

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Recovering the Dalit Public Sphere: Vernacular Liberalism in Late Colonial North India

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## Abstract

Drawing from publications by Swami Achutanand and the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha press between 1916 and 1940, this article examines the role of this north Indian Dalit organization in creating language and categories of liberalism in the Hindi vernacular. The Mahasabha poet-activists published numerous song-booklets in a variety of Hindi song genres to intervene in ongoing discussions on the subjects of representation and equality which they characterized as *mulki-haq* and *unch-niche*. Histories of liberties in late colonial India have typically examined its emergence within dominant Hindu and Muslim middle-class groups. This article uncovers the unique contributions of Dalit poet-activists who recognized the value of liberal ideas and institutions in challenging caste and abolishing “Manu’s Kanun” (lawgiver Manu’s Hindu law codes). It highlights the methodological importance of *mohalla* (neighborhood) sources usually located in Dalit activists’ houses in untouchable quarters. The chapbooks found in *mohalla* collections have enabled the writing of a new history of the Mahasabha’s activism and of the initiatives taken by poet-activists in founding a new Dalit politics in northern India. I explore the emergence of a Dalit literate public which sustained the activities of the Mahasabha and which responded with enthusiasm to its articulation of the new social identity of *Achut* (untouched) and a new political identity of *Adi-Hindus*—original inhabitants of Hindustan (India). Offering a new methodological approach in using *mohalla* sources and song-booklets composed in praise of liberal institutions, this essay makes a significant contribution to the recovery of a forgotten Dalit public sphere in early twentieth-century India.

**Keywords:** Dalits; liberalism; nationalism; equality; caste; representation; public sphere; archives; *mohalla*; Adi-Hindu Mahasabha

On 14 February 1922, some twenty-five thousand Indian “untouchables” marched with their leader, Swami Achutanand, from the campgrounds of Old Fort in south Delhi through Old Delhi and the Civil Lines to the Khyber Pass road in north Delhi to welcome the Prince of Wales. They cheered as the Prince’s convoy passed the Khyber Pass and raised slogans in support of his visit. Press reports noted that earlier in the

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day volunteers of the Indian National Congress, which had organized a national boycott of the royal visit, had tried to obstruct the untouchable procession in Old Delhi.<sup>1</sup> Untouchable peasants and laborers from western Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, and surrounding regions came to participate in the procession and the conference. A day before the procession, on 13 February, Swami Achutanand and two poet-activists, Kavi Jagatram Jatiya and Nekram, had published the *Harihar Bhajan Mala Part II*, a song-booklet that engaged with questions of political representation, the struggle for equality, and caste. It contained twenty-eight songs in a variety of north Indian genres, including *bhajans*, *ghazals*, *khayals*, *rasiyas*, and *qawwalis*, and used these verse types as the titles of each song instead of highlighting their topical social-political themes.<sup>2</sup> The song-booklet coined and circulated vocabulary newly associated with concepts of liberty: “*mulki-haq*,” or civil rights, was used to describe separate (communal) electorates and proportional representation in the legislative assembly; “*unch-niche*,” high-low, was used to describe caste inequality and the struggle for social and constitutional equality; “*Adi-Hindu*,” was used to characterize “untouchables” as the original (Adi) inhabitants of Hindustan (India) and “Hindu” referred to the subcontinent rather than religion; and “*Achut*” was invoked to describe untouchables as untouched and pure.<sup>3</sup>

Swami Achutanand, leader of the Achut Caste-Reform Sabha and vice president of the Depressed Classes Association,<sup>4</sup> and its president, G. A. Gavai, had organized the third Depressed Classes conference in Delhi from 12–16 February 1922 to coincide with the royal visit. A year after this remarkable procession through the streets of Delhi, Achutanand became the founding president of the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha, established in 1923. Regarded as untouchables by orthodox Hindus, Dalits constitute 17 percent of India’s population and yet their histories have been severely underrepresented in mainstream Indian historiography. The study of Swami Achutanand and his associates’ remarkable activism and publishing projects, and the organizational accomplishments of the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha, building on the earlier organizational manifestations such as the Achut Caste-Reform Sabha and the Depressed Classes Association, together offer new insights into the history of Dalit activism.

Fieldwork in Dalit neighborhoods and an active search for Hindi-language Dalit histories have critically shaped my research efforts to recover a history of the Dalit public sphere. I first learned about the 1922 untouchable procession from two Dalit

<sup>1</sup>*Pioneer*, 16, 17, and 19 Feb. 1922; *Tribune*, 16 and 18 Feb. 1922; the Hindi daily, *Aaj*, 16 and 18 Feb. 1922. C. A. Barron, Chief Commissioner’s Delhi, “Tour of India of HRH Prince of Wales, 1921–22; History and Progress of the Tour; Speeches; Reports, etc.,” Nov. 1921–Sept. 1923, L/PJ/6/1777, file 7179, India Office Records, British Library, London. The newspapers and Commissioner Barron’s report mentions the presence of twenty-five thousand Dalit participants.

<sup>2</sup>*Harihar Bhajan Mala Part II* (Delhi: Mithanlal Chaudhari Haukumiram, Jatiya Committee, Delhi, 1922). Until 1924, Achutanand was known as Hariharanand and the first four song-booklets were named after him (Harihar).

<sup>3</sup>*Harihar Bhajan Mala Part II*, the song “Raga hariana dhavani,” 12–13, uses the term “*haq*,” but subsequent editions of this song used *mulki-haq*. *Unch-niche* appears in songs, *khayal* (9), *ghazal* (10–11), *qawwali* (14–15), *ghazal* (16). Although the word “*prachin-vasi*” appears in *ghazal* (3–4), *qawwali* (6), *ghazal* (7), *ghazal* (8), the later editions of these songs use the term “Adi-Hindu.”

<sup>4</sup>The cover page of *Harihar Bhajan Mala Part II* identifies Swami Achutanand as President of *achut*, “Caste-Reform Mahasabha.” The December 1925 Adi-Hindu Mahasabha poster describes Achutanand as the “Chief Leader of the Adi-Hindus” and organizer of the Prince of Wales 1922 welcome procession (publisher and place of publication unknown).

lawyer-activists in Agra, Daya Shankar and Kartar Bharti, in September 2002.<sup>5</sup> A year of ethnographic and archival research in 2008–2009 proved most productive during which time generous Dalit activists offered copies of chapbooks from their personal collections, including works published between 1916 and 1970. In March 2009, I was introduced to Mr. Mohan S. Bansal, the grandson of Swami Achutanand, who kindly shared copies of twenty-nine chapbooks, consisting of song-booklets, plays (in verse), and speeches published by the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha Press between 1924 and 1940, along with a collection of photos relating to the Mahasabha. These chapbooks included four of Achutanand's song-booklets published between 1916 and 1924 with support from Dalit patrons in Agra and Delhi.<sup>6</sup> Several Mahasabha chapbooks and two posters mentioned Swami Achutanand's procession to welcome the Prince of Wales. Despite earning a master's and doctoral degrees in Indian history from the University of Delhi, one of the world's premier South Asian history programs, I had never before read about this massive demonstration of twenty-five thousand Dalits who had assembled less than a mile from the university. The narrative of this Dalit demonstration to welcome the Prince of Wales in the age of strident nationalist opposition to the colonial state found little reception in dominant nationalist historiography.<sup>7</sup> The establishment of the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha Press and the publications of chapbooks reveal a vibrant Dalit engagement with print activism that belies widespread academic claims that Dalit political activism emerged only after the 1970s.<sup>8</sup> This article recovers a lost history of this vibrant Dalit public sphere by focusing on early Adi-Hindu Mahasabha publications and accounts of its activism.

The publication of the *Harihar Bhajan Mala Part II* and the very public activism in Delhi in February 1922 decisively confirm the emergence and consolidation of a Dalit public sphere.<sup>9</sup> Four song-booklets authored by Swami Achutanand (1916–1924), an additional twenty-five published by the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha (1924–1940), and the practice of counter-demonstrations that began in 1922, together demonstrate the pioneering role of Dalit poet-activists in creating a new Hindi language public sphere in northern India. These poet-activists, led by Achutanand, founded the Mahasabha in 1923 and established its printing press in 1925, which enabled them to publicize their agendas and gave them unprecedented depth and visibility in untouchable neighborhoods. This Dalit public sphere engaged in the civic debate inaugurated by the Government of India Act of 1919 on the question of separate (communal) electorates and proportional representation, identified in Mahasabha writings as *mulki-haq*.<sup>10</sup> Pre-existing song genres were adapted to

<sup>5</sup>Interview with Daya Shankar and Kartar Bharti, Agra, 13 and 14 Sept. 2002. Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu, *Shri 108 Swami Achutanandji "Harihar"* (Lucknow: Bahujan Kalyan Prakashan, 1968), 8–10.

<sup>6</sup>I spent a week with Mr. Bansal at Gwalior in Madhya Pradesh, 4–10 Mar. 2009.

<sup>7</sup>Minnie Sinha writes that Katherine Mayo's Indian friend Cornelia Sorabji challenged the "veracity of [her] description of the visit of the Prince of Wales," regarding the presence of twenty-five thousand Dalits in Delhi. M. Sinha, ed., *Selections from Mother India: Katherine Mayo* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998), 192–93.

<sup>8</sup>Christophe Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 8–9.

<sup>9</sup>There are several instances of Dalit activism between 1916 and 1922 (see my next section), however, 1922 marks the beginning of a shift toward an outward orientation with a very public engagement.

<sup>10</sup>Durba Ghosh, "The Reforms of 1919," in *Gentlemanly Terrorists: Political Violence and the Colonial State in India, 1919–1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), ch. 1; Stephen Legg, "Dyarchy:

play a constitutive role in the formation of the Dalit public sphere and offer a new perspective on the existing conceptual models of the public sphere with its exclusive focus on middle-class prose genres.<sup>11</sup> This Dalit public sphere shared characteristics with other counterpublics, but given Dalits' awareness of their subordinated status tied to the prevailing notions of stigma and hierarchy that regulated their visibility in public spaces, this public sphere from its inception sought to intervene in a starkly visible manner within northern India's dominant civic spaces.<sup>12</sup> Achutanand described the 1922 Delhi procession as a "movement in opposition to the Non-Cooperation movement," organized to challenge the Congress-led nationalist movement due to its failure to address the question of caste.<sup>13</sup> Dalit poet-activists created new vernacular concepts in popular song genres to advocate for the democratization of the public sphere and challenge the exclusionary ideology of caste.

