Subaltern Autonomy: Dalit Students’ Identity Politics in India

Summary
Based on the fieldwork yielding 24 unstructured in-depth interviews at universities of Hyderabad, India, the present paper analyses Dalit, known as the ex-untouchable, students’ identity politics from the perspective of Subaltern Studies. The focus on Dalit students’ cultural festivals provides a framework for the analysis and the conceptualisation of the subaltern’s autonomy. Dalit students venture to reconstruct their identity in cultural and historical terms by creating an ideological framework for the establishment of an alternative “counter culture” which is infused and fused with negative anti-Brahmanical, anti-Hindu and anti-nationalist connotations, as well as claims for cultural difference. On the other hand, the desired cultural difference is achieved through re-interpretation of the dominant Hindu culture. Paradoxically, Dalits achieve the aim of cultural differentiation through becoming part of the dominant discourse paradigm. Otherwise stated, the Dalit “counter culture” is directed against Hindu nationalist discourse, but the “counter culture” manifests and represents itself through symbols of the dominant discourse. This paradox evokes the dichotomous view posited by the Subaltern School. The dichotomy is posed as a question: whether the subaltern embodies autonomous culture and politics (Guha, 1988) or whether the subaltern is inevitably an effect of the logic of the dominant discourse. The latter relates to Gayatri Spivak’s question “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (Spivak, 2006). By illustrating the reciprocal relationship between the dominant and the dominated, and the inevitable entanglement with each other, this article assumes a reciprocal understanding of social relations between subalternity and domination as continuously constituting each other (Chatterjee, 1993; Prakash, 1994; O’Hanlon, 1988).

Keywords: subaltern, untouchability, Dalits, caste, social movements, identity politics, Hindu nationalism.

Introduction
In last decades, Indian society has witnessed intense Dalit mobilisation in different spheres: political, cultural, intellectual and other (Kumar, 2010). Caste identity politics can be regarded as a common feature of diverse movements and mobilisations. The politics is realised as the articulation of untouchable identity and diverse forms of its implementation in order to reach particular political, social or economic gains. Caste identity, which had been a source of exclusion, discrimination and social stigmatisation, in the social and political context of contemporary India
is gaining more positive meanings for socially marginalised groups as caste capital becomes a key source for groups’ identity politics (Satyanarayana & Tharu, 2011).

Dalit social and political mobilisation has recently gained much attention in India and abroad. In particular, scholarly attention has been directed toward Dalit regional political mobilisation in some Indian states (Gorringe, 2005; Jaffrelot, 2003; Pai, 2012; Rao, 2012; Kumar, 2006; Jaoul, 2006, 2013, 2012; Narayan, 2011, 2012). This acquires added significance in light of the fact that pan-Indian Dalit socio-political movement is still in the making. Various Dalit political mobilisations point to a complex postcolonial process, in which previously stigmatised people gain citizen rights for political participation. These “new political subjects” use their caste identity for construction of self-pride and for gaining political power (Rao, 2012). Indian universities constitute a sphere which has witnessed intense Dalit activity since the 1990s. There emerged Dalit and other subaltern student organisations, which fight for their constitutional rights, demand quotas in educational institutions, criticise caste discrimination and strive for the representation of their culture and identity in the public sphere. Indian universities are highly politicised places with many different competing ideologies and student groups, fighting for different issues related to student life. Student groups also engage in political activism to promote their visions regarding the future of Indian society and politics. Most of the studies in the field focus on regional Dalit mobilisation and Dalit identity politics with regard to party politics in urban, rural and regional contexts. The present paper turns attention to Dalit identity politics within the settings of Indian universities, an area which has received less scholarly attention.

This article is based on the field work on Dalit students’ movement in Hyderabad’s higher education institutions, the English and Foreign Languages University.

---


Hyderabad is one of the most important political, economic and cultural centres of southern India. The city has a complex political and cultural history. For centuries it had been under the rule of different Muslim dynasties and until the present time is under a strong Islamic cultural influence. For decades it has been the centre of the regional Telangana State movement. Telangana region, which formerly belonged to the princely State of Hyderabad, since 1956 has become part of the newly created Andhra Pradesh State, formed on linguistic basis. People of Telangana region, populated mostly by lower caste groups, gradually became dissatisfied with the common state and felt marginalised in economic and social sense. It has to be pointed out that the benefits of economic development mostly reached the coastal areas of the Andhra region. After the decades of struggling, in February 2014, the Telangana Bill was passed by the Indian Parliament, which marked preliminary steps in the establishment of a separate Telangana State. The state came into official existence on June 2, 2014. Telangana became the 29th Indian state. Hyderabad was declared to serve as a joint capital of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh States for the next ten years. For most of the Dalit students in the region, Telangana State bifurcation was a long awaited political victory that was followed by mass rallies near Osmania University, centre of the Telangana movement. For the history of Hyderabad, see Benichou (2000), Beverley (2015) and Faruqui (2013). For the Telangana movement, see Forrester (1970), Haragopal (2010), Janardhan & Raghavendra (2013), Mantena (2014), Srikanth (2013).
(EFLU) and Osmania University (OU). There the author conducted research between January 12 and March 17, 2014. The two universities, chosen for the research, have a strong presence of active Dalit students’ movements characterised by different aims. During the two months of the fieldwork, 24 unstructured in-depth interviews were conducted. Other methods of data collection were research diary, field notes, taking photographs and collection of visual material of the events that had happened at the target universities prior to the reported fieldwork. Most of the informants were reached through snowballing; some were met accidentally. The informant group included Dalit student-activists, apolitical Dalit students, students from other marginalised groups, Dalit teacher-activists as well as political and apolitical General Category students. The informants are from different Indian states and regions with specific cultural characteristics. They belong to different religions: Hindu, Christianity, Buddhism and Islam. The religious diversity adds to the complexity of social identities enacted within the university space. Students’ political activism and Dalit students’, in particular, is mainly dominated by male students. Male students, therefore, constitute the majority of the informants. The study involved four female informants, two of whom are from marginalised background. Two female informants belong to the General Category.

