Just Us

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Rejecting the politics of identity and victimhood, Practicing Caste articulates the politics of radical narcissism of a “just us” that tries to disinherit the knowledge on caste received from the classical Sanskrit texts, philosophy, sociology and anthropology. It strives to dispossess itself of caste as a marker of injustice in India. It presents a tropology that studies caste as the regulation of touch/untouch, pitching it at the level of intelligibility of the assembly language of computers that does not presuppose anything like a meaningful social whole.

Practicing Caste: On Touching and Not Touching by Aniket Jaaware is a book about us, just us. It is for, by and of “just us.”

We could ululate us, us, all of us, us. Not us and them, not you and me making up a divisible us. Just us. (Jaaware 2019: 96)

Aniket insists “We must tell others that they are us.” This us includes just everyone who suffers, resists, escapes and studies caste. These are all ways of practising caste.

Just us are all of us. Others are also us. This us is not instituted through the dialogue and dialectic of I and thou. Philosopher Ramachandra Gandhi once asked how can the two—you and I—ever play? Two can only divide and fight. Only one can play. This us is not yet a we—the we of the people instituted by the Ambedkar’s constitutional gesture. We are a destitute us. We are without strong claims of identity, authority or ownership.

We also make a claim on justice by being “just us.” Amidst caste injustice we are not making a claim for distributive justice. The equality we affirm is not that of anything we possess or we need to possess in order to be what we are. This is a justice of dispossession. In the Rawlsian framework of justice, to ensure distributive justice as fairness, we need to pretend that, in the original position, we know nothing about our merit and possessions. For us who are just us, it is not a matter of not knowing but of not having. The equality of those who dispossess everything. We have to make us here on this destitute ground.

I can also hear Aniket, with that innocent and non-biodegradable grin telling us “I am leaving you all to that ‘just us’.” Perhaps, only immortals can use “us” in the second person. The you-us points out to us that the real challenge is not overcoming death but overcoming birth and inheritance. Caste is non-biodegradable and death offers no escape from its clutches. Also, it catches us before birth. “Just us” is a call to all those who are dead or yet to be born, proximate or distant to come and share the bodies we occupy and be with us in the same space-time.

Against Deep Descriptions

This book is an attempt to disinherit the knowledge on caste received from various sources, including the classical Sanskrit texts, the academic discourses of philosophy, sociology and anthropology and also in Jotirao Phule and B R Ambedkar. It strives to dispossess itself of caste as a marker of injustice in India, and also the Constitution that has been reduced to law and penal code. To disinherit means to continue to read Sanskrit grammar, Charvaka, Edmund Husserl, Jacques Derrida, Levi Strauss, Phule and Ambedkar in a breathtaking pace—Aniket calls it oublierring (oublier + erring)—so that one can reach what one has to say as quickly as possible. Oublierring is deliberate and
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intentional forgetting and erring so that something is said with an urgency that some readers may find new and some others may find foolish. Here I am reminded of what Gilles Deleuze remarked about Spinoza: Practical Philosophy. Spinoza does not begin by deriving his idea of god from the scripture. Nor does he impose his arbitrary conception on us. Thinking for him meant reaching the true idea of god as quickly as possible—ignoring the scriptures and also our own ideas of god—so that one can derive what is urgent to say about our life, ethics and politics. Aniket is an author in a hurry and took almost a decade to write this book. On completion, again, he left us in a hurry.

Aniket has always warned us about how not to talk about caste. He urged us to move away from the sociological/anthropological way of talking about caste in terms of kinship systems, intermarriage, inter-dining, purity/pollution, and as a predication of birth. He twisted himself free from all attempts to study caste as an aspect of an existing society. He dispossessed himself of the idea of society.