In this article, I recover the history of this Dalit public sphere by documenting their invisibility within existing South Asian historiography and examining the innovative role Mahasabha poet-activists played in crafting a language of liberal politics through their song-booklets and development of new activist techniques. In part one, I discuss the *invisibility* of the Dalit public sphere within academic discourses and its corresponding *visibility* in Dalit *mohallas* (neighborhoods) by investigating the relationship between nationalist Hindu middle-class actors and the absence of Dalits in the historiography of the public sphere. Drawing from my fieldwork experiences, I introduce the notion of "*mohalla* archives" to highlight the critical role of Dalit activists' houses, typically in untouchable neighborhoods, as alternative sites of historical sources that enable this recovery of a vibrant public sphere. Part two investigates the creative leadership of Dalit poet-activists based in Agra, Delhi, and Kanpur in founding the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha, establishing its press, and forming a critical relationship with a Dalit literate public, a source of vital patronage. This public emerged primarily from secular casteless occupations, such as the "building-construction trade," and "the railways,"<sup>14</sup> and it readily responded to unique social (Achut) and political (Adi-Hindu) identities articulated by Mahasabha poet-activists. In part three, I explore Dalit poet-activists' engagements with liberal politics through their song-booklets and their production of a new political vocabulary. I focus particularly on two terms: *mulki-haq* and *unch-niche*. These poet-activists addressed gender dimensions of Dalit politics by advocating for the education of untouchable girls and for their employment in secular professions. They promoted the Sant-mat religious tradition, marked by devotion to the formless supreme lord (Satnam), as the ethical source of the Mahasabha's liberal politics.

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Democracy, Autocracy, and the Scalar Sovereignty of Interwar India," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 36, 1 (2016): 44–65.

<sup>11</sup>"On the Genesis of the Bourgeois Public Sphere," in Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994[1991]), 14–26. Habermas defines the middle class as a "reading public" based in the cities (*ibid.*: 23). Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 111–42.

<sup>12</sup>Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 118–21.

<sup>13</sup>"Bahishkar Andolan ke Virodh Mein Andolan," in Jigyasu, *Shri 108*, 9.

<sup>14</sup>Ramnarayan Yaduvendu, *Yaduvansh ka Itihas* (Agra: Navyug Sahitya Niketan, 1942), 130.

## Invisible Histories and Methods in Dalit Studies: The Role of the *Mohalla* Archives

The words “Dalits” and “untouchables,” and references to “Dalit activism,” were absent from the first prominent discussion of the public sphere in the journal *South Asia*’s 1991 special issue on “Aspects of ‘the Public’ in Colonial South Asia.”<sup>15</sup> Yet, in 1990, discussion on caste had entered the Indian public sphere in a dramatic fashion. Caste-Hindu student groups had led a year-long agitation against the Indian government’s decision in August 1990 to implement the Mandal Commission Report, which recommended the extension of affirmative action to include lower-caste Hindu groups, previously confined only to Dalit and Adivasi (indigenous) communities. Fearing reservations would limit their own employment opportunities, caste-Hindu student groups organized widespread protests in Indian cities against the implementation of affirmative action quotas. Dalit student organizations staged counter-demonstrations to defend the principle of affirmative action and protest the historical injustice of caste inequality.<sup>16</sup> The “Introduction” to the *South Asia* special issue identified “two distinct arenas” of the public sphere: “one constituted by the political discourse” typically associated with nationalist groups, and the other represented by local “familial and fictive kin-based” groups typically associated with advancing caste identity politics.<sup>17</sup> Chris Bayly has argued that in the early twentieth century untouchables were “invisible” and, more importantly they were theoretically and spiritually disempowered,” and therefore Dalit actors received scant attention from nationalist groups.<sup>18</sup> The historiography of the public sphere has focused primarily on the nationalist Hindu middle-class groups. The lack of awareness of Dalit vernacular sources (or lack of access to them) has contributed to the elision of early Dalit activism from Indian historiography. Inspired by Shahid Amin’s emphasis on “historical fieldwork,” we can see how engagements with archival sources preserved in Dalit *mohallas* must radically transform our understandings of the histories of vernacular public spheres.<sup>19</sup>

The invisibility of Dalit activism within English-language academia demonstrates the dominance caste-Hindu groups have acquired in institutional and academic settings. In genealogies of Indian democracy, interventions by Dalit organizations have been considered derivative of practices established by Indian nationalist organizations. In his 2001 essay, Atul Kohli has emphasized “the role of the Indian nationalist elite and nationalist movements in the birth of Indian democracy.” Since independence, the “spread of democracy has implied that norms and practices of

<sup>15</sup>Sandria Freitag, “Introduction: ‘The Public’ and Its Meanings in Colonial South Asia,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 14, 1 (1991): 1–13, 3–4, 7–8. See also Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Open Space Public Place: Garbage Modernity and India,” *South Asia* 14, 1 (1991): 15–31, 20–24.

<sup>16</sup>Gail Omvedt, “‘Twice-Born’ Riot against Democracy,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 25, 39 (1990): 2195–201; David Gilmartin, “Rule of Law, Rule of Life: Caste, Democracy, and Courts in India,” *American Historical Review* 115, 2 (2010): 406–27.

<sup>17</sup>Freitag, “Introduction,” 4.

<sup>18</sup>Christopher A. Bayly, *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 298.

<sup>19</sup>Shahid Amin has emphasized the vital role of historical fieldwork, which combines research in the archives with ethnographic fieldwork that can provide new insights into historian’s narratives, in *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri-Chaura 1922–1992* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 194–95.

democracy—not only independent voting, but also expressing dissent, and forming associations to press demands—have been embraced by more and more people, including those at the bottom of India’s social structure.”<sup>20</sup> The more recent visibility of Dalit activism since the 1980s and 1990s, especially the Bahujan Samaj Party’s political interventions, is typically explained as initiatives to protect “caste-based reservations” which have transformed “castes into interest groups”<sup>21</sup> and fostered “a sense of caste identity”<sup>22</sup> politics. Dalit activism is historicized as derivative of earlier Indian nationalist political methods and discourses. Founded in 1984, the Bahujan Samaj Party achieved extraordinary electoral success in India’s largest state, Uttar Pradesh, winning a legislative majority and forming the government several times between 1990 and 2007. Greater visibility of Dalit movements after the 1990s in the public sphere have “met with violent backlashes” that have posed historiographical dilemmas in South Asian studies.<sup>23</sup> Recovering the much longer history of the Dalit public sphere forces us to recognize the fundamental contributions Dalits have made not just to identity politics but to the histories of democracy, liberalism, and the public sphere.

The study of the Indian public sphere has revealed the value of vernacular sources in tracing the hegemony achieved by Hindu middle-class groups in colonial India. The 1991 *South Asia* special issue highlighted these middle-class groups’ reliance on textual sources of Hindu and Muslim religious traditions to redefine public and private domains. The Muslim service gentry generated an extensive discussion of how its domestic private spaces (*khas*), comprising women, eros, and paganism, was reformed by instilling orthodox textual Islamic values.<sup>24</sup> The Hindu middle class fashioned its secular image by raising “the women question” in the nineteenth century to advance the ideals of the conjugal relationship, and it achieved that objective with the support of the colonial state, which enacted new laws.<sup>25</sup> Its agenda to transform gender relations has been historicized as having drawn from “elite upper-caste Hindu imaginations” within which the ideal of the Aryan woman represented the Hindus’ glorious past and accommodated their concerns for modern, educated wives.<sup>26</sup> The middle-class Hindu sensibilities of the *sati-savitri* model idealized the chaste and devoted woman, and this gendered ideal defined the autonomous women’s movement that developed in the 1920s, which advocated for

<sup>20</sup>Atul Kohli, ed., “Introduction,” in *The Success of India’s Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1–22, 5, 14.

<sup>21</sup>Christophe Jaffrelot, “Caste and Political Parties in India: Do Indians Vote Their Caste—while Casting their Vote?” in Atul Kohli and Prerna Singh, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Indian Politics* (London: Routledge, 2013), 107–19, 109–10.

<sup>22</sup>Badri Narayan, *The Making of the Dalit Public in North India: Uttar Pradesh, 1950–Present* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), xxvi.

<sup>23</sup>Sharika Thiranagama, “Respect Your Neighbor as Yourself: Neighborliness, Caste, and Community in South India,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 61, 2 (2019): 269–300, 270.

<sup>24</sup>Faisal Devji, “Gender and the Politics of Space: The Movement for Women’s Reform in Muslim India,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 14, 1 (1991): 141–53.

<sup>25</sup>Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar, eds., “Introduction,” in *Women and Social Reform in Modern India: A Reader* (Ranikhet [Uttarakhand]: Permanent Black, 2007).

<sup>26</sup>Mrinalini Sinha, “Gendered Nationalism: From Women to Gender and Back Again?” in Leela Fernandes, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Gender in South Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 13–27, 17; Uma Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* (Calcutta: Stree, 2003).



child marriage reforms.<sup>27</sup> For example, professional and mercantile groups in the city of Surat in western India appropriated the notion of rights rooted in the Jain-Hindu religious vocabulary for the purposes of electoral politics. Terms such as *dharma* (religious duty), *maryada* (honor), *rashtriyavad* (nationalism), and *svatantrata* (independence) were used to define concepts central to Indian nationalism.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the history of the north Indian ecumene is premised on the discourses of rights, duties, and just kingship borrowed from caste-Hindu religious ideals and Sanskrit vocabulary, marshalled to forge a shared national identity.<sup>29</sup>

The study of vernacular public spheres reveals the seminal role played by regional languages as mediums of knowledge production that shaped the literary and cultural histories which enabled the “upper-caste intelligentsia” to wield considerable influence in the provinces.<sup>30</sup> In Maharashtra, the caste-Hindu intelligentsia actively ignored the Dalit groups demand to address questions of caste inequality.<sup>31</sup> Francesca Orsini’s masterly study traces the rise of small-town caste-Hindu elites who played a leading role in the formation of the Hindi language, further solidifying their hegemony over the Hindi public sphere. The caste-Hindu elite actively promoted Vedic-Aryan ideals in the literary media as foundational cultural resources for present-day Indian society.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, Dravidian advocates of devotion to a pure Tamil language (*tamilparru*) sought to cleanse it of the influences of Sanskrit terms and fostered fidelity to a Hindu Shaivite religious ethos untouched by Brahmanism.<sup>33</sup> Caste-Hindu elites in the coastal Andhra region successfully forged a new linguistic and political loyalty to the Telugu language (Telugu *talli*), but deliberately ignored the activism of its most famous martyr, Potti Sriramulu, to end discrimination against untouchables.<sup>34</sup> Dalit actors have been invisible both in the *South Asia* special issue and in subsequent histories of the Indian public sphere due to the nationalist caste-Hindu groups domination of academic scholarship and the public sphere.

<sup>27</sup>Mrinalini Sinha, “Gender in the Critiques of Colonialism and Nationalism: Locating the Indian Women,” in Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar, eds., *Women and Social Reform in Modern India: A Reader* (Ranikhet [Uttarakhand]: Permanent Black, 2007), 452–72, 465.

<sup>28</sup>Douglas Haynes, *Rhetoric and Ritual in Colonial India: The Shaping of a Public Culture in Surat City, 1852–1928* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), ch. 10; Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere, 1920–1940: Language, Literature, in the Age of Nationalism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), ch. 5.