First, the present article presents a theoretical framework for the analysis of the subaltern’s autonomy. Then, it provides background information regarding several aspects: historical development of untouchable categorisation, the emergence of Dalit students’ assertiveness and the implementation of new caste politics in India. This is followed by the discussion on Dalit students’ experiences within university setting. This part is crucial for understanding the realities of Dalit students’ life within the campus environment. It also provides insights into experiences which affect Dalit students’ identity politics. The discussion proceeds with the analysis of two events: Beef and Asura festivals which exemplify the Dalit students’ “counter culture.” Viewed from the perspective of the Subaltern School, the festivals function as manifestations of the autonomy of the subaltern agency.

3 At Hyderabad universities, where the author conducted the reported field research, there are multiple Dalit and other subaltern student organisations possessing unique characteristics and different levels of inclusion. Some of the groups are based on caste (jāti) groups (e.g. All Mala Student Association at Osmania University). Others involve not only Dalits but also tribes, religious minorities and other ‘backward’ castes (e.g. Dalit Adivasi Bahujan Minority Student Association at the English and Foreign Languages University). It is beyond the scope of the present article to provide a detailed analysis of the organisational aspects of these groups. The analysis treats them as a whole on the basis of their self-positioning as ‘counter culture’ toward the dominant higher caste nationalist Hindu culture. In this regard, the term ‘Dalit students’ movement’ should be used in the plural. The present paper uses the singular form for convenience wherein the term ‘Dalit students’ movement’ serves as a common denominator for the plurality of the untouchable and other social groups of different identities and interests.

4 According to the present Indian reservation policy, the General Category denotes all Indian social groups that do not benefit from the Quota scheme.
Since these events happened before the reported field work, and the author did not participate in the events, the events are reconstructed through students’ narratives (unstructured in-depth interviews) and visual material (photographs and pamphlets). It will be argued that, through these cultural festivals, Dalit students reconstruct their identity in cultural and historical terms. This is achieved by creating an ideological framework for the establishment of an alternative “counter culture” infused and fused with negative anti-Brahmanical, anti-Hindu and anti-nationalist sentiments and cultural difference claims, all of which result in the reinterparation of the dominant Hindu culture. The mixed approach to the so-imagined ‘other’ relates the empirical material of the present study to the discussion on similar questions posed by the Subaltern Studies group: whether we can understand the subaltern as constituting an alternative independent cultural and political domain (Guha, 1988) or whether the subaltern inevitably is an integral part of the dominant discourse and is unable to speak in his/her own words (Spivak, 2006). By illustrating the reciprocal relationship between the dominant and the dominated and their interdependency, this article adopts a perception of social relations between subalternity and domination as continuously constituting each other (Chatterjee, 1993; Prakash, 1994; O’Hanlon, 1988). Dalit students’ identity politics reveals a similar contradiction. Although the realisation of identity aims to highlight difference, it is essentially constructed through the dominant Hindu nationalist discourse.

**Approaching the subaltern autonomy**

Subaltern Studies emerged in the late 1970s among South Asianists. The leading figure was Indian historian Ranajit Guha. As one of its significant contributions, the Subaltern Studies group attempted to rewrite Indian history “from below,” i.e. from the perspective of subaltern groups. Ranajit Guha borrowed the concept of the ‘subaltern’ from Antonio Gramsci. Guha expanded Gramsci’s definition of the subaltern as a class to include all forms of subordination “in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way” (as cited in Altern, 2012, p. 59). Rewriting of history, according to Guha, is related to the fact that

the historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism – colonial elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism. Both originated as the ideological product of British rule in India, but have survived the transfer of power and been assimilated to neo-colonialist and neo-nationalist forms of discourse in Britain and India respectively. (Guha, 1988, p. 37)

Peasants who were the object of Guha’s research like other subalterns were generally considered to be devoid of agency, and thus unable to contribute to the process of nation building. Guha noted that Indian historical writing “[f]ails to acknowledge, far less interpret, the contribution made by the people on their own, that is,
independently of the elite to the making and development of this nationalism” (Guha, 1988, p. 39; emphasis in the original). Therefore, the main objective of the Subaltern School was to represent culture and politics of marginalised, subaltern groups and to critique dominant colonial, nationalist and Marxists discourses (Prakash, 1994, p. 1477; O’Hanlon, 1988, pp. 191-192).

With reference to Subaltern Studies, the present paper draws on the central discussion of the Subaltern School. It considers whether the subaltern can be seen as constituting an alternative independent cultural and political domain and whether the subaltern is inevitably constructed by dominant discourse. This theoretical position is central in the subsequent analysis of Dalit students’ cultural festivals.

**Discovering the subaltern**

Initially the Subaltern School, as the intellectual tradition that critiqued elitist historiography, tended to stress the subaltern agency. Ranjit Guha, in his groundbreaking text “On Some Aspects of Historiography of Colonial India” (1988), defined the subaltern as constituting autonomous political domain. He developed the idea in his influential work *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (1998). According to Guha:

> parallel to the domain of elite politics there existed throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics in which the principal actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the labouring population and the intermediate strata in town and country—that is, the people. This was an autonomous domain, for it neither originated in elite politics, nor did its existence depend on the latter. (Guha, 1998, pp. x–xi)

To explain his argument, Guha relies on the Gramscian concept of hegemony. According to Antonio Gramsci, hegemony denotes ideological domination by the ruling class. The bourgeoisie maintains its domination through the imposition of its values and beliefs as a “common sense“ understanding upon the subaltern classes (Gramsci, 1992). Guha redefines Gramsci’s notion of hegemony in the following way: “hegemony stands for a condition of Dominance (D), such that, in the organic composition of D, Persuasion (P) outweighs Coercion (C)” (Guha, 1998, p. 23).

He applies such a perception of hegemony to explain why the autonomous political domain of the subaltern could emerge in the colonial Indian state. Guha designates the colonial state as non-hegemonic because in its structure of dominance coercion outweighed persuasion ("dominance without hegemony"). As such, it failed to assimilate various subaltern groups into its ideological fold. The latter is regarded as the “failure of the Indian bourgeoisie to speak for the nation” (Guha, 1998, p. 23).