Aniket envisages a science that would take temporary forms of sociability as its object domain, instead of society and institutions. He finds the intimation of such a science in the work of Ambedkar, Gabriel Tarde and the art work of Stefanie Trojan. The latter performed events like carrying a portable toilet and sitting on it in public or picking dirt from the faces of strangers. For Aniket these were less of social criticism than exploration of new forms for sociability. Imagine a science that would study scavenging, like traffic, as a pathological mode of sociability. He challenges the sociology to suicide to study the joy of a girl who on psychedelic drugs falls from a height thinking that she is flying and splatters her blood and bones down below!

Practicing Caste tells us how to talk about caste so that we practise caste as part of an anti-caste struggle. Taking untouchability as marker of caste practice allows us to see the way sociability is inscribed with discrimination and inequality. Touch takes us to a level of description lower than inter-dining and intermarriage. Aniket compares this level to that of the assembly language of computers that is lower than that of programming languages. Assembly language is machine-readable. Neither truth nor meaning, only effectivity counts. Touch leaves traces which are like fingerprints. Fingerprint is to touchability/untouchability what signatures are to inter-marriage and inter-dining. The former level, where regulations of touch work, is more random and dispersed and resists institutionalisation and claims of identity. Anti-caste efforts so far have focused on the latter level, that of interpretation and institutionalisation.

Here Aniket takes forward the path-breaking move Ambedkar made in his 1916 essay “Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development.” Kinship regulation and the purity/pollution distinction, etc, are the effects of caste, not its cause. Ambedkar locates the origin of caste in the advent of endogamy in an exogamous society. Caste originated in responding not to the question of birth but to that of death. The endogamous society had to maintain the man/woman ratio as 1:1. If one of the partners dies, the other should not be allowed to take a man or woman who could be a potential partner in a future pair. Sati, widowhood, asceticism, child marriage were the means deployed to secure the sex ratio required for instituting endogamy. Societies elsewhere too had tried similar means. However, only in India, unlike in other societies, caste survived as a historically redundant vestige; the means to secure endogamy ran out of control. Caste is the effect of these means running amok. The origin of caste cannot be located in an end, telos, intentions or interests.

In this essay Ambedkar rejected most of the available sociological anthropological paradigms for studying caste. However, he upheld the theoretical and methodological insights of a sociologist who had by then been marginalised by the emerging scientific sociology of Emile Durkheim, namely Gabriel Tarde. Aniket endorses Tarde’s laws of imitation. Imitation is the prototype of communication and exchange and the basis of sociability. Ambedkar, Tarde and Aniket agree that society does not exist. The part is more complex than the whole. All three are suspicious of deep descriptions of social phenomena. Deep level explanation of caste would grant the latter some reason for existence. That which has a reason for existence can only be partially undone or reformed. Caste can be and ought to be annihilated because its existence is unnatural and unreasonable. Social wholes likes capitalism and caste are ontological clouds. In order to preserve the seriousness of our anti-caste struggles we shall not grant caste a solidity and gravity it cannot have. (In the parenthesis, I must say that Gandhi who receives just a single negative and irreverent mention in this book too would agree with our threesome. Gandhi refused to link the question of untouchability to caste. This was not entirely because of his need to interpret caste as part of division of labour and safeguard the Hindu tradition. He believed that such deep descriptions of untouchability in terms of caste would lead to multiple interpretations and delay moral work against untouchability.)

Regulations on Touch

Anti-caste thinking meets with an aporia. If the anti-caste struggle aims to end caste then it cannot be based on caste identity. We—everyone and anyone—need to think of caste as irrelevant. However, in Dalit literature and politics we see a positive and authentic assertion of caste identity. Dalit literature claims to articulate experiences from the singular and unsubstitutable perspective of Dalits but at the same time wishes to be part of world literature. How can we free ourselves from the claims of identity and ownership of experience and at the same time face up to the caste problem?

