traditional tropes and modes of representations and re-drew the cultural semantics of caste in broad public view. As opposed to printed texts, the visual format of cartoons perhaps helped take the message of Hindu/Indian unity to the non-/semi-literate publics. The brahman–untouchable binary became the framing device in such cartoons in ways that helped gloss over the complicity of the modern, educated, common man in ongoing caste practices. By focusing on bad brahmans, Christianized and Anglicized untouchables, and self-interested and anti-national untouchable politicians, Hindi cartoons closed off the pictorial frame, like the traditional temple, to the recalcitrant and rebel untouchable figure. By letting the semantics of class recode the inscriptions of caste in depictions of urban spaces, cartoons, perhaps more powerfully than textual polemics, produced the persistent iconography of the socially unmarked (Hindu) common man, with middle-class accoutrements (as opposed to Muslims and Christians, who always already remained visually identifiable).

More importantly, the needs of visualization caused cartoons to heighten and intensify, rather than dissolve, certain social stereotypes. Perhaps this shows up the limits of visual realism when speaking of caste, making caste appear more amenable to textualization rather than representation. By depicting the untouchable body as dark and cowering, cartooning also 'racialized' caste, reinforcing caste prejudices even when the political agenda, limited as it might have been, was to question the same. Cartooning in India had to wait for more than half a century for the arrival of radical Dalit artistes, who would seek to move beyond conventional realism and deploy the cartoonist's right to 'distort' in order to stage emancipatory images.

Dalit cartoonist U. Syama Sunder today uses the same stereotyped brahman-priest body as representative of Brahmanism, but his depiction of the Dalit body defies earlier stereotypes (Figure 15.16). Here, the Dalit is standing erect, wearing a



Figure 15.16 Cartoon by Syama Sundar.

Source: U. Syama Sunder, published in *News Minute*, 3 October 2019, public domain, https://www.thenewsminute.com/andhra-pradesh/meet-syama-sundar-cartoonist-whose-work-revolves-around-anti-caste-themes-109930 (accessed 28 November 2023).

uniform given by the government in ironic recognition of his caste right to jobs in urban sanitation, but kicking the brahman on his butt and refusing the caste vocation of manual scavenging.

Notes

1. For an overview of early Hindi cartoons, see Prabhat Kumar, 'Hindi patrikaon mein karṭoon aur driṣya sanskriti, 1900–1940', *Pratiman* 16 (2020).
2. Academic studies of cartoons in India include Ritu Khanduri, *Caricaturing Culture in India: Cartoon and History in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); and Christel R. Devadawson, *Out of Line: Cartoons, Caricature and Contemporary India* (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2014). These do not reflect on the caste question. Charu Gupta, *Gender of Caste: Representing Dalits in Print* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2016), uses Hindi cartoons on caste in her book but as supplementing textual sources. U. Syama Sunder, *No Laughing Matter: The Ambedkar Cartoons, 1932–1956* (Delhi: Navyana, 2018), has curated English newspaper cartoons in which the figure of B. R. Ambedkar has been portrayed, but he primarily deals with upper-caste biases.
3. Ram Vilas Sharma, *Bharatendu yug aur hindi navjagran ki samasyaen* (Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 1975), gives an overview of the Hindu literary sphere of the times but ignores caste question unlike Veer Bharat Talwar, *Rassakasi: unnisavin sadi ka navjagan aur paschimottar prant* (Delhi: Saransh Publication, 2003) and Kanval Bharti, *Achhutanandaji Harihar aur Hindi Navajagaran* (Delhi: Swaraj Prakashan, 2011).