---

5 For the analysis of the development of the Subaltern School, see Altern (2012), Chaturvedi (2007) and Ludden (2002).
1998, p. xi). This produced “vast areas in the life and consciousness of the people which were never integrated into their hegemony” (Guha, 1998, p. xi). Guha argues that, because the colonial Indian state could not create an all inclusive universal hegemonic discourse and because it could exercise only political dominance, it created conditions for the emergence of an independent autonomous political and cultural subjectivity of the subaltern.

Guha considers further nationalist mobilisation as an actual struggle to gain hegemony: “the Indian bourgeoisie could strive towards its hegemonic aim only by constituting ‘all the members of society’ into a nation and their ‘common interest’ into the ‘ideal form’ of a nationalism” (Guha, 1998, p. 101). However, the fact that there exist various social movements in the postcolonial Indian state testifies to the failure of Indian nationalism to create all pervasive hegemony which would integrate culturally, religiously and socially different groups. Having been constructed essentially on the basis of Hindu culture, nationalist hegemony, even though it is gaining more power in the present political context, essentially fails to comprehend the multicultural nature of Indian society. As a consequence, culturally diverse and disprivileged groups constantly oppose the nationalist imagination of the Indian state.

**Deconstructing and reconstructing the subaltern**

Some scholars of the Subaltern School have challenged the concept of the autonomous subaltern by pinpointing to the complex nature of the subaltern subjectivity. One of the main and most influential critiques directed at the notion of the subaltern subjectivity was by literary theorist and philosopher Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In her landmark essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988) she asks: “How can we touch the consciousness of the people, even as we investigate their politics? With what voice-consciousness can the subaltern speak?” (Spivak, 2006, p. 32). Situating her argument within the premises of the traditional sati ritual, widow burning, Spivak claims that the subaltern sati women’s voice is lost among two prevalent discourses: the claims of British coloniser reformists and those of Indian traditionalists. According to the former, “white men” wanted to rescue “brown women from brown men”; the latter justified the sati ritual as women’s “[want] to die” (Spivak 2006, p. 33). This illustrates that the subaltern subordination precludes the subaltern autonomy since self-representation is not infrequently enacted through the framework of the dominant discourse.

Rosalind O’Hanlon, a representative of the Subaltern School, is also critical of Guha’s claims regarding the subaltern autonomy. She argues that Guha essentialises the subaltern subjectivity. The tendency, according to O’Hanlon, can be traced back to the Enlightenment humanist ideals of the self-constituting human subjectivity. O’Hanlon holds that Guha overlooks the factor of power which conditions the (self) positioning as the dominant and/or the subaltern. For O’Hanlon, the subaltern is
“constantly in the process of production, and that, too, mediated through symbols and signs which were external to it, those of elite authority” (O’Hanlon, 1988, p. 204). O’Hanlon suggests focusing on “the creative practice of the subaltern” and on “his ability to appropriate and mould cultural materials of almost any provenance to his own purposes, and to discard those, however sacred or apparently an integral part of his being, which no longer serve them” (O’Hanlon, 1988, p. 197). It is stated that the subaltern subjectivity is contradictory in itself; it works through the strategy of inversion as “the insurgent did not invariably wish to destroy the signs of authority, but very often preserved and appropriated them for himself” (O’Hanlon, 1988, p. 205).

In its early stages, the Subaltern School tended to romanticise the subaltern subject. It also undermined the influence of the dominant culture. This instigated reconsideration of the meaning of the subaltern and its position with regard to the dominant discourse. Indian historian and the Subaltern School proponent, Gyan Prakash aptly describes changes in the conceptualisation of the subaltern:

subalternist search for a humanist subject-agent frequently ended up with the discovery of the failure of subaltern agency: the moment of rebellion always contained within it the moment of failure. The desire to recover the subaltern’s autonomy was repeatedly frustrated because subalternity, by definition, signified the impossibility of autonomy… Subalterns’ resistance did not simply oppose power, but was also constituted by it. (Prakash, 1994, p. 1480)

The perception of the subaltern reveals a web of contradictions and paradoxes. Not only is the subaltern agency defined but also rooted in the dominant discourse. In this regard, the dominant discourse functions both as a point of critique and as a point of reference. Consensus has emerged on the dependency of the subaltern on the dominant discourse and on the understanding that the subaltern cannot come into being on its own. It is also agreed on the fragility of the subaltern subjectivity. At the same time, the subaltern started to be seen as arising not outside but inside the dominant discourse, “in its interstices,” as Prakash has stated. Even though emerging in the dominant discourse, the power of the subaltern essentially reveals itself through the subaltern’s ability to “exert pressure” on the structures that dominate it (Prakash, 1994, pp. 1481–1483).

Partha Chatterjee refers to history to explain changes in the conceptualisation of the subaltern. The contemporary political activism of the subaltern is no longer expressed as an actual confrontational rebellion, as in the case of peasant insurgency reported by Guha. At present, subalterns use bureaucratic and institutional means in pursuing their goals. Such strategy resembles elite politics. Thus taken, the politics of the subaltern and the elite shows significant interconnectedness in the making of the Indian nation. According to Chatterjee:

Now the task is to trace in their mutually conditioned historicities the specific forms that have appeared, on the one hand, in the domain defined by the hegemonic project of nationalist modernity, and on the other, in the numerous fragmented resistances to that normalizing project. (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 13)
It is not that the political autonomy of the subaltern never existed. Rather, in modern postcolonial condition, it has become much more affected by various influences. Peasant uprisings, described by Guha, and the current social movements exist in different socio-political contexts, which explain the differences in the conceptualisations of the subaltern. The Subaltern School had initially defined the subaltern as an autonomous political and cultural agent (Guha, 1988). Such a position was deconstructed by Spivak (2006) and O’Hanlon (1988) whereas recently the emphasis shifts to interdependency between the subaltern and the dominant culture (Chatterjee, 1993; Prakash, 1994; O’Hanlon, 1988).

For a long time, the history of the subaltern was regarded as the history of the people who sought to become similar to the mainstream society, the attitude which is central in the sanskritisation theory\(^6\) (Srinivas, 2013). In recent years, Dalit social movements and their intellectual leaders tend to project themselves as constituting autonomous alternative cultural domain existing outside of nationalist Hindu culture (Ilaiah, 2009). Modern world encouraged new visions of the subaltern that do not seek similarity but are for the recognition of difference (Pandey, 2006). The emphasis on difference can be attributed to the prevailing paradigms of multiculturalism in the international arena and to affirmative action policies of the local Indian government.