<sup>29</sup>Christopher A. Bayly, “The Indian Ecumene: An Indigenous Public Sphere,” in *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 180–211.

<sup>30</sup>Veena Naregal, *Language Politics, Elites, and the Public Sphere: Western India under Colonialism* (London: Anthem, 2002), 266; Vasudha Dalmia, *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions: Bharatendu Harishchandra and Nineteenth-Century Banaras* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997); Sanjay Joshi, *Fractured Modernity: Making of a Middle Class in Colonial North India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>31</sup>Chapter 5, on relationship between caste, the middle class, and language, in Naregal, *Language*.

<sup>32</sup>Orsini, “The Shape of Society,” in *Hindi Public Sphere*, 225–39.

<sup>33</sup>Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891–1970* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), ch. 2; David Washbrook, *The Emergence of Provincial Politics: The Madras Presidency, 1870–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), ch. 6.

<sup>34</sup>Lisa Mitchell, *Language, Emotion, and Politics in South India: The Making of a Mother Tongue* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 205–6.

Studies of subaltern activism in colonial India have argued that it is the paucity of vernacular sources written by subaltern groups which have informed the method and approaches to the history of subaltern politics. Dipesh Chakrabarty's influential work on labor in colonial Bengal has drawn attention to the persistence of caste hierarchies in working-class politics.<sup>35</sup> However, evaluating the contributions of the *Subaltern Studies* volumes to historical methods, he has argued that the "problem of subaltern pasts dogging the enterprise" was to "ground the struggle for democracy in India in the facts of subaltern history."<sup>36</sup> Most studies of subaltern consciousness, such as Ranajit Guha's seminal article "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," explained the rebellious acts of peasants in supernatural terms and not with reference to social and economic facts.<sup>37</sup> Subaltern histories highlighted activists such as Dhorai, a low-caste activist who used language and idioms associated with the mythic past of Lord Rama, the moral authority of *Ram-Rajya*, to interpret and engage with the Congress-led national movement.<sup>38</sup> Guha's article on the Santal Adivasi rebellion relied exclusively on the colonial archive and lacked sources from Santal organizations and Lutheran and Jesuit missionary archives—two sets of co-participants.<sup>39</sup> Uday Chandra writes that the latter two sets of sources contain vital information on Santal Adivasi rebels' motivations, suggesting a longer secular engagement with the colonial state relating to their rights over resources.<sup>40</sup> Historians of working-class politics have acknowledged the challenges in recovering the voices of labor activists.<sup>41</sup> Chandavarkar has written about the "silence" of working-classes sources which has forced historians to depend on "those who spoke on their behalf: trade unionists and political leaders, journalists and social workers, civil servants and lawyers."<sup>42</sup>

The field of Dalit Studies has emerged from an innovative approach to sources that combines historical fieldwork in Dalit *mohallas* with close readings of the vernacular writings that fieldwork has revealed. Dalit historical sources are typically housed in Dalit activists' homes rather than in formal libraries or state archives.

<sup>35</sup>The notion of "precapitalist 'community'—distinguished by hierarchical, inegalitarian, and illiberal relationships" occupies an important intellectual concern in Chakrabarty's work: *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal 1890–1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 219.

<sup>36</sup>Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 102–3. Chakrabarty has emphasized a distinct domain of subaltern activism that continually brought "gods and spirits" into politics and distinguished it from middle-class activism that engaged with liberal ideas and institutions (*ibid.*: 14–15).

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 102–6.

<sup>38</sup>Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 10–14. Dhorai encouraged low-caste voters to vote for the present-day Lord Rama, Mahatma Gandhi.

<sup>39</sup>Uday Chandra, "Flaming Fields and Forest Fires: Agrarian Transformations and the Making of Birsa Munda's Rebellion," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 53, 1 (2016): 69–98, 70.

<sup>40</sup>"Introduction," in Uday Chandra, "Negotiating Leviathan: State-Making and Resistance in the Margins of Modern India," PhD diss., Yale University, 2013.

<sup>41</sup>Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 8. Samita Sen, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India: The Bengal Jute Industry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 9. On peasants, see Vinayak Chaturvedi, *Peasant Pasts: History and Memory in Western India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 5–8.

<sup>42</sup>Chandavarkar, *Origins*, 8.



They circulated almost exclusively within Dalit networks at political and cultural events and were rarely encountered or preserved by non-Dalits. Dalit activists have informally performed the role of archivists by preserving sources in wardrobes and trunks in their own houses. They have consciously built personal collections by recognizing the value of historical print material, including diaries and newspapers, as part of their commitment to Dalit politics. Acknowledging the discovery of Marathi language chapbooks and newspapers in *mohalla* archives in untouchable neighborhoods, Anupama Rao writes in the preface of her 2009 book, “It would be impossible to write Dalit history without the private collections of activists such as V. Moon, G. Pantawane, and R. Shinde.”<sup>43</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer’s exceptional 1982 study of the Dalit Ad-Dharm movement in Punjab in the 1920s and Ravindra Khare’s 1984 ethnography of Dalit activism in Lucknow both highlighted the methodological role of *mohalla* archives.<sup>44</sup> Drawing from the Telugu-language sources found in Dalit activists’ homes, Chinnaiah Jangam’s 2018 study unearthed the history of vibrant Dalit activism in Hyderabad led by activists, such as Bhagya Reddy Varma and Jalal Rangaswamy, who actively engaged with the Gandhian national movement.<sup>45</sup> G. Aloysius discovered the Tamil Dalit publications of the Adi-Dravida activist Iyothee Thass in Chennai, enabling him to document Thass’ organizational efforts between 1890 and 1914 and his singular efforts to claim Buddhism as the original religion of untouchables.<sup>46</sup> A number of new studies in the last decade have recovered, for the first time, vibrant histories of parallel Dalit public spheres in a wide range of regional languages in the early twentieth century.<sup>47</sup>

Dalit feminists have similarly utilized personal collections in *mohalla* archives of Pune and Mumbai to recover new dimensions of gender history and challenge dominant notions that untouchable women had more freedom than caste-Hindu women.<sup>48</sup> In the 1980s, Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon recorded the voices of twenty-nine surviving Dalit women participants in the Ambedkar movement whose

<sup>43</sup>Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), xvi. On the relationship between fieldwork and Dalit history, see Saurabh Dube, *Untouchable Pasts: Religion, Identity, and Power among a Central Indian Community, 1780–1950* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998). On the use of Dalit memoirs, see Gyanendra Pandey, *A History of Prejudice: Race, Caste, and Difference in India and the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), ch. 6.

<sup>44</sup>Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision: The Movement against Untouchability in Twentieth-Century Punjab* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); R. S. Khare, *The Untouchable as Himself: Ideology, Identity and Pragmatism among the Lucknow Chamars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). Both books highlight Dalit Punjabi and Hindi language sources discovered during fieldwork.

<sup>45</sup>Chinnaiah Jangam, *Dalits and the Making of Modern India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017), ix–xi. His study has recovered several Dalit-run newspapers, such as *Bhagyanagar Patrika*, *Harijana Shathakamu*, and chapbooks published between 1900 and 1940.

<sup>46</sup>G. Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity: A Buddhist Movement among the Tamils under Colonialism* (New Delhi: New Age International, 1998).

<sup>47</sup>P. Sanal Mohan, *Modernity of Slavery: Struggles against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015); Dwaipayan Sen, *The Decline of the Caste Question: Jogendranath Mandal and the Defeat of Dalit Politics in Bengal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>48</sup>Urmila Pawar, “What Has the Dalit Movement Offered to Women?” in Sandeep Pendse, ed., *At Crossroads: Dalit Movement Today* (Mumbai: Vikas Adhyayan Kendra, 1994), 83–94; Sharmila Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women’s Testimonios* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006).

voices had been absent from mainstream histories.<sup>49</sup> Feminist scholars have highlighted the role of Dalit *mohallas* as a site of struggles for human dignity and against dominant masculine cultural norms.<sup>50</sup> Contemporary Dalit Hindi feminist writers have emphasized individual struggles for education, while negotiating hegemonic boundaries of caste and patriarchy, with the goal of acquiring middle-class professions considered vital to achieving dignity.<sup>51</sup> Lucinda Ramberg recovers the history of Dalit women Jogatis (Devadasis) as “auspicious women,” keepers of the devotional tradition related to non-Sanskrit Shakta religion embodied in village goddesses Yelamma and Matangi.<sup>52</sup> Occupying this ethical space in villages in northern Karnataka empowered Jogatis with the rights to inherit and transfer property rights.<sup>53</sup> We must recognize that the ethno-historical fieldwork in Dalit *mohallas* and the efforts of Dalit activists themselves to preserve important documentation of their own pasts in their private collection played a pivotal methodological role in the emergence of the Dalit Studies.

African American historians have interrogated the critical relationship between sources and historiographical priorities to demonstrate the methodological value of material produced by stigmatized groups. Dalit pasts have been silenced because of “uneven power in the production of sources, archives, and narratives,” an argument that Michel-Rolph Trouillot has elaborated to explain the general silencing of the Haitian revolution by Western historiography.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, it is imperative to incorporate historical materials produced outside of academia, including, for instance, alternative Dalit vernacular narratives of the past to investigate the “one-sidedness” of the sources and narratives in the “theories of history.”<sup>55</sup> Such methodological insights have contributed to the expansion of the history of the American public sphere by making visible Black activism and contributions to its political thought. Houston Baker, Jr., for example, has argued that the historiography of American liberalism has been unwilling to recognize or even acknowledge “black cultural work” comprised of religious songs, musical ministry, oratory, and church meetings, which “can be conceived as ceaselessly inventing its own modernity.”<sup>56</sup> According to Michael Dawson, the invisibility of Black political thought was maintained by claims that it was derivative of white American liberalism, and by actively ignoring and dismissing practices that challenged the dominant narrative.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon, *We also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement*, Wandana Sonalkar, trans. (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2008), 38–42. The book was originally published in Marathi language in 1989. See also Shailaja Paik’s study of Dalit middle-class women based on interviews and autobiographies: *Dalit Women’s Education in Modern India: Double Discrimination* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>50</sup>Lucinda Ramberg, *Given to the Goddess: South Indian Devadasis and Sexuality of Religion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>51</sup>“Centered on Dalit Women-Reflections,” special issue of the Hindi journal *Apeksha* 6, 22 (2008). See especially articles by Kusum Meghwal, Anita Bharti, and Rajat Rani “Minu.”

<sup>52</sup>Ramberg, *Given to the Goddess*, 27–28.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, 196–200.

<sup>54</sup>Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 27.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>56</sup>Houston A. Baker, Jr., “Critical Memory and the Black Public?” *Public Culture* 7, 1 (1994): 3–33, 13, 16.