Today, the academic discourse knows how to deal with the horns of the aporia. We are called upon to suspect binaries and deconstruct them. This is not the path followed here. Aniket might have even said that caste cannot be deconstructed. On one hand social sciences try to explain caste or use caste as a framework to explain social life in India. On the other, a critical discourse gaining a voice in the academy claims that caste is a Western construct. Aniket, like Ambedkar, does not hesitate to point out that caste as a grid for making sense of suffering and
also making claims about equal opportunity and exclusive ownership on experiences are historically constructed by a society of acquisition. However, the caste problem, the persistence of the tropology of the caste in the rhetoric of politics is nothing. It demands immediate intervention. The protocols of deconstruction are of not much help when faced with the aporetic insistence of the caste problem.

This book explores caste as a problem of sociability on the basis of the regulations on touch. There is no inherent relationship between caste and untouchability. The latter is not limited to Hindu religion or to Indian society. If the caste society does not allow the lower castes to enter temples, capitalism does not allow those who do not pay to enter restaurants and movie halls. The sameness and difference between caste and class can be studied through the regulations on touch. The realms of purity/pollution, sacred and profane, etc, are generated by the regulations of bodily behaviour, mainly, touch. Touch is prior to these realms. Regulations of bodily behaviour, mainly, touch.

Aniket explores touch through a set of structural oppositions—touching self and touching other, literal touch and figurative touch and good and bad touch. Here touching, touched is a basic opposition. This book dedicated to touch only makes passing remarks about the official phenomenological discourse on touch. To phenomenology the paradigmatic contact with objects is one of grasping. To touch something or perceive something means to hold it in one’s hands, close to one’s body, turn it around so that it turns its face to us. Aniket realises that this perspective does not suit his study on the regulations on touch.

Most patient meditations on touch we have from Sundar Sarukkai to Derrida find a well-known passage from the later writing of Merleau-Ponty compelling to quote. It says when one touches oneself the toucher and the touch does not coincide. The touching is not touched. They do not coincide on the body. The meeting point is something other than the body—the untouchable. Merleau-Ponty provides two distinct but related characterisations of this untouchable. It belongs to the other but as that which even the other cannot touch. This has been interpreted as the touch’s necessary opening to the other. We cannot sense ourselves without taking recourse to an alien image in the mirror or we cannot touch ourselves without the fantasy of the other. Merleau-Ponty also provides another characterisation of the untouchable. It is not a positive element that is not yet touched. It is a true negative and not an inaccessible positive elsewhere. This is the primordial negativity of the primary narcissism of touching oneself—feeling of a self-sufficiency of the “just us.”

Aniket proposes the political narcissism of the “just us” to be a critical response to the identity politics. This move is scandalous in our times when politics is either subsumed by an ethics of the other or pathologically deformed by the narcissism of nationalism. The narcissism of the destitute disposes itself of identity, inheritance and ownership and calls for the political suspension of the ethical. How does the self-sufficiency of narcissism go with a politics of destitution?

Methods and Concepts

Aniket is indifferent to psychoanalysis which according to him privileges mind over body. However, I find that Sigmund Freud’s insights on narcissism could help us in comprehending the politics of disposed narcissism. Who according to Freud are the greatest narcissists?—women, children, great criminals, cats, humorists and, perhaps, philosophers. Their self-sufficiency and indifference make them enigmatic and objects of love. Their investment in themselves is prior to selfishness and altruism and inheritance and acquisition.

Psychoanalysts like Andreas-Salomé, Kristeva and Sarah Kofman have explored the radical potential of narcissism. In Narcissus they see not self-love and fascination with one’s own image but a passion for sameness and a dispossessed self that finds itself in the in-distinction and indifference between the inside and outside, the self and the other. The self of primary narcissism is neither a reflective self nor the pre-reflective minimal self of phenomenology. It is neither an identity nor a locus of control. The narcissist self does not presuppose the unity of the I, me and mine. It seeks sameness amidst these elements of the self. Here narcissism is the desire to lose the self in the all. “Tell them they are us!”