With reference to the above discussed theoretical tenets of the Subaltern School, the present article discusses whether Dalit students’ identity politics can be seen as constituting autonomous cultural and political domain as claimed by most Dalit activists or whether it is inevitably entangled in the dominant discourse. If subaltern culture is constituted by the dominant discourse, as per Spivak and O’Hanlon, and if it is fragmented and oppressed, in Prakash’s sense, then, one may ask, how and where the subaltern agency can be located. The article also explores what lies behind Dalit students’ claims of cultural difference. The analysis concerns the difference which is constructed through creative practices, “counter culture” festivals, in particular. Central in the paper is the analysis of means and resources, which are employed in the construction of difference, and, finally, the paper explores what these resources reveal about Dalit students’ subjectivity.

**Defining and categorising the untouchables**

Historically, the naming of the untouchables depended on who was naming them. As written sources indicate, representatives from the dominant Brahmanical tradition used different ways to denote their subalternity, dirtiness and untouchability

---

\(^6\) Indian anthropologist M. N. Srinivas described sanskritisation as a process by which “a ‘low’ Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual ideology and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, ‘twice born’ caste. Generally such changes are followed by a claim to a higher position in the caste hierarchy than that traditionally conceded to the claimant caste by the local community” (Srinivas, 2013, p. 6).
(the most common is chandālā). The colonial British government, acknowledging the vulnerability of these groups, referred to the untouchables as the ‘depressed class.’ The government of the independent India, in its newly drafted Constitution, designated the diverse untouchable groups under the category of the scheduled castes. The category was subjected to positive discrimination measures. Prominent Indian political leader of the 20th century, M. K. Gandhi referred to the untouchables as harijan (“children of god”), a designation that encodes a patronising attitude, showing an attempt to include the untouchables under the umbrella of the Hindu religion (Zelliot, 2013, p. 11).

The term Dalit, which in the regional Marathi language means “broken” or “oppressed” entered the common parlance and has gained wider publicity through a Dalit leader and influential political figure Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. One of the most prominent Dalit researchers, Gail Omved holds that the word Dalit stems from the British ‘depressed classes.’ The term gained popularity between the 1930s and the 1940s. It became a “militant alternative” for Gandhi’s harijan and included the “colourless” scheduled caste category (Omved, 2013, p. 79). As Eleanor Zelliot, a Dalit researcher, claims, the term Dalit denotes the self-chosen way of naming. The self-naming is associated with Dalits’ refusal to accept their alignment with pollution. It also indicates their realisation that the subordinate position of the untouchables was determined by social relations, specifically the existence of the caste system but not by religious scriptures (Zelliot, 2010, p. vii).

The militant Dalit Panther movement of the 1970s and the 1980s in its manifesto involved into the Dalit category: “Members of scheduled castes and tribes, neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion” (as cited in Omved, 2013, p. 74). In the present day India, the term Dalit is subject to criticism and is sometimes replaced by other designations such as bahujan (“majority”) or murlnivasi (“indigene”). This implies a wider political mobilisation, i.e. inclusion of various groups from the bottom of the social hierarchy such as tribal communities and other “backward classes.” The multiplicity of categories denoting the untouchables imply that the group designated as untouchables was and still is a social formation in the making whereas the boundaries of its social and political definition, its loyalties and rivalries are continuously being re-drawn. This acquires an added significance in light of the fact that, by mobilising different social groups, Dalits aim at forming political majority and thus strengthening their power positions.

---

7 The Indian Constitution and later legislations have made provisions for certain socially and economically disadvantageous groups. Currently, the scheduled caste category (SC), which encompasses various untouchable groups, is given 15% seats in state educational institutions and civil services; Scheduled Tribes category (ST) – 7.5%; Other Backward Classes (OBC) – 27%.

8 For a more detailed analysis of the intellectual and political evolution of the terms denoting the untouchables, see Charsley (1996) and Guru (1998).
The present paper uses the term the *untouchable* to stress the ‘primordial’ identity of people belonging to various untouchable castes whilst the designation *Dalit* is used to denote secondary, politically conscious and ideologically marked identities of the untouchable. *Dalit* can also be a politically correct reference to ex-untouchable groups. *Dalit* is used interchangeably with the term the *subaltern* to denote the subordinate and the marginal in Indian society.

**The development of Dalit students’ assertiveness and new caste politics**

Dalit students’ activism acquired new impetus after the Mandal Commission reforms of 1989, which foregrounded the extension of reservation policies to OBC groups (Other Backward Classes). The reforms instigated major opposition between upper caste students, who protested against the extended reservations, and lower caste students, including Dalits, who supported the new reforms. The reforms triggered the emergence of Dalit and other lower caste student organisations in universities. It is then that castes who had been hardly visible to the public became “hyper-visible” (Deshpande, 2013). Castes entered the mainstream politics, university campuses and wider public sphere. Students from upper castes marched to protest extended reservations, i.e. the Mandal Commission reforms of 1989 which foregrounded the extension of reservation policies to OBC groups. The reforms directly affected the balance of power relations in educational sphere and increased competition.

Although Dalits were not directly affected by the Mandal reservation policies, the violent attacks on the policies made Dalit students unite not only among themselves but also to join with OBCs and start forming various organisations striving to defend reservation policies. Gradually, these student organisations developed into more nuanced and culturally flavoured identity politics movements. This, in turn, prompts academic interest in Dalit studies (Rege, 2006, 2010; Satyanarayana & Tharu, 2011). Extended reservations exposed the problem of the “contemporaneity of caste” as “a live force in Modern Indian culture and politics” and revealed many contradictions in Indian society, especially in regard to ways of thinking about castes (Satyanarayana & Tharu, 2011, p. 9–10). The question which poses itself is whether the Mandal reforms recreated caste or just revealed its continuing latent existence. Until the present, however, Indian society and politics have revealed a deep division between caste articulating pro-reservation and caste neglecting anti-reservation thinking. Supporters of the Mandal reservation policies, usually lower caste citizens, are regarded as casteists (supporters of caste discrimination) whereas anti-reservationists project themselves as defending national interest and regard themselves as meritorious and qualified citizens. As a result, caste *per se* tends to be
associated with lower caste groups. The General Category world of upper castes, on the other hand, is essentially seen as casteless (Deshpande, 2013; Satyanarayana & Tharu 2011, p. 11).