<sup>57</sup>Michael Dawson, “A Black Counterpublic? Economic Earthquakes, Racial Agenda(s), and Black Power,” *Public Culture* 7, 1 (1994): 195–223, 209.

Historical fieldwork in Dalit *mohallas* and the search for untouchable histories in vernacular languages outside the privileged English-language academic settings have contributed significantly to recovering histories of Dalit public spheres in various provinces. Dalit *mohalla* archives have emerged as alternative sites of historical sources and the informal collections of chapbooks in activists' houses have played an active role in preserving and circulating Dalit Hindi language histories. Instead of studying untouchables through the pollution cliché, as Gyan Prakash has cautioned us against,<sup>58</sup> historical fieldwork has helped recover Dalit activists as vernacular historians. The recognition of Dalits as proactive actors is a historically contingent development linked to political events in the 1990s marked by public discussion over caste, the rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party, and the emergence of Dalit student, literary, and feminist organizations.<sup>59</sup> The contemporary visibility of Dalit actors has prompted the search for histories of the Dalit public sphere, and the methodological developments that have resulted from this have notable parallels with the discussion of the Black public sphere in the 1990s.<sup>60</sup> Baker's opening essay of *Public Culture's* special issue "The Black Public Sphere" drew attention to the changed political context. He argued that the "[Black] struggle under King's leadership moved from 'invisibility' to legal civil rights victories," coupled with a greater recognition by the mainstream American media and academia.<sup>61</sup>

### The Adi-Hindu Mahasabha: A New Introduction

Swami Achutanand's four song-booklets, the Mahasabha press's twenty-five chapbooks, and another dozen published by affiliated Dalit groups between 1916 and 1960 offer fresh insights on the activists who led the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha and on that movement's patrons. These sources revise the history of the movement in three key areas: (1) they reveal the role Dalit patrons played in supporting poet-activists in Agra, Delhi, and Kanpur; (2) they bring to light the emergence of a Dalit literate public and its relationship with the Mahasabha; and (3) they uncover Mahasabha poet-activists' motivations in creating new social (*Achut*) and political (*Adi-Hindu*) identities. Histories of the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha by R. S. Khare (1984), Nandini Gooptu (2001), Badri Narayan (2004), and Ramnarayan Rawat (2011) have mainly relied on two major Hindi books by Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu.<sup>62</sup> The first is a history of the original inhabitants of India published in 1965 while the second is a 1968 biography of Swami Achutanand.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>58</sup>For an important study of labor and untouchability, see Gyan Prakash, *Bonded Histories: Genealogies of Labor Servitude in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 34–81.

<sup>59</sup>On implications of contemporary Dalit activism for the emergence of this new field, see "Introduction," in Ramnarayan S. Rawat and K. Satyanarayana, eds., *Dalit Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 1–8.

<sup>60</sup>"The Black Public Sphere," special issue of *Public Culture* 7, 1 (1994).

<sup>61</sup>Baker, "Critical Memory," 29.

<sup>62</sup>Khare, *Untouchable as Himself*; Nandini Gooptu, *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 152–66; Badri Narayan and A. R. Misra, eds., *Multiple Marginalities: An Anthology of Identified Dalit Writing* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2004); Ramnarayan S. Rawat, *Reconsidering Untouchability: Chamars and Dalit History in North India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), ch. 5.

<sup>63</sup>Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu, *Bharat ke Adi Nivasiyon ki Sabhyata* (Lucknow: Bahujan Kalyan Prakashan, 1965); Jigyasu, *Shri 108*.

The Mahasabha's innovative organizational approach produced one of the largest Dalit movements in early twentieth-century India. In February 1922, Swami Achutanand and his fellow poet-activists of the Achut Caste-Reform Sabha played a leading role in organizing the untouchable procession and conference in Delhi. As president of the Mahasabha, Achutanand successfully arranged for a highly visible national conference of Dalit leaders from different provinces of the subcontinent, including Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, in Allahabad, from 26–28 December 1927. At this conference, the Dalit leaders announced their unanimous position on the question of *mulki-haq*—demanding separate electorates and proportional representation in legislative assemblies in the provinces. The first day began with a march of twenty-five thousand Dalit activists and leaders through Allahabad's streets to the conference venue of Mayo Hall.<sup>64</sup> This national meeting was planned to coincide with the annual meeting of the Indian National Congress held on the same dates in Madras (Chennai) to deliberate on representation in the provincial legislative assemblies, and especially on the allocation of seats to minorities. The Adi-Hindu Mahasabha, as a Dalit organization, developed the political technique of counter-demonstrations to actively engage with the Congress and caste-Hindu groups.

In 1923, first-generation Dalit poet-activists, educated in government vernacular secondary schools between 1890 and 1910, established the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha at a gathering of several hundred people in Etawah town in western Uttar Pradesh. Swami Achutanand (1879–1933), based in Delhi and later Kanpur, and Kavi Jagatram Jatiya, based in Delhi, played leading roles in founding the Mahasabha.<sup>65</sup> A group of Jatav Mahasabha leaders in Agra and Delhi, led by its vice-president, Babu Hiralal Bodhilal, persuaded Achutanand to expand his work on education and activism from Mainpuri and Agra to Delhi. A prosperous trader in Agra, Babu Hiralal Bodhilal, had emerged as a major patron of Achutanand and funded the publication of his first song booklet in 1916, the *Hari-Bhajan Mala Part I*. In 1917, Achutanand moved to Delhi, where he lived for seven years in a Paharganj *mohalla* which had a sizeable presence of Dalits, mainly from the Chamar-Jatav community, who were engaged in a number of trades. There he met his two core associates, poet-activists Jagatram Jatiya and Devidas Jatiya, and together in 1917 they founded the “Achut Caste-Reform Sabha” in Delhi. These three poet-activists emerged as the leading writers of the Mahasabha's song booklets. The 1924 *Adi-Hindu Bhajanavali Part IV* introduced Achutanand as the “chief-leader of the Achut Sabha and editor of *Achut* newspaper in Delhi.”<sup>66</sup> In 1925, Achutanand moved to Kanpur at the invitation of Dalit patrons who offered him a house and a printing press to further strengthen the Dalit movement. He lived there until his premature death in July 1933 at the age of fifty-three.

<sup>64</sup>The figure of twenty-five thousand is mentioned in the Mahasabha report, but the police and newspaper reports mention no exact figure. *Report of the All-India Adi-Hindu (Depressed Classes) Conference, Allahabad, December 26–28, 1927* (Allahabad: All-India Adi-Hindu Conference (Imperial Press), 7 Jan. 1928), 12 pp., UP, 427, IOR/Q/13/1/14, India Office Records, British Library.

<sup>65</sup>Hira Lal Jatiya, *Arjun ke Gumnamī Bujdile* (Kanpur: Adi-Hindu Mahasabha Press, [1928?]), 8 pp., 6–8. This paragraph draws from this book, which provides an historical account of Achutanand's activism between 1910 and 1927.

<sup>66</sup>*Adi-Hindu (Achut 'Pavitra') Bhajanavali: Arthat Harihar Bhajan Mala Part IV* (Fatehgarh: Achut Adi-Hindu Sabha, 1924), 13 pp. The Adi-Hindu Mahasabha, Fatehgarh, UP, published the song-booklet ahead of a regional conference in November 1924.

The founding of the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha Press in 1925 enabled Dalit poet-activists to circulate a political agenda within its distinctive audience which would further strengthen the incipient movement. Dalit publications would no longer be tethered to individual patrons, which had been the case with Achutanand's four song-booklets; instead, the Press regularly published song-booklets, speeches, and newspapers from 1926 to 1933. It published two additional books: the *Ram-Rajya Nyaya Natak* in 1936 and the *Adi-Vansh ka Danka* in 1940.<sup>67</sup> This first generation of poet-activists contributed actively by composing song-booklets for the press. Although Swami Achutanand and Kavi Jagatram Jatiya were its most visible faces, several other poet-activists such as Devidas Jatiya from Delhi, Dr. Ramswarup Jaiswar from Lucknow, and Babu Prabhu Dayal Kureel from Kanpur also published song-booklets with the Mahasabha's press. These incorporated verses composed by poet-activists based in small towns in Uttar Pradesh, including by Kanhaiyalal Mantri from Fatehgarh, Hira Lal Jatiya from Kannauj, and Nekram from Etawah. The song-booklets also contained compositions by unknown individual authors, such as a 1928 "*kajari*" song on *mulki-haq* rights. Shanti Bai, Achutanand's daughter, was one of the two editors of Mahasabha's publications and the *Achut* newspaper from Kanpur. Married to the Mahasabha activist Thakur Chand Kain, her name first appeared as the "composer" of *Arjun ke Gumnamī Bujdile*, a 1928 chapbook providing a brief history of Achutanand.<sup>68</sup> Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu, a close associate of Achutanand, built on this commitment to print by starting the Adi-Hindu Propaganda Press in 1940 and later the Bahujan Kalyan Prakashan in 1960, in Lucknow. The latter became the most prominent Dalit publishing house in northern India. In addition to publishing Swami Achutanand's biography and his plays, the Bahujan Kalyan Prakashan published nearly ninety titles by Dalit authors between 1960 and 2006. Currently there are two active Dalit presses in Delhi: Samyak Prakashan and Siddarth Books. This century of publication is critical to the present-day strength of the Dalit movement in northern India.

Access to employment opportunities and to secondary school education in late British India also played a decisive role in creating a vernacular Dalit literate public in urban centers and small towns in northern India.<sup>69</sup> The label "Dalit literate public" builds on Nandini Gooptu's definition of "a new generation of literate untouchables," which describes the education level of poet-activists and untouchables engaged in service occupations who were educated in Hindi-language government-run schools.<sup>70</sup> However, I use it to highlight a new relationship between the literate untouchables employed in secular (casteless) "*naukari*" (service) in small trades, workshops (*karkhanas*), and industries. A Persian Hindi word, *naukari* was used in a 1942 Dalit chapbook, *Yaduvansh ka Itihas*, to describe new kinds of employment that untouchables had entered into early in the twentieth century.<sup>71</sup> As the 1929 Hindi

<sup>67</sup>Swami Achutanand composed the play and Dr. Thakurchandji Kaim wrote the script: *Ram-Rajya Nyaya Natak: Shambuka (Shudra-Saints') Sacrifice*, in 1936 (Kanpur, 1936). The play's five chapters portray Shambuka as an ascetic-activist who protected the Adi-Hindus and educated them against caste inequality. Bahujan Kalyan Prakashan printed this play in 1960 and by 1996 had published fifteen editions. *Adi-Vansh ka Danka* (Lucknow: Adi-Hindu Propaganda Bureau, 1940).

<sup>68</sup>Jatiya, *Arjun*, 4–5.

<sup>69</sup>Juergensmeyer, *Religion*, chs. 11, 13.

<sup>70</sup>Gooptu, *Politics of the Urban Poor*, 154–55, 160.