4. Henceforth eating cow dung, drinking cow urine along with milk, butter and curd, bathing in Ganges, feeding brahmans and so on was no longer required; only tonsure, fire sacrifice, donning the sacred thread and recitation of the Gayatri mantra would suffice. C. A. Adcock, *The Limits of Tolerance: Indian Secularism and the Politics of Religious Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
5. Prasanna Kumar Chaudhary and Shrikant, *Bihar mein samajik parivartan ke kuchh aayam* (Delhi: Vani Prakashan, 2006); Hetukar Jha, 'Lower Caste Peasants and Upper Caste Zamindars in Bihar (1921–25): An Analysis of Sanskritization and Contradiction between the Two Groups', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 14, no. 4 (1977): 549–59.
6. *Shuddhi* was also a method for re-nationalizing denationalized Muslims, who were often lower-caste converts to Islam. But *shuddhi* also sometimes addressed Hindu groups, such as the Malkan Rajputs of Agra and Mathura, as part of the revival of Hindu masculinity, though the ostensible rhetoric was against untouchability. See Adcock, *The Limits of Tolerance*; Charu Gupta, 'Articulating Hindu Masculinity and Femininity: 'Shuddhi' and 'Sangathan' Movements in United Provinces in the 1920s', *Economic and Political Weekly* 33, no. 13 (1998): 727–35; Prabhu N. Bapu, *Constructing Nation and History*, PhD thesis, SOAS (2009); William Gould, *Religion and Politics in Modern South Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Veer Bharat Talwar, *Hindi navjagaran ki vichardhara: Satyarth Prakash, samalochana ka ek prayas* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advance Studies, 2001).
7. Adcock, *The Limits of Tolerance*.
8. Needless to say, Gandhi's views on caste changed through time, especially after his encounter with Ambedkar. Nishikant Kolge, *Gandhi against Caste* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017).
9. See Suresh Kumar, 'Hindi navjagaran ke agradooton ki nigah mein golmej, poona pact aur achhut samasya', *Pratiman* 19–20 (2023), for an overview of the general reaction of Hindi intellectuals to Ambedkar during 1930–2. For Achhutanand, see Bharti, *Achhutanandaji Harihar aur Hindi Navajagaran*. For backward caste mobilization by Triveni Sangh, see Prasanna Kumar Chaudhary and Srikant, *Bihar mein samajik parivartan ke kuchh aayam*.
10. Chapter 2 of Gupta, *Gender of Caste*.
11. Vasudha Dalmia, *The Nationalisation of Hindu Tradition: Bharatendu Harishchandra and Nineteenth Century Banaras* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 251–61; Prabhat Kumar, 'Colonialism, Modernity and Hindi Satire in the Late Nineteenth Century', *Zeitschrift für Indologie und Südasienstudien* 28, no. 11 (2011): 105–44.
12. *Achhut ki shikayat* by Heera Dom (*Saraswati*, September 1914) is often cited as the prototype of this variety, also see Ramchandra Shukla, *Achhut ki aah* (*Saraswati*, October, 1916), later on Ramkumar Varma, *Achhut* (1922) Baijnath Kedia, *Chhut-Achhut* (1938). Kedia's stories are a little different and more interesting as they additionally show that untouchables who have turned Christians or Muslims remain Hindu from the bottom of their hearts. They would love to leave Christianity if Hindus welcomed them back with the promise of dignity.
13. Mahadevi Varma, *Atit ke Chalchitra* (Allahabad: Barati Bhavan, 1941). For a selection of stories of similar orientation by Premchand, see Rajeev Ranjan Giri, *Ghasvali: Pemchand ki dalit jivan se judi kahaniyan* (Delhi: Books for Change, 2017). Equally prominent was the self-representation of lower-caste and untouchable men as masculine, industrious, brave and so on, who have been cheated in history by the conspiring and shrewd brahmans. Such publications, voices and representations

existed side by side but were yet to enter the world of nationalist Hindi periodicals. Also see chapter 4 in Gupta, *Gender of Caste*.

14. *Prabha* (Kanpur), September 1923.
15. *Prabha*, July 1924.
16. *Matvala* (Calcutta), 25 October 1924.
17. *Madhuri* (Lucknow), July 1925.
18. Many cartoons (including some cited here) were reproduced (often with minor variations of caption) later in the same journal, in other journals or as part of cartoon albums. I have used the earliest possible versions. If the visual quality of the available cartoon print was too poor, I have either tried to use later reproductions or enhanced its quality.
19. *Matwala*, 26 April 1924. A modified version of this cartoon (with same graphic but different text) would be reprinted in *Yugantar*, March 1933.
20. This is part of a series of cartoons published in special issue on untouchability, *Chand* (Allahabad), May 1927.
21. *Chand*, April 1928.
22. *Vyangya Chiltravali: Caricature Album*, 9. This cartoon appeared first in the journal *Prabha* and later reproduced in the Album.
23. *Matvala*, 20 February 1926.
24. *Ganga*, Bhagalpur, April 1931.
25. This image invokes the visual repertoire of the cow-protection movement, which popularized the image of the cow embodying the mass of Hindu divinities often threatened by demons resembling Muslims.
26. In many cartoons, the orthodox zamindars and priests opposing the anti-untouchability campaign of *shuddhi* were ridiculed as inconsequential rabble-rousers and depicted as lowly and aimless dogs in the street. To cite just one example, see *Dharma-bhavan ka bhagadatta*, *Matwala*, 9 May 1925.
27. Christian Lee Novetzke, 'The Brahmin Double: The Brahminical Construction of Anti-Brahminism and Anti-Caste Sentiment in the Religious Cultures of Pre-colonial Maharashtra', *South Asian History and Culture* 2, no. 2 (2011): 232–52. Pre-modern burlesques, including in Sanskrit, have many foolish, greedy, pedantic, wicked brahman characters. Lee Siegel, *Laughing Matters: Comic Tradition in India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).
28. *Chand*, February 1930.
29. *Chand*, January 1936.
30. *Chand*, February 1928.
31. See, for example, the figure of rack-rented sharecropper-agricultural labour in *'Zamindar saheb', Madhuri*, March 1928; domestic servant in '*Sharir seva*', *Madhuri*, February 1928; a railway coolie in '*Ticket-collector ke pau-barah*' *Chand*, February 1931; a bullock-cart driver in '*Sadak par*', *Chand*, February 1930; a kunjari/woman vegetable seller, *Chand*, March, 1933. There are also instances in anti-British cartoons – not so frequent, however – of the casteless figure of the poor Indian (resembling the untouchable body) suffering the trauma of colonial extraction. 'Samrajya-nirman', *Madhuri*, February 1926.
32. The untouchable's demand for the right to self-represent mostly decried by Hindi nationalist editors and political commentators. See Suresh Kumar, 'Hindi navjagaran ke agraduton ki nigah mein golmej, poona pact aur achhut samasya'.

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