More research needs to be done on the ways in which reservation policy contributed to the emergence of new caste politics in India. Reservation policies allowed and even stimulated members of lower caste groups to articulate anew their caste identity and to engage in more active ways of articulation. Caste identity thus became the main tool for political and cultural assertion. As claimed by Kusuma Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu, Dalits recreate caste

as a new identity of self-assertion and pride. Thus, Dalits and other subordinated castes invoke caste ties as signs of solidarity, fraternity, pride, self-respect, assertion and unity. They regard caste as a shared experience not only of oppression, but also of the history, myth, culture of a social group. (Satyanarayana & Tharu, 2011, p. 11)

This reveals the paradox of caste politics: by articulating and asserting their own caste identity, Dalits fight against caste discrimination. For Dalits, then, caste identity assertion becomes the main form of empowerment. On the other hand, caste identity politics enhances the emergence of new forms of discrimination, for example, discrimination in terms of support of reservationism and quota related benefits (quota-walla status). Furthermore, caste identity politics, although are for rejection of caste-based discrimination, in effect thrives in caste discourse.

**Defining Dalit students’ identity: what does it mean to be a Dalit at an Indian university?**

To understand identity politics of Dalit students, it is important to discuss what it means to be an ex-untouchable student at an Indian university and what happens with one’s ‘primordial’ untouchable identity when a person from untouchable background comes to inhabit a university space. Universities, intellectual circles and urban areas are seen by some scholars as places where caste has almost lost its relevance (Béteille, 2000). On the one hand, the author agrees with André Béteille's view on the declining significance of caste identification. At universities, where research was conducted, caste discrimination is not explicit, differently from other settings such as rural areas, where social hierarchies and interaction models are based on caste identities. Prestigious Indian universities (such as EFLU) attract students from different culturally specific Indian regions and states. In such multicultural environments, the expression of caste differentiation becomes more complex because regional caste interaction models lose their significance. At universities students enter, at least formally, a secular environment where they have to overcome caste barriers: share hostels, canteens and classrooms as well as the wider public space of university
campuses. Inevitably students broaden their social networks. On the other hand, Béteille can be opposed by stating that the university environment hardly allows one to be caste-anonymous. Lower caste students enter universities due to reservation system and remain under the category of *quota-walla* throughout their studies. The shared experiences by Dalits aptly describe how caste discrimination is manifested within the university setting.

As mentioned, at the universities chosen for the present research, the author did not recognise any obvious acts of discrimination. The data are from students’ narratives. Most of the informants, both Dalit students and the staff from lower caste background, noted that university is a space where discrimination continues to persist though it may take different forms. Informants used different words to describe discrimination. They labelled it as “hidden,” “technical” and “sophisticated” discrimination. In essence, the new forms of caste discrimination are different from traditional expressions of caste discrimination such as avoidance of physical contact, space division and others. New forms of discrimination are constructed through modern means and different types of relations. Discrimination can be based on reserved category identity, restrictions to obtain quota system based enrolment into higher education institutions, discrimination by lowering test scores and assignment grades, refusal to supervise and other forms of treatment of Dalits as intellectually inferior and “non-meritorious.”

A Dalit activist, a former student at EFLU, expressed his criticism of “hidden discrimination,” a form of discrimination that was indicated by many informants, by claiming that universities, even prestigious institutions such as EFLU, are highly casteist places. The informant also claimed that most of the social experiences of Dalits are inevitably coloured by caste wherein Dalits are treated like “slaves” who in many cases fail to identify discrimination of either themselves or others; hence, their movement is “slave movement.” He stressed that “caste is everywhere,” and that it is so internalised that people do not even realise when they practice or experience caste identity.⁹

Gopal Guru, a leading Dalit political science scholar, described Dalit experience at universities as follows:

> The strict observance of a language code, protocols, body language and ground rules effectively converts seminar halls into a hostile structure that very often inflicts humiliation on the Dalits, who then feel too nervous or intimidated to enter such structure… Dalit might have a genuine insightful point that might challenge the big boss in social sciences, but the moment Dalit questions the premises of the big boss, immediate loud laughter full of crushing derision is collectively produced in such gatherings. (Guru, 2013, p. 20)

---

⁹ Conversation with a Dalit activist at EFLU, February 6, 2014.
Language appears to be one of the most significant factors through which Dalit identity represents itself. Most of Dalit students come from illiterate families and state schools where the language of instruction is a local regional language. On the campus, where English is the dominant language, by extension a symbol of higher caste/upper class status, Dalits face severe difficulties in dealing with language barriers. Even after Dalits master some English, not infrequently their pronunciation and the way of expression reveal their essential difference from students with a private education background, which creates opportunities to acquire good English skills. Because of the limited knowledge of English, Dalits and other subaltern students do not feel confident enough to express themselves publicly in English. As a result, their public speaking becomes dominated by other students who come from upper caste/class backgrounds. In the classroom, not only the English language but also sophisticated intellectual jargon becomes a major obstacle for Dalits. As a Dalit interviewee, a teacher, put it, Dalits coming from rural areas have to learn English through a discourse that is completely alien to them and which does not correspond to their social experience.10

The many stories about entering university space that Dalit students and the staff from lower caste background shared with the author reveal that being a Dalit in an institution of higher education is a major challenge, especially for those coming from rural areas and uneducated family backgrounds. Dalit students from such backgrounds experience culture shock in an environment where styles of wear, communication and behaviour are different from those of their place of origin. Scheduled caste identity remains a problematic question: some teachers treat Dalits as intellectually inferior; some General Category students consider that Dalits should not be admitted to university. Another problem area is social stratification among students. Dominant student groups, who speak fluent English and adhere to Western styles of wear and lifestyle, form in-groups open only to the select few.