<sup>71</sup>I have borrowed the term *naukari* from Yaduvendu, *Yaduvansh ka Itihas*, 130.

*Sabdasagar* (dictionary) notes, the term “public” describes “the ordinary people, the masses” in the Indian context, indicating a group distinct from the caste-Hindu middle class.<sup>72</sup> The Dalit literate public was not restricted to only those who were literate but also included the illiterate audiences which were receptive to the *bhajan* medium and attracted to the Mahasabha’s vision. The poet-activists employed songs in a variety of genres as their primary medium, indicating shared social milieu with the illiterate “masses.”<sup>73</sup> Mahasabha leaders utilized songs regularly during conferences and processions. In conference settings, *bhajan* songs were typically sung at specific times during the day, including before the inauguration of the conference and between speeches. The 1927 report on the two-day Allahabad conference specifically mentioned that Mahasabha *bhajan* songs were sung.<sup>74</sup> Given the vital role of songs, song-booklets were sometimes printed before important conferences. The *Harihar Bhajan Mala Part II*, for example, was printed on 13 February 1922, two days before the three-day Depressed Classes Conference in Delhi and a day before the counterdemonstration to welcome the Prince of Wales.

This Dalit literate public emerged out of *naukari* occupations in urban areas. *Naukari* occupations in the construction industry, the railways, and small businesses, and as government teachers in rural schools provided members of the Dalit literate public with independent means of livelihood. Two Dalit Hindi texts, *Yadav Jivan* (1929) and *Yaduvansh ka Itihas* (1942), mention the presence of Chamars in “*naukari*” occupations and highlight their strength in the “building-construction trade” and “the railway service.” According to *Yaduvansh ka Itihas*, Chamars had the largest presence in the “building-construction trade,” covering the entire gamut of that workforce, including “business-owners, supervisors, skilled workers (*mistari*), and laborers.”<sup>75</sup> In addition, urban untouchables worked “as paid municipal employees or domestic servants of the British, and at times in factories.”<sup>76</sup> The *Hari-Bhajan Mala Part I* (1916) equated *naukari* occupations with dignity and development, and songs such as, “Holi ka hullar” highlighted opportunities provided by these modern professions. The first stanza of the song lists occupational titles of trades taken up by members of the Dalit public, “*byopari* [trader], *thekadar* [contractor], *Seth* [merchant], and *Babu* [clerk]” and identifies these as evidence of a “new moment and progress” in British India.<sup>77</sup>

The 1931 Uttar Pradesh census provides information on *naukari* employment and trades within select untouchable castes such as Chamars, Pasis, and Bhangis, and distinguishes them from those listed in the traditional caste occupation categories.

<sup>72</sup>The Hindi dictionary, *Sabdasagar*, vol. 4 (Banaras: Nagari Pracharini Sabha, 1929), p. 1981. It defines public as “populace, ordinary people” (“पबलिक (pabalika) सन्साधारण । जनता । आम लोग”).

<sup>73</sup>Susan Wadley has argued for greater engagement with the vernacular song-tradition because the songs are used by women and low-caste groups, “Texts in Contexts: Oral Traditions and the Study of Religion in Karimpur,” in Sylvia Vatuk, ed., *American Studies in the Anthropology of India* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1978), 309–41, 341.

<sup>74</sup>*Report of the All-India Adi-Hindu (Depressed Classes) Conference, Allahabad, December 26–28, 1927*, 1, British Library, Evidence-UP, 427, IOR/Q/13/1/14.

<sup>75</sup>Pandit Sundarlal Sagar, *Yadav Jivan*, published by the Jatav Mahasabha (Agra: Shree Jatav Mahasabha, 1929), 102–4; Yaduvendu, *Yaduvansh ka Itihas*, 130.

<sup>76</sup>Gooptu, *Politics of the Urban Poor*, 145.

<sup>77</sup>“Holi ka hullar,” in *Hari-Bhajan Mala Part I* (New Basti, Agra: Agra Akhbar Press, Oct. 1916), 16 pp., 4–5.



Since the *Yadav Jivan* and *Yaduvansh ka Itihas* focus on the Chamar caste, I offer a closer examination of their presence in *naukari* occupations. At 12.6 million, Chamars comprised nearly 60 percent of the Dalit population in Uttar Pradesh. The 1931 census identifies ten categories of *naukari* occupations: “i) industries: owners, managers, clerks etc., ii) transport, iii) trade, iv) public force, v) public administration, vi) arts and letters professions, vii) persons living on their income, viii) domestic service, ix) contractors-clerks-cashiers etc, and x) labourers unspecified.”<sup>78</sup> Chamars had no presence at all in professions associated with elite and middle-class groups, such as public administration and arts and letters. However, they occupied 9 percent (270,000) of the *naukari* trades out of a total working population of 3.1 million and had a sizeable presence in the “trade” and the “contractors-clerks-cashiers etc” categories. The census data nicely illustrates claims made in *Yadav Jivan* and *Yaduvansh ka Itihas* on Chamars’ noticeable presence in the *naukari* trades and offers an impressive testimony of an untouchable community’s tenacity in taking advantage of *naukari* occupations. Thekadar Ramdayal Jatav, a contractor in the building-construction trade, supported Swami Achutanand in organizing the public meeting in Etawah in December 1923 at which he founded the Mahasabha. A group of Dalit traders and contractors, including Girdhari Lal Kuril, Jhamlal Aherwar, and Seth Durga Dasji in Kanpur, supported Achutanand by providing resources to purchase a printing press.<sup>79</sup> Mahasabha leaders understood the financial and human costs of running the press, which they described as an arduous and uphill task.<sup>80</sup> These *naukari* professions opened up opportunities previously unavailable to Dalit communities in ways that were unprecedented. The Mahasabha’s agenda to reframe “untouchables” social and political identities particularly appealed to this Dalit literate public.

The Mahasabha leaders were creative in their approach to political organization and resourceful in adopting effective terms for activism. They introduced Achut as a positive social identity for untouchables in the 1920s to advance their struggle for dignity. They actively promoted the use of Achut as an alternative to the popular pejorative Sanskrit (Hindu) term *asprya jati*, meaning polluted and impure. Achut first appeared in a sixteen-page Mahasabha song-booklet, the *Adi-Hindu Bhajanavali Part IV* (1924), which contained eighteen songs in Hindi song genres composed by Achutanand, Jagatram Jatiya, and Kanhaiyalal “Mantri” from Fatehgarh in western Uttar Pradesh.<sup>81</sup> A four-line verse on the cover page of the text described untouchables as Achut and defined the term as untouched and pure.<sup>82</sup> Although these ideas first appeared in Achutanand’s *Hari-Bhajan Mala Part I* (1916) and *Harihar Bhajan Mala Part II* (1922), the term Achut first appeared only in 1924.

<sup>78</sup>Table XI: Occupations of Selected Castes, Tribes or Race,” in *Census of India, 1931, United Provinces of Agra and Oudh (Part II: Imperial and Provincial Tables)* (Allahabad: Superintendent of Government Press, 1933), 441–43.

<sup>79</sup>“The Dalit Movement in Kanpur,” in Maren Bellwinkel-Schemp, *Neur Buddhismus als gesellschaftlicher Entwurf: Zur Identitätskonstruktion der Dalits in Kanpur, Indien* (Uppsala: Edita Vastra Aros, 2011): 102–38, 104–9.

<sup>80</sup>Jatiya, *Arjun*, 7.

<sup>81</sup>*The Adi-Hindu Bhajanavali: Part IV* (Fatehgarh, UP: Achut [Pavitr] Adi-Hindu Sabha, 1924), 1–16.

<sup>82</sup>For a detailed discussion on the emergence of the Achut category and identity, see Ramnarayan S. Rawat, “Genealogies of the Dalit Political: The Transformation of Achhut from ‘Untouched’ to ‘Untouchable’ in Early Twentieth-Century North India,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 52, 3 (2015): 335–55.

The masthead of Mahasabha press publications from 1926 carried a one-line verse: “Jai Achut (Pavitr) Satguru Bhagavan” [“Hail Achut (pure), the Supreme Lord”]. The masthead would typically also include a couplet from Kabir, one of the leading poet-saints of the Sant-mat devotional tradition: “We eat by touch, we wash by touch, we are born by touch; who’s untouched, asks Kabir? One who is pure, the *supreme lord* [*Satnam*].”<sup>83</sup> The Ad-Dharm movement of Dalits in Punjab that emerged in 1925 had adopted Achut as its identity because of its relationship with the Mahasabha.<sup>84</sup> The term occupied a foundational role in Mahasabha poet-activists’ claim that untouchables are the original residents of India because they are untouched and pure. Achut became the first term coined by Dalit activists in modern India to promote a radical oppositional identity among untouchables.

Swami Achutanand and his fellow poet-activists named their organization the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha. They intentionally used the term “Adi-Hindu” to assert a collective political identity of untouchables by claiming sovereign rights over Hindustan—a name commonly used in Hindi media but less so in English. Adi-Hindu defined untouchables as the “first” (*Adi*) residents of “Hindustan,” with Hindu denoting a geographical space rather than a religious identity. In the *Hari-Bhajan Mala Part I* (1916), Swami Achutanand insisted that untouchables were not only the earliest residents of Hindustan, but many had been chieftains with principalities. He argued that the evidence for this claim came from the Rig Veda, circa 1500–1200 BCE, which mentions battles between Aryans and local clans who are described as *asuras* (demons) or *dasas* (slaves). He writes, “Rise, you original residents and inhabitants of this Hindustan, who have been weakened; it was those oppressive Aryans who grabbed our wealth, food, and place.”<sup>85</sup> The cover page of the *Harihar Bhajan Mala Part II* (1922) states that its writers, Swami Achutanand, Jagatram Jatiya, and Nekram, had “recovered the glorious forgotten history of the Prachin-Hind-vasi (Aboriginal Indians) from the *Rig Veda Sayan Bhashya*, Literary Society, Allahabad, and Historical texts of the History Publication Committee, Banaras.” This was followed by a four-line verse:

Most civil, we are, the ancient rightful proprietors of Hind  
 Yes, we have fallen into slavery, we were the kings once  
 That age [of slavery] is over, let us not accept oppression anymore, Harihar  
 Break the chains of slavery, let it not enslave you [again].<sup>86</sup>

In this historical narrative, the Mahasabha poet-activists described the Aryans and their descendants, present-day Hindus, who arrived from the west to establish their control over Hindustan. The Aryans enslaved the original residents of Hindustan and took over their “wealth, food, and place.” By adopting the term “Adi-Hindu,” Mahasabha poet-activists joined the movements among untouchables in other

<sup>83</sup>Title page, *Vigyan Bhajan Mala* (Kanpur: Adi-Hindu Mahasabha Press, 1926).