Aniket finds concepts like exclusion and marginalisation unhelpful to speak about the political situation of anti-caste struggle. Supporters of these concepts see society as a totality that closes on itself by excluding some elements. This excluded is at once constitutive of the totality and also outside of it. Today, power is often studied as putting to work a mechanism of exclusion. A heady combination of theories of exclusion and supplantarity...
allows us to see the untouchable as both excluded and marginal. Ambedkar’s famous one-liner “There is no caste without outcastes” is often read as an attestation of this exclusionary logic of power. However, according to Ambedkar, untouchability and exclusion were imposed on those who were already outside the permeable boundaries around the sedentary groups, the social totality. Aniket follows and extends this insight using concepts like transversality. Caste society is segmented. But segmentation is not exclusion. Segmentation presupposes transversal contaminations.

Towards Destitute Literature
For Aniket, Dalit literature aspires for the status of world literature through transversal destitution and extension. Aniket notices that a certain kind of Dalit writing has now become popular, respectable and successful. These are narratives of suffering, deprivation and discrimination. It anticipates and fulfils the expectations of our modern secular morality shared by the author, characters and readers. No wonder Dalit autobiographies have proliferated. What would be Dalit literature after Gopal Guru’s criticism of the cult of autobiography? Destitute literature does not mean literature that represents the life of poor people. Instead, it achieves destitution—destitution of the ethical as well as the literary. For Aniket, this is a sad enterprise that extracts a narrative of suffering from those who really suffered. For Aniket, the destitute literature marks an ethical aporia—an inability to pass into an act. The destitute lives become a model for this aporia that is generalisable. Politics presupposes the interruption of the ethical. This is a politics of willing to do anything to change the situation. This does not follow from any conception of justice or morality. Destitution is this urgency and necessity to do anything whatsoever.

Destitution is not blind action. Aniket discusses a story from Godse Bhatji’s Maza Pravas. In 1857, just before the mutiny, two soldiers—a Brahmin and a Chamar—go to a river to drink water. The Chamar asks to drink water from the Brahmin’s jug. The Brahmin refuses. The Chamar then tells the Brahmin about the cow fat that covered the bullet the latter had put in his mouth. Aniket distinguishes between the nature of knowledge of the Brahmin and the Chamar. The Brahmin’s knowledge is abstract, tentative and passive. The Brahmin would say “I cannot bring myself to give it to you.” The Chamar’s robust empirical knowledge is less dubitable and without any anxiety or passivity. This knowledge, though available to the Chamar earlier on, is revealed and deployed only when anything whatsoever may be deployed to get water. Hence, it is rhetorical and is driven by a knowledge about what can and cannot be touched. The destitute literature takes on this rhetorical deployment.

The stridency and loudness of Dalit literature is not phatic. It lays claim on the Dalit legacy of oral tradition. According to Aniket, the Vedic tradition even when transmitted through recitation was never oral. It was written in sound. Only the lower caste could afford the oral mode as they had no knowledge meant to be transmitted across contexts and no experience worth remembering.

With an academic detachment he scans the dispersion of statements about injustice found in letters written to British rulers that were magnetised by the discourse on suffering found elsewhere—say in the writing of Phule, etc. Such generalisation for victimhood does not help the transversalisation of Dalit literature and politics. Aniket renders victimhood inoperable. The discourse of victimhood prevents Dalit politics from being generalisable.

An exploration of untouchability explains the transition from I do not touch shit to I do not touch those who touch shit. How is touch/untouch extended from things to people? For Aniket this is a metonymical extension—part-whole metonymy through spatial concomitance and cause-effect metonymy through temporal concomitance. We touch things while we act upon them in the process of making. With the advent of machine-based production, touch is restricted to the control panels and with the digital era to the keyboard. However, there is no digital production unless someone is dirtying their hands in mining. Between the potter’s wheel and the keyboard there are many transpositions and transplantations taking place between regulations on touching and being touched by people and things. This would need a *programmalogie*. Aniket clears the ground for a tropology of touch, a necessary first step.

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