Finally, if Dalits become politically active and assertive in terms of caste identity, they gain a certain degree of self-confidence and public visibility. For many of them, being exposed to new ideas generated by Dalit intellectuals and Dalit student organisations create an eye-opening effect leading to an understanding of how the caste system functions. Such an “awakening” helps Dalit students to become critical toward the mainstream society. The critique of caste and Hinduism, expressed by Dalit student activists and scholars, allows Dalit students to relate their own experience with diverse theoretical views on Indian society. Such a synthesis encourages Dalit students to become emotionally engaged with the subaltern discourse. All of these processes impact not only Dalits and other subalterns but also, to an extent, upper caste students: they start to support Dalit activities on campuses and to participate in them.

10 Conversation with a staff member of the ex-untouchable origin at EFLU, February 12, 2014.
University environment provides Dalit students with a possibility to unite: new Dalit students can meet and communicate with senior reserved category students and share common experiences of “humiliation or suffering." On the other hand, sub-caste experience may inspire them to replicate divisions among different scheduled caste communities. A conflict between Malas and Madigas scheduled caste communities over the sub-categorisation of reservation quotas serves as a case in point. The tensions that occur among Dalit sub-caste groups can also be observed in Dalit student politics at Osmania University.

University environment provides the ex-untouchables with different possibilities for self-identification. They can join other, non-Dalit, non-subaltern political groups; such identity re-alignment provides them with additive identities and alliances on the campus. Dalit students can also choose a way of passive adaptation to the university environment, i.e. to be apolitical or to hide their ‘primordial’ untouchable identity. One of the informants from an untouchable background but from a relatively economically and educationally advanced family, when talking about politically active Dalit students on the campus, consistently used the pronoun “they” or “these people” to indicate self-distancing from politically active Dalit students.

The university environment, then, provides scheduled castes students with multiple ways of self- (trans)formation and creates possibilities for alternative, secondary identity constructions in response to perpetuating political discourses. The next section of the paper turns to the discussion of Dalit identity construction and assertion. These processes are conditioned by activities of the recently emerged Dalit student organisations. Specifically, the focus is on the construction of alternative identities and performance of “counter culture” by students from the subaltern background and, in some cases, from that of the upper caste.

### Asserting caste identity: celebrating cultural difference

Assertion of Dalit identity will be discussed within the context of the Beef and Asura festivals which took place at several universities in Hyderabad in the past few years. These events question the “hegemonic oppressive Brahmanical nationalist Hindu culture” and seek publicity for the “counter culture” of ex-untouchables usually through the means of oppositional symbolism (Hardtmann, 2009, pp. 236–237).

---

11 Most of the Dalit informants used these words to describe their experience of caste discrimination.
12 In Andhra Pradesh especially in the Telangana region, there are two main scheduled castes communities, Malas and Madigas. It is generally assumed that Malas have a higher position in the caste hierarchy: they are better off economically; they have gained more benefits from reservation policies and thus left the Madigas lagging behind. Since 1994 the Madiga sub-caste group started the Madiga Dandora movement to demand additional reservations (“reservation within reservation”) for their community. For the Mala-Madiga conflict and sub-categorisation movement in Andhra Pradesh, see Rao, 2009.
13 Interview with a Scheduled Caste student at EFLU, January 28, 2014.
**Beef festival: “this is our food”**

In Hindu society, the cow is considered to be an important religious symbol and a means of livelihood.\(^\text{14}\) Since the Indian Independence Movement, the notion of the ‘holy cow’ has been strengthened by various Hindu right-wing groups that employ the symbol for the consolidation of communitarian identities.\(^\text{15}\) In the contemporary political context, and especially after the recent parliamentary elections of 2014 in which the Hindu right-wing nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power, cow related sentiments seem to be on the rise within the Indian public. The new BJP manifesto highlights that the cow constitutes a significant part of the Indian cultural heritage:

> "In view of the contribution of cow and its progeny to agriculture, socio-economic and cultural life of our country, the Department of Animal Husbandry will be suitably strengthened and empowered for the protection and promotion of cow and its progeny. (Bharatiya Janata Party Election Manifesto, 2014)"

Protection of the cow presupposes stricter regulations on beef consumption, leading to beef bans in some parts of India. These right-wing initiatives were met with outrage by groups who eat beef: Dalit, tribal minorities and other lower caste and religious minority communities, especially in the South of India.

As a reaction to nationalist groups attempts to impose Hindu cultural hegemony on various marginal groups of Indian society, the ‘holy cow’ has become a symbol of Dalits and other subaltern student groups at the universities of Hyderabad in their struggle for visibility and self-assertion. The idea of a beef festival was suggested by the community of the Madiga Dalit students from the University of Hyderabad (UoH), who traditionally had cow related occupations and beef eating habits stemming from their own families and caste lifestyles.\(^\text{16}\) At the universities where the research was conducted, the Beef festival was supported not only by the Madiga but also by other Scheduled Caste groups, the adivasis, a tribal minority, and some leftist student organisations that regard the question of beef as a potential tool to “counter Hindutva\(^\text{17}\) forces.” Dalit students, as members of caste groups who are gaining some power, started questioning university mess menus and opposing regulations within

---

\(^\text{14}\) For more about cultural meaning of the cow, see Batra (1986), Lodrik (2005) and Simoons, Simoons & Lodrik (1981). Many of these accounts have emerged as a critique of M. Harris’ (1992) interpretation of the Indian cow worship in terms of cultural ecology.

\(^\text{15}\) For the use of cow symbolism for political reasons, see Freitag (1980), Jaffrelot (1996) and Parel (1969).

\(^\text{16}\) The Beef festival was started by Madiga students at the University of Hyderabad, a tradition has become part of an annual celebration of the Sukoon festival (Gundimeda, 2009).