<sup>84</sup>“The Achut are the descendants of the original people...” “The Ad Dharm Mandal, which was founded in 1925, as a collective organization from all Achut in the Punjab...” 598–99; “Report—Ad Dharm Mandal, Jullundur,” 15 May 1931, 599–634, and translated from Urdu into English in Mark Juergensmeyer, “Political Hope: The Quest for Political Identity and Strategy in the Social Movements of North India’s Untouchables, 1900–1970” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1974).

<sup>85</sup>“Bhajan,” Swami Achutanand, in *Hari-Bhajan Mala Part I* (New Basti, Agra: Agra Akhbar Press, Oct. 1916), 16.

<sup>86</sup>Harihar here refers to Achutanand. “Shair” verse, on the cover page of the *Harihar Bhajan Mala Part II*.

parts of India that were growing in the 1920s: Adi-Dravidas (1919), the Adi-Andhra and Adi-Hindu movement in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh (1922), and the Ad-Dharma movement in Punjab (1925).

By drawing from a range of literary genres and scholarly methods to cite written historical sources, the Mahasabha poet-activists demonstrated a remarkable commitment to creating a new politics of self-respect. Having built small, fragile fortunes through the “building-construction trade,” “the railways,” and other *naukari* occupations, the literate Dalit public recognized the transformative change that had taken place in late British India. These Dalit authors used the term *naukari* to emphasize the secular, casteless character of service occupations defined by monetary transactions in contrast to the caste-based obligations that predominated in rural India. Dalit patrons readily supported the poet-activists in establishing the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha and its printing press. The social identity of Achut and the political identity of Adi-Hindu appealed to this literate Dalit public. In today’s Dalit movement in northern India, “*mool-nivasi*” (original inhabitants) has replaced “Adi-Hindu,” but the meanings associated with this concept remain relevant in Dalit politics. Jangam has cautioned against the emphasis on radical Dalit activism, arguing that Bhagya Reddy Varma-led Adi-Andhra group in Telugu-speaking South India was attracted by the nationalist Hindu reform organizations’ objectives of removing caste barriers.<sup>87</sup> Mahasabha poet-activists were deeply invested in the freedom which enabled political organization, publishing, access to education, and the articulation of social and political rights.

### Bhajans of Liberal Politics: Representative Government and Equality

Addressing a meeting of several hundred Dalits in the district town of Mainpuri in western Uttar Pradesh in October 1926, Swami Achutanand declared that the “Mahasabha’s objective is to demand the distribution of *mulki-haq* according to the proportion of [untouchables’] population” in the legislative assembly. The Government of India Act of 1919, also known as the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms, had introduced provincial assemblies with extremely limited franchise along with separate and proportional representation for minorities.<sup>88</sup> It extended the principle of separate electorates, which had been confined to Muslims, by including Sikhs in Punjab and Non-Brahmans in the Madras Presidency.<sup>89</sup> At a daylong meeting in Mainpuri, Mahasabha leaders passed resolutions demanding proportional representation in village and town councils, in state government employment, and in educational institutions. They repeatedly used the term *mulki-haq* to refer to the concept of separate (communal) electorates and proportional representation. They participated in the debate over parliamentary democracy in the 1920s that would lead to the expansion of the electorate to one-sixth of the adult population through the Government of India Act of 1935. In addition to *mulki-haq*, another critical category Mahasabha poet-activists introduced was *unch-niche* (high-low) to define caste inequality and the struggle

<sup>87</sup>Jangam, *Dalits*, 13; Gooptu, *Politics of the Urban Poor*, 174–80.

<sup>88</sup>*The Adi-Hindu Mahasabha Mainpuri Report* (Kanpur: Mahasabha Press, 1926), 4.

<sup>89</sup>“Epilogue,” in Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj (The New Cambridge History of India III.4)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Washbrook, *Emergence of Provincial Politics*, ch. 7.

for equality. I found the discussion on representation and equality in the works of Jennifer Pitts (2005) and Helena Rosenblatt (2018) extremely helpful in recognizing *mulki-haq* and *unch-niche* as critical liberal principles.<sup>90</sup> Rosenblatt has argued that “civil equality, constitutional and representative government” emerged as core principles of liberalism in the early nineteenth century.<sup>91</sup> In the Indian context, the Mahasabha’s vernacular liberal terms aspired to capture these liberal values.

The Hindi-language liberal terms created by Mahasabha poet-activists in late British India offer fresh insights into Dalit appropriation of liberalism. Ajay Skaria has argued that Chris Bayly’s work on the intellectual history of modern India has demonstrated the “irreducibly global nature of modern historical processes” because activist groups based in the margins, outside the metropole, participated in creating universal ideas.<sup>92</sup> The Mahasabha’s distinctive vernacular terms emerged in a dialogue over the nature and scope of representative government. Metcalf writes that the British commitment to “liberal idealism” continued to motivate discussion on representative government despite the insistence on racial difference.<sup>93</sup> Departing from earlier studies by Anil Seal and Eric Stokes, which have emphasized the role of colonial institutions and administrators in building democratic practices,<sup>94</sup> Bayly argued that elite Indian nationalists “were able to excavate, appropriate and cannibalise” liberalism within their local contexts. Indeed, the nationalists elaborated ideas of moral and political rights, and of self-government from the classical Hindu texts such as the Manusmriti, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Ramayana.<sup>95</sup> Women’s groups utilized the language of citizenship and rights advanced by the colonial state to challenge caste and patriarchy and demanded legal decrees to remove social barriers.<sup>96</sup> Bengali Muslim peasants articulated a distinctive political agenda on the question of rights to intervene in the discussion on representative government based on the limited franchise that emerged after the Government of India Act of 1919.<sup>97</sup> Andrew Sartori insightfully documents Bengali Muslim cultivators’ “aspiration to freedom” built on the widely shared Islamic notions that aligned religious piety and ethics with cultivation of land and ownership of property as a natural right.<sup>98</sup> Both the Mahasabha poet-activists and Bengali Muslim cultivators borrowed the language of universal liberal values in similar ways, raising an important methodological challenge to accounts that

<sup>90</sup>Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 3–4; Helena Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), chs. 2 and 7, p. 52.

<sup>91</sup>Rosenblatt, *Lost History*, 52.

<sup>92</sup>Ajay Skaria, “Can the Dalit Articulate a Universal Position? The Intellectual, the Social, and the Writing of History,” *Social History* 39, 3 (2014), 340–58, 354.

<sup>93</sup>Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*, chs. 4–6, 226.

<sup>94</sup>Anil Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968); Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India* (Clarendon: Oxford University Press, 1963). Ranajit Guha, “Neel-Darpan: The Image of a Peasant Revolt in a Liberal Mirror,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 2, 1 (1974): 1–47.

<sup>95</sup>Bayly, *Recovering Liberties*, 11, 18–22.

<sup>96</sup>Rachel Sturman, *The Government of Social Life in Colonial India: Liberalism, Religious Law, and Women’s Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 4–5.

<sup>97</sup>Andrew Sartori, *Liberalism in Empire: An Alternative History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), ch. 5.

<sup>98</sup>*Ibid.*, 146.

restrict the study of liberalism in British Empire to a limited set of canonical thinkers.<sup>99</sup> Karuna Mantena's study nicely illustrates the challenges the British faced in legislating liberalism because it required negotiating with the particularities of Indian customary laws and proprietary rights.<sup>100</sup> Pitts has suggested that studies of liberalism might benefit by recognizing, "Liberal theory has been constituted by its engagement in politics,"<sup>101</sup> and I would submit that the Mahasabha's song-booklets illustrate liberalism's deeper sociological entanglements.

The Mahasabha poet-activists articulated a separate political identity of Adi-Hindu to justify their demand for *mulki-haq*—separate electorate and proportional representation in the legislative assembly based on the percentage of the untouchable population in each province. They also demanded extending the principle of *mulki-haq* to employment in the state administration and to admission into educational institutions. The Mahasabha engaged with the colonial state on the nature of representative government at a time when discussions over "responsible government" and "self-government" were taking place in India. The 1919 Act had included new religious minorities in separate electorates, but it opened a new opportunity for Dalit organizations as well. The Mahasabha intervened in this debate by publishing the *Harihar Bhajan Mala II* (1922) and by organizing the three-day Depressed Classes Conference. Mangoo Ram, the founder of the Ad-Dharm movement in Punjab, told Juergensmeyer in 1971 that the struggle against caste along with the demand for separate electorates contributed to the emergence of their autonomous Dalit movement in Punjab in 1925.<sup>102</sup> The leaders of nationalist organizations promoted "the concept of indigenous local assembly, the panchayat," in offering an alternative form of representative democracy in the 1920s.<sup>103</sup> In the 1928 *Nehru Report* Congress leaders refused to accept caste inequality as a legitimate reason for awarding separate electorates to Dalits. The demand of *mulki-haq*, first raised by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar as a legal measure during the 1919 constitutional discussions, acquired a sociological depth in the Mahasabha's literary and political activism.<sup>104</sup>

First broached in the 1922 *Harihar Bhajan Mala Part II* and in the Depressed Classes Conference, the most detailed discussion of *mulki-haq* appeared in Achutanand's Mainpuri speech in 1926, and soon the Mahasabha poet-activists incorporated this concept into songs in several genres that appeared in a number of song-booklets. The "*kajri*" song, sung in the Bhojpuri-Hindi dialect, defined different features of the *mulki-haq* agenda which formed a major theme in the

<sup>99</sup>Uday Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). Pitts, "Introduction," in *Turn to Empire*, captures the broad themes on the subject.

<sup>100</sup>Karuna Mantena, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), ch. 5.

<sup>101</sup>Pitts, *Turn to Empire*, 5.

<sup>102</sup>Juergensmeyer, *Religion*, 29–30.

<sup>103</sup>Bayly, *Recovering Liberties*, 279. Especially relevant here are chapters 9 and 10. Bayly draws from the works of Radhakumud Mookerji, B. K. Sarkar, Srinath Dutt, and Sankaran Nair on the *panchayat* assemblies.

<sup>104</sup>B. R. Ambedkar, "Evidence before the Southborough Committee, 27 January, 1919," in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, vol. 1, Vasant Moon, ed. (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1979), 252–64.

*Adi-Hindu Bhajan Mala: Achut Bhajanavali*, published in August 1928, a few months before the Mahasabha's Lucknow meeting that November.<sup>105</sup> Composed in a rhythmic tempo with each line of the verse stating the candid message effectively, the *kajri* song appeared in several Mahasabha song collections and was included in the 1960 biography of Achutanand.<sup>106</sup> The song contained a list of demands and ends by asking the Mahasabha leaders to tell the British government that Achuts were India's ancient rulers and original inhabitants (Adi-Hindus). The English translation does not fully capture the melody of the *kajri*:

Will you, Adi-Hindu-vanshi brother, distribute our mulki-haq  
 Will you, provide us office of equal status, touchable, and pure  
 Will you, then end our oppression, eliminate our suffering  
 Will you, deliver us proportional representation in the boards and in the councils  
 Will you, compose a constitution (kanun) compassionate to the community  
 Will you, create officers, inspectors, clerks, and representatives from the community<sup>107</sup>

The Mahasabha song-booklets also introduced *unch-niche* as a conceptual category in the Dalit public sphere to define caste inequality as a structural feature of South Asian society and to advocate for social equality. The 1924 *Adi-Hindu Bhajanavali Part IV* contained twelve devotional songs and several used the term to convey an astute recognition of "the new age of equality" instituted by the "British government." Several songs in the *Bhajanavali* praised the role of institutions and laws in achieving civil equality, including, the importance of the press and publication, the vital role of education, notably for girls, the leadership of Achutanand, and the Adi-Hindu history of untouchables. In one song appropriately titled "Rasiya" (sweetness), the Mahasabha identified the emergence of representative institutions as a notable development in Indian history.<sup>108</sup> Songs of this genre are sung to welcome the cool monsoon rains after the harsh hot summer months and also to express love for a lover or devotion to God. Dalit poet-activists used the *rasiya* genre to convey admiration for modern institutions, especially the rule of law and legal regulations which promise justice regardless of caste.

This British Raj that works on the principles of justice (nyaya-kari)  
 The presence of justice (nyaya) in the Raj which all enjoy with happiness (sukha)  
 Now, even the Achuts have awakened, who the Hindus call niche [untouchables]  
 [Caste] distinctions of unch-niche the English (Angrez) do not follow  
 Rules, laws, with which the [Raj] works, the Hindus (Dwijas) do not practice  
 Right (haq) and rights (haquqa) that belong to us, [Raj] is assigning us.<sup>109</sup>

A few years earlier another song in the "*qawwali*" genre published in the 1922 *Harihar Bhajan Mala II*, equated the novel age of equality with modern institutions established by the Raj. The *qawwali* contrasted the institutions of British India with

<sup>105</sup> "Mirzapuri Kajri or Braj ka Rasiya," in *Adi-Hindu Bhajan Mala* (Kanpur, 1928).

<sup>106</sup> *Report: Adi-Hindu Sabha Agra* (Agra: 1933), 1–8, 7; Jigyasu, *Shri 108, kajri* poem, 95–96.

<sup>107</sup> *Adi-Hindu Bhajan Mala*, 5.

<sup>108</sup> A collection of songs by Swami Achutanand and Poet Jagatram (of Delhi), *Adi-Hindu Bhajanavali: Part IV*, 8.

<sup>109</sup> "Unch-niche ka bhed nahin Angrez rakhate hain," in *ibid.*, 8.



their emphasis on equality with the edicts of Manusmriti (the laws of Manu), which upholds and justifies caste hierarchy (*unch-niche*).

Now Manu's constitution (kanun) is gone, our existence is no longer a sin,  
This British government has true laws, all [every caste] drink water from the same tap,  
Illiteracy is disappearing and all are Brahmans (educated), caste hierarchy (*unch-niche*) is no longer a thing.<sup>110</sup>

The *qawwali* referred to representative institutions and the rule of law which offered the promise of a good life in the twentieth century. The *rasiya* and *qawwali* songs vividly demonstrate the Mahasabha's use of the term *unch-niche* to define its struggle against caste inequality and highlights the substantive role assigned to the state and the constitution in creating civil equality.

Mahasabha poet-activists linked the struggle against *unch-niche* with the twin humiliations of caste and gender discrimination experienced by Dalit women. Addressing a gathering of nearly six thousand Dalits in Gwalior in July 1933, Swami Achutanand pointed to sexual violence against "our women" by caste-Hindu men who indulge in such atrocities. He specifically drew attention to the organized sexual harassment Dalit women faced every year during the spring festival of Holi when caste-Hindu men would enter Dalit villages singing lewd songs and molesting them. Achutanand stated with much anger that "the greatest dirty songs are sung for [our women] to hear."<sup>111</sup> Mahasabha leaders highlighted the sexual humiliation of Dalit women's bodies at work places and in homes as a feature of caste privilege in rural society.<sup>112</sup> Middle-class Hindu groups defined the role of women in the private domain and the consequent "politicization of the domestic" in the nationalist project, whereas male Dalit activists defended the self-respect of women and daughters who experienced caste-sexual violence.<sup>113</sup>

Several speakers at the July 1933 meeting in Gwalior, including Chandrika P. Jigyasu and Kalyan Chand Jatiya, raised the question of the appropriate marriage age for girls and boys. This was a subject of intense nationalist debate at this time, led by caste-Hindu women's organizations. Speakers at the conference urged the audience to focus on the education of their children, refrain from marrying girls until age fourteen and boys until age twenty as required by law, and not burden them with marriage.<sup>114</sup> The Mahasabha's song-booklets contained songs addressed to Dalit parents, mainly mothers, to prioritize the education of children. The 1922 *Harihar Bhajan Mala II* contained six songs (out of twenty-eight) on this topic. The "Stree Shiksha Bhajan" (Women's education song) advised "mothers" to send their daughters to schools, which would prepare them for becoming "officers and barristers." It pleaded with parents to invest resources in education and not in intoxicants.<sup>115</sup> The six songs by these male poet-activists focused on access to education in order to secure secular professions for Dalit women. Mahasabha poet-activists identified a structural relationship between caste and sexuality, education and dignity, and secular professions and freedom.

<sup>110</sup>*Harihar Bhajan Mala Part II*, 14.

<sup>111</sup>Gwalior State Adi-Hindu Mahasabha First Meeting, 7–9 February, 1933 Report (Gwalior: Kalyan Chand Jatiya, Adi-Hindu Sabha, 1933), 1–25, 9.

<sup>112</sup>"The Sexual Politics of Caste," in Rao, *Caste Question*, ch. 6, 217–40.

<sup>113</sup>Sinha, "Gendered Nationalism," 18.

<sup>114</sup>Gwalior State Adi-Hindu Mahasabha First Meeting, 7–9 February, 1933 Report, 6–7.

<sup>115</sup>*Harihar Bhajan Mala Part II*, 20–21.

The poet-activists actively promoted an ethical framework to further strengthen commitment to liberal institutions and political activism. To achieve this objective, they appropriated Satnam, the formless supreme lord, from the Sant-mat religious tradition, as the ethical source of its liberal politics. Known by several names in the Sant-mat religion, including Jagadhar, Kartar, and Karim, Satnam appears in the teachings of almost all of the medieval poet-saints belonging to the Sant-mat tradition, such as, Kabir, Raidas, Dadu, and Nanak. The Mahasabha in its publications repeatedly argued that Satnam promised equal rights to all human beings and opposed the poisonous distinctions of *unch-niche*. Ramswarup Jaiswar, a Lucknow-based Mahasabha leader, eloquently captured the liberal attributes of Satnam in the opening lines of his 1926 twelve-page song-booklet:

Pray to the power and vision of the supreme lord (Satnam)  
 Who shines the light of knowledge on the world  
 Who from his power gave equal (sem adhikar) rights to all  
 Set aside the poisonous practices of high and low (unch and niche)  
 Unfortunately, we were stuck in the web of darkness  
 Now, consciousness is waking us, in the British rule<sup>116</sup>

Sant-mat religious tracts, such as the 1926 *Vigyan Bhajan Mala* and the 1927 *Raidas Bhajan Mala* published by the Mahasabha press, identified two distinct moral sources of the Dalit public sphere: Satnam and the state. Drawing from these ethical sources, these poet-activists argued that in this age of equality, “*unch-niche* is no longer a thing,” and described the “Kanun of Manu” (Manu’s constitution) as a relic of the past. The institutions of the modern state, including representative democracy, provided a juridical justification for the Mahasabha’s struggle for civil equality and Satnam offered an ethical genealogy.

The Sant-mat religion had a distinctive presence in Dalit *mohallas* which made it easier for the Mahasabha poet-activists to adopt its existing vocabulary, using such terms as *unch-niche*, *mulki*, *haq*, and Satnam to translate liberal ideas into vernacular concepts.<sup>117</sup> Dalit scholars of Hindi literature, such as, Kanwal Bharati and Mohan Dass Namishray, have discussed the critical role of the Sant-mat religion in Dalit *mohallas*.<sup>118</sup> The medieval Sant-mat poet-saints Raidas and Kabir had used the term *unch-niche* in verses to illustrate that Satnam, the supreme lord, did not distinguish between high (*unch*) and low (*niche*) caste devotion but only cared for true piety. Raidas was an untouchable poet-saint of the fifteenth century who self-identified as a member of the Chamar caste. His verses also capture a core principle of his teachings that the distinction between *unch-niche* should be contested in the worship of god:<sup>119</sup>

<sup>116</sup>*Hindu Vansh ka Prachin Gaurav aur Videshyion ke Atyachar* (Kanpur: Jaiswar Tract Samiti, 1926), 1–16, 1, published by Adi-Hindu Mahasabha press.

<sup>117</sup>Ramnarayan S. Rawat, “The Genealogy of Dalit Liberalism: Sant-Mat, *Unch-niche* and the New Ethical Politics,” paper delivered at the CRASSH conference, “India’s Political Lexicon in Its Vernacular,” Cambridge University, May 2018.

<sup>118</sup>Mohandas Namishray, *Apne Apne Pinjare (A Dalit Autobiography) Part I* (Delhi: Vani Prakashan, 1995); Kanwal Bharti, *Swami Achutanand-ji ‘Harihar’ Sanchayita* (Delhi: Swaraj Prakashan, 2011).

<sup>119</sup>See Winand M. Callewaert, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas: The Bhakti Poets of North India* (Richmond: Curzon, 2000), 345–46, for original Hindi poems of Raidas, and 320 for the English translation. I have slightly edited the English translation.

Ananta Das offers devotion to the Lord, ignoring ideas of caste  
 Hari [Lord] takes no account of high-low (*unch-niche*), caring only for true  
 devotion

The Mahasabha publications, such as the *Hindu-Vansh ka Prachin Gaurav* (1926) and the *Ram-Rajya Nyaya Natak* (1936), compared the teachings of Raidas and Kabir in promoting ideas of equality and freedom with the teachings of the Hindu religion narrated in the Ramayana and Manusmriti in defending caste hierarchy.<sup>120</sup> Given its Sant-mat genealogy, “*unch-niche*” as used conceptually in Dalit activism in the twentieth century drew from a much longer history of usage and it continues to play an active role in the rhetoric of the Bahujan Samaj Party in India today. A recent biography of Kanshi Ram, the founder and ideologue of the Bahujan Samaj Party, had no hesitation in asserting that the “ideas of Kanshi Ram were similar to Kabir, the two recalcitrant fighters against the ideology of *unch-niche*.”<sup>121</sup> In urban Hindu middle-class usage in north India, the phrase *unch-niche* is more commonly used to refer to uneven ground, as is evident in the popular children’s tag game, “*unch-niche ka papada*.” Most middle-class Indians associate *unch-niche* with this game, in which a person who is “it” has to tag a player who crosses the boundaries of high and low ground regardless of whether the group of kids have selected *unch*, any raised surface, typically steps, or niche, a flat and even surface.