\(^\text{17}\) In the present socio-political context, the Hindutva ideology is advocated by the extreme right-wing umbrella political organisation: Sangh Parivar with affiliated organisations, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, Bharatiya Janata Party, Bajrang Dal, Vishwa Hindu Parishad and others. The Hindutva ideology and its present usage is problematic, in the sense that it is constructed essentially on Hindu cultural values and is exclusionist in terms of its attitude toward various minority groups. According to Thomas Blom Hansen, religious Hindu nationalism “has grown into the most powerful cluster of political and cultural organisations in the country” (Hansen, 1999, p. 3).
the university setting. They demanded space and equality for self-representation and the right to the availability of beef in the university mess or at least the right to eat beef in public during the Beef festival. The beef debate reached a broader public when Dalit groups started writing on this point (Chandran, 2012; Gundimeda, 2009; Shyamala, 2012) and launching cultural programs, including singing and poetry reading to express the significance of beef in the lives of the untouchables.\(^{18}\) The Hyderabad feminist broadsheet magazine Anveshi titled a special issue What's the Menu? Food Politics and Hegemony. The issue, with a picture from the celebration of the Beef festival at Osmania University on its front cover, was devoted to the beef question.\(^{19}\) The idea of the Beef festival, as an attempt to gain the right to assert Dalit culture, spread across Indian universities. In some of them, there were violent confrontational reactions from rightist nationalist pro-Hindutva groups. In 2011, a public action of eating beef publicly at EFLU was interrupted by right-wing students who, overwhelmed by anger, broke furniture, threw stones at Dalit students and destroyed food by spilling urine on it. During the 2012 Beef festival at Osmania University, there was a violent reaction from the right-wing; nationalist groups set ablaze a media vehicle; students from opposing camps became engaged in an actual fight. From Hyderabad, in 2012 the idea of the Beef festival reached New Delhi (Jawaharlal Nehru University). The idea could not be implemented there because of the local legal acts prohibiting beef consumption in Delhi and because of the dominance of a more orthodox Hindu culture which has deep religious sentiments for the cow.

Debates sparked over whether consuming beef in public places is against Indian culture and Indian cultural values. Supporters of the festival claimed that a particular food culture was imposed on a big part of the Indian population, namely subaltern groups, which have their own cultural traditions regarding beef consumption. Defenders of the beef festival claimed that groups have their fundamental democratic right to assert their cultural identity. In their view, universities should be places that accommodate not only plural cultures but also plural food habits. The imposition of one particular food culture on the university mess was seen as “food fascism,” to use Kancha Ilaiah’s wording (Ilaiah, 2012). Dalits did not naively take the question of beef as a pure cultural sentiment but used it for political provocation to gain control over public space. A Dalit scholar-activist has stated:

So beef, I mean eating beef became a political agenda for Dalits to express their anguish or express their alternative ideology against the Brahmanism. Eating beef is not, not only a food practice, it’s a political program for Dalits. See, Muslims are eating in Hyderabad, m? Tribes are eating in the forests, everybody is eating in Hyderabad. They don’t have any problem eating beef outside the campus, but right-wing people, basically RSS looking at the universities as holy centres.\(^{20}\)

\(^{18}\) A poem (2012) by a female Dalit activist, Gogu Shyamala includes the lines: “Beef is our culture, / beef-our living green nature. / Life’s diversity, / breath of our soul.”


\(^{20}\) Interview with a Dalit scholar-activist at EFLU, February 2014.
Opponents of the festival, mostly right-wing proponents, claimed that the festival was a deliberate provocation and an insult to the Hindu population as the cow is a sacred animal to them. Most of them did not question personal eating habits, including beef consumption as long as food consumption is confined to the private sphere and does not reach the public space. Opponents blamed the festival for manipulating with the politics of caste identity and for politicising the question of food. This was perceived as a threat to the national unity of the country. They also considered Dalits’ attempts to create a certain antagonistic sentiment as directed against upper castes and as a disruption of Dalit assimilation into Hindu culture. The latter was envisioned as a proper and unquestionable route to follow.

The debate reveals that opponents of the beef festival aim to retain the status quo of the caste system and to make Dalits and other subalterns embrace cultural hegemony of the Hindu majority. The opponents pursue their aims hiding themselves behind the mask of nationalism and treating any movement from below that questions the right-wing ideology as anti-national. Supporters of the oppositional beef politics strive to overturn power relations by questioning the basic right to food. The opposition translates into a wider symbolical struggle over meaning. Food constellates here not as a basic biological need but as a sphere in which society’s power relations are negotiated. Balmurli Natrajan, a contemporary caste scholar, has noted that

> The banality of caste is best seen in non-dramatic aspects of everyday life, such as food – the conception of what is food, its production (or more commonly for urban residents, its procurement), preparation, the conviviality or lack thereof that accompanies its consumption, etc. Although food-sharing as a marker of caste is on the decline, largely due to the onset of certain aspects of modernity… distinctive food practices continue to provide occasions where caste reveals itself. Or, shall we say, food is still a key sire where people perform, produce and reproduce caste? Intimately shaped by caste, or even constituted by caste, food in the Indic context verily contains a ‘surplus of meanings’ perhaps like no other cultural setting in this world. (Natrajan, 2011, p. 35)

In Brahmanical culture, vegetarianism is a practice of exclusion, domination, stigmatisation and exploitation. It is also a sign of cultural superiority and distinction, as Natrajan claims (Natrajan, 2011, p. 35). Beef eating by subalterns, then, can be seen as a conscious practice of differentiation from the upper caste vegetarian Hindu culture.

**Asura festival: “these are our gods”**

Hindu mythological narratives, from Vedic literature and Ramayana or Mahabharata epics to contemporary Amar Chitra Katha cartoons and Mahabharata TV series, embody a nationalist character encoding a focus on an epic mythological conflict between gods (devas) and demons (Asuras). The latter are depicted as villains and disrupters of the universal order (dharma). Dalits and other subalterns reinterpret
these narratives wherein they identify with Asuras. Central in the revisionist narratives are mythic episodes, especially from Mahabharata and Ramayana epics, which depict cruel behaviour of Hindu gods with the Asura characters. The exposure of this thematic span aims to criticise Hindu religious tradition and to construct an alternative cultural tradition.

In addition to the mythological implications, the Asura festival engages with the Aryan invasion theory. At the universities of the present research, the Aryan invasion theory was re-employed by Dalits, tribal and other subaltern groups, under an indirect influence of Dalit political parties, as an attempt to construct a more inclusive mulnivasi or bahujan identity, which could include not only ex-untouchables but also other marginalised, ‘backward’ castes, tribes and religious minorities (Jaffrelot, 2007, p. 261, 268). Despite the obvious political underpinnings, the re-use and re-interpretation of the Aryan invasion theory provides subaltern groups with powerful ideological material for identity formation and strategies to overcome social and cultural differences within the subaltern groups.