*Unch-niche* first emerged as a conceptual category in the 1922 *Harihar Bhajan Mala II*, in which Achutanand used the term to describe caste inequality. The Mahasabha’s publications and its activism redefined the normative meaning of *unch-niche* in late British India. S. W. Fallon’s *New Hindustani-English Dictionary* (1879) offered three definitions of *unch-niche*: “a) the unevenness of ground, b) goodness and evil or profit and loss, c) ups and downs of life.”<sup>122</sup> Fallon used Hindi proverbs to highlight each of these meanings, with a particular emphasis on uneven ground and the vicissitudes of life. John Platts’ 1884 Urdu-Hindi-English dictionary described *unch-niche* as an adjective for “high and low,” along with “unevenness, inequality, undulating ground.”<sup>123</sup> The first edition of the Hindi language dictionary *Hindi Sabdasagar* in 1916 acknowledged the three dominant meanings of *unch-niche* and listed additional definitions, as “small/big” and “belonging to noble descent or low birth.”<sup>124</sup> Clearly, ideas of high caste and low caste existed within these definitions which may explain Platts’ use of the word inequality, but he does not elaborate the context of its use. It is instructive that the second edition of *Hindi Sabdasagar* (1967) repeated the definitions of *unch-niche* in the first edition but excluded the 1933 *Concise Hindi Sabdasagar* definition “of low caste and of high

<sup>120</sup>*Ram-Rajya Nyaya Natak*; and *Hindu Vansh ka Prachin Gaurav*.

<sup>121</sup>Shivmurti Pathak, *Rashttranayak Kanshiram* (Allahabad: Shekhar Prakashan, 1995). The book contains speeches by Kanshiram, founder and leader of the Bahujan Samaj Party.

<sup>122</sup>S. W. Fallon, *A New Hindustani-English Dictionary, with Illustrations from Hindustani Literature and Folklore* (Banaras: Medical Hall Press, 1879), 48; John Shakespear, *A Dictionary, Hindustani and English: With a Copious Index, Fitting the Work to Serve, also, as a Dictionary of English and Hindustani* (London: Pelham Richardson, 1834), 45.

<sup>123</sup>John T. Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English* (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1884), 108, 1165.

<sup>124</sup>“Chota-Bada” and “kulin-akulin,” in Syamasundaradasa, ed., *Hindi-Sabdasagars: Arathat Hindi Bhasha ka Ek Barhat Kosh*, vol. I (Banaras: Nagari Pracharini Sabha, 1916), 371.

caste.”<sup>125</sup> Only in 1993 did McGregor’s *Oxford Hindi Dictionary* for the first time explain “*unch-niche*” as “inequality (social and political),” referring to caste inequities.<sup>126</sup> This suggests that the Mahasabha’s conceptual revolution received recognition in the dominant Hindi literary public sphere only in the 1990s, the decade marked by greater visibility of Dalit politics in north India, including the rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party.

The Mahasabha’s activism in northern India adds a new dimension to the history of Dalit public spheres in the provinces in late colonial India. A critical objective of Dalit struggles in western India was to resolve the “contradiction between the experience of stigma and possibility of emancipation” by forcing the colonial state to adjudicate through official and legal policies.<sup>127</sup> Dalit groups raised civil rights concerns and organized public processions between 1927 and 1929 to demand the right to enter Hindu temples and access public water points.<sup>128</sup> In the first decade of the twentieth century, Ayyankali, a Dalit leader in the Travancore region of South India, led struggles demanding for Dalits the right to enter public streets and attend public schools.<sup>129</sup> The Adi-Andhra movement in the Telugu-speaking region of South India shared an intellectual relationship with the nationalist organizations.<sup>130</sup> Whereas, in northern India, the Mahasabha and the Ad-Dharm Mandal organized processions in Delhi and Allahabad to demand *mulki-haq*, and projected the Sant-mat religion as an alternative to Hinduism. The Mahasabha’s publications do not discuss or mention processions to demand entry into Hindu temples.<sup>131</sup> Similarly, the Adi-Dravida movement of untouchables in Tamil Nadu insisted upon separate electorates and maintained its autonomous character despite strong overtures from the leaders of the powerful non-Brahman movement for joining their struggle.<sup>132</sup>

A diverse set of motivations embedded in distinct regional cultural contexts shaped the contours of each of these Dalit public spheres in different ways. Yet, Dalit regional leaders participated in the December 1927 conference organized by the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha in Allahabad and collectively signed a declaration demanding *mulki-haq* rights in the provincial legislative assemblies. They had issued the unanimous statement for the forthcoming constitutional negotiations during the Simon Commission’s visit to India in 1928–1929. Unlike the histories of subaltern struggles, such as the Awadh peasant movement, whose leaders borrowed ideas of

<sup>125</sup>Syamasundaradasa, ed., *Hindi-Sabdasagars*, vol. I (Banaras: Nagari Pracharini Sabha, 1967), 647; Ram Chandra Varma, ed., *Sankshipta Hindi Sabdasagara* (Banaras: Nagari Pracharini Sabha, 1933), 159.

<sup>126</sup>R. S. McGregor, *Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 16.

<sup>127</sup>Rao, *Caste Question*. Ambedkar in 1928 used the legislative assembly to change the functioning of *Mahar vatan* by removing elements of servitude with taxes on the land (106–10).

<sup>128</sup>*Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>129</sup>On access to public spaces, see Mohan, *Modernity of Slavery*, ch. 3.

<sup>130</sup>Jangam, *Dalits*, chs. 4, 5. On the relationship between the Namasudra movement and the Congress in Bengal, see Sen, *Decline of the Caste Question*.

<sup>131</sup>The Uttar Pradesh annual reports on public instruction highlight the absence of any visible obstructions against Dalit children in municipal schools. *General Reports on Public Instructions in United Provinces of Agra and Oudh* (Allahabad: Superintendent, Government Press, United Provinces, 1916), 18.

<sup>132</sup>V. Geetha and S. V. Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Thass to Periyar* (Calcutta: Samya Prakashan, 1998), chs. 5, 6.

justice from Lord Rama's ethical kingship of Rama-Rajya,<sup>133</sup> the Mahasabha poet-activists borrowed ideas of justice from liberal institutional discourses and connected these with concepts drawn from earlier Sant-mat poet saints. While caste-Hindu nationalists were drawing nationalist vocabulary from Vaishnavite religiosity and Sanskrit terminology,<sup>134</sup> Mahasabha poet-activists were drawing their conceptual categories of *Achut*, *mulki-haq*, and *unch-niche* from the Sant-mat religion. Many of these terms continue to inform the politics of Dalit organizations in northern India today. These features distinguished the 1920s politics of the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha in Uttar Pradesh and created a distinctive genealogy of Dalit politics in northern India. The Mahasabha appropriated method and agenda from an existing cultural repertoire to promote the new principles of representative democracy.

## Conclusion

*Mohalla* archives have been instrumental in recovering the history of a distinctive Hindi-language Dalit public sphere and in illuminating the critical role of the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha. As repositories of historical sources, *mohalla* archives help us reframe histories of knowledge production. Unlike formal institutional archives and libraries, the informal *mohalla* collections of books, newspapers, and diaries are found in the almirahs and trunks of Dalit activists' homes. Deliberately adopting the methods of ethno-historical fieldwork, a close examination of Mahasabha's song-booklets, chapbooks, speeches, and plays has contributed most to recovering the history of the Dalit public sphere. These sources offer fresh insights into the emergence of the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha and the leadership of its poet-activists. The Mahasabha's song-booklets enable us to identify the innovative leadership of poet-activists in creating a new vernacular language of liberal politics. They assembled a Hindi-language vocabulary in support of liberal principles, including terms such as *mulki-haq* and *unch-niche*, and utilized song genres to offer reasoned arguments in support of these ideas. They appropriated the Sant-mat religion and especially the medieval poet-saints Raidas and Kabir whose religious and philosophical teachings were critical of caste. With its emphasis on the aniconic divinity of Satnam, the Sant-mat religion had strong roots in segregated and stigmatized Dalit *mohallas*. Mahasabha poet-activists portrayed the poet-saints Raidas and Kabir as spokespersons for liberties and used their teachings to nurture a new ethical politics.

The Mahasabha's Hindi-language booklets demonstrate the Dalit literate public's critical engagement as patrons of this ambitious Dalit movement. They help us recognize this public's emergence in relation to secular casteless occupations in urban areas and in relation to education in government vernacular secondary schools. The names of Dalit patrons and references to *naukari* employment, including petty trades, in Mahasabha and associated Dalit publications highlight the liberating role of secular occupations in creating small surpluses that were channeled to support activism. A group of patrons in Agra, Delhi, Kanpur, and

<sup>133</sup>Gyanendra Pandey, "Peasant Revolt and Indian Nationalism: The Peasant Movement in Awadh, 1919–1921," in Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies*, vol. 1 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), 143–97. Chaturvedi's study of lower-caste-Hindu peasant movements in late colonial Gujarat describes a commitment to Rama's kingship as "an ethical form of governance," in *Peasant Pasts*, 231.

<sup>134</sup>Bayly, *Recovering Liberties*, ch. 9.

Mainpuri came forward to fund the Mahasabha and provide resources to house Swami Achutanand in Kanpur and purchase the press. Babu Hiralal Bodhilal was instrumental in supporting Achutanand's activism in Agra and Delhi. In addition to Achutanand, Kavi Jagatram Jatiya and Devidas Jatiya appear as stellar actors within the Mahasabha's movement. The Mahasabha's formulations of the Achut social identity as untouched and pure and the Adi-Hindu political identity to claim untouchables as the original residents of Hindustan resonated with the secular visions of this literate Dalit public.

Dalit poet-activists composed songs and published song-booklets to debate and discuss the juridical transformation that had occurred in late colonial India to challenge "Manu's Kanun" and strengthen Dalit commitment to liberty. These songs celebrated liberal ideas and institutions such as courts, the structures of formal law, rules, and regulations, and the right to representation and to petition. Fashioning an expansive understanding of liberalism, poet-activists advocated access to education as a critical source of self-respect and composed songs to extoll the new opportunities that schools created for untouchable children, which would then give access to casteless *naukari* occupations. Dalit poet-activists made their most original contributions by introducing a new vernacular language of liberal politics in Hindi, adapting terms such as *mulki-haq* and *unch-niche*, which emerged as key categories of the Dalit public sphere. Interventions by the Mahasabha's poet-activists redefined the category of *unch-niche* to mean caste inequality, and also the struggle for social and legal equality. They appreciated the political and institutional role of representative institutions and demanded separate (communal) electorates with proportional representation. The procession to welcome the Prince of Wales and the publication of *Harihar Bhajan Mala II* in February 1922 marked the development of this important new Hindi-language Dalit public sphere in northern India.

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