As the present research has revealed, Dalit and other subaltern students, draw inspiration from dominant cultural representations and from scholarly theories. Festivals, dedicated to the commemoration of the killings of Asura kings presented as Dalits, were held at universities of Hyderabad. The celebrations were intended as expressions of “take[ing] pride” in Dalit identity and as communication of cultural differences to critique the right-wing Hindu politics.

Asura celebrations started at Osmania University in 2010 when a group of Dalit students, who had an important stronghold there, organised a Mahishasura festival before the Hindu holiday Dashara, and later a Narakasura festival before the Hindu holiday Diwali. The dates were chosen deliberately to enact “counter” celebration of the dominant Hindu holidays. Dalit students claim that all major Hindu holidays

---

21 The Aryan invasion theory, since its inception in the 19th century, has been highly debated and politicised issue by foreigners and various Indian social groups and others (Elst, 2003; Thapar, 1996). Constructed and elaborated by western scholars and Orientalists, e.g. Max Muller, the Aryan invasion theory, setting the assumption that there were essential racial differences in the Indian population between dark skinned Dravidians and fair-skinned Aryans, was used to justify British colonialism as yet another Aryan invasion to the subcontinent. Simultaneously, the theory received attention from Indian nationalists, such as Tilak, Sawarkar, Dayananda Saraswati and others, who used it to proclaim the superiority of the upper caste members. They argued that the upper caste members are descendants of Aryan ancestors. The argument was used to retain the superiority of spiritual Indian culture (Thapar, 1996, p. 8). The Aryan invasion theory was also employed by subaltern intellectuals. It was used by Jotiba Phule, a 19th century low caste intellectual from Maharashtra State who subverted the theory by re-interpreting it in caste related terms. He portrayed Aryans, whose descendants were contemporary upper castes, as cruel invaders that conquered local non-Aryan, low caste groups (Thapar, 1996; Omved, 2013). The re-interpretation of the Aryan invasion theory, which engages with Phule’s theoretical model, featuring Aryans as ruthless invaders, was elaborated by the Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu. The re-interpretation was opposed by Hindu nationalists, who negated the very legitimacy of the Aryan invasion theory. They claimed it could shake the foundations of India as a unified country based on Hindu values. Nationalists officially denounced the Aryan invasion theory as an erroneous and misleading interpretation of Indian history.
are intended to celebrate the killings of Asura kings and other subaltern heroes who are believed to be local Dravidian kings conquered by the upper caste Aryans.

The decision to organise the Asura celebration at EFLU in 2013 was an aftermath of celebration at Osmania University. Since EFLU is a short distance from Osmania University, subaltern students from both universities have a good social networking, share ideologies and participate in each other's events. EFLU students, mostly members of DABMSA (Dalit, Adivasi, Bahujan and Minority Student Association), during one of the major Hindu holidays, Ganesha Chaturthi, started celebrating the Asura festival. The subaltern students used mythological characters such as Ravana, Mahishasura, Shurpanakha and others, regarded by the Hindu tradition as negative and demonic. During the festival, students presented these characters as their gods and ancestors. Subaltern students, who form the core of the organisation, participated in the celebration. The event was also joined by some upper caste students, who relate themselves to the subaltern ideology, which to a certain extent has gained certain “hip” status on the EFLU campus. The celebration of Asura kings is considered to be a challenge to the right-wing Hindutva groups which hold extensive annual celebrations of various Hindu pujas on university campuses. In 2013, EFLU DABMSA

Picture 1. Courtesy Ajayan.
members and its supporters organised “Asura Pride Week,” which included face painting competition in Asura style, canvas painting, discussions and other cultural activities, all of which questioned the prevalent negative representations of Asura characters in the dominant Hindu culture. The event enhanced self-identification as an Asura (see Pictures 1 and 2). The celebration at EFLU was disrupted by the police called by the hostile university administration, which accused students of the incitement of communal enmity.

The festival was an accumulated response to the prevalence of Hindu religious sentiments and practices within the university setting, which in view of the protesting students had to be a secular place. The informants showed several sites on the campus where there still were displayed Hindu religious symbols: a small tile with a picture of Lord Ganesha and a garland of sacred leaves used during the Hindu religious pujas. These symbols were placed at the entrances to some of the university buildings (Picture 3). Although not explicitly dominant on the campus, these symbols caused resentment among subaltern and pro-subaltern students who did not relate to these symbols and who found them quite offensive. The informants pointed out that the EFLU campus used to have many more visual Hindu religious symbols. They were removed after persistent demands of subaltern students. One of the interviewees provided information on some of the DABMSA initiatives aimed to disturb
the *veena* festival named after an instrument and music genre associated with upper caste Hindu culture. The festival, involving both students and the staff, was organised by the EFLU teachers’ association. The Saraswati *puja* celebration was held at the university library, where a Brahmin priest performed *puja*, a religious ceremony of worshiping a religious idol. The celebration was objected by arguing that these religious and cultural festivals were organised using institutional money and that they publicised only the dominant Hindu culture despite the fact that the campus in its composition was essentially multicultural.\(^22\) An informant who participated in the *Asura* pride week provided the following description of the “counter” initiatives:

So the fact is that not everybody is happy with the larger nationalist upper caste Hindu discourse saying that we are all the same or this is our tradition or these are our holy texts or these are our mythologies or this is our tradition – no. So there are different stories, there are people wanting to say that we are different, we have different cultures, languages, systems of knowledge… We have a lot of variety. So even when we say that we celebrate the diversity in India not all diversity is being celebrated, as a lot of traditions are being discarded or being given an inferior status, because they don’t belong to upper caste or a dominant kind of ideology.\(^23\)

\(^{22}\) Interview with a Dalit scholar, ex-activist at EFLU, January 27, 2014.

\(^{23}\) Interview with a participant in the *Asura* festival at the English and Foreign Language University, January 21, 2014.
Discussion

The prevalent argument among the Dalit and the subaltern groups in the debates on all of the above discussed festivals stressed that their cultural practices and histories mark their essential difference from the dominant, supposedly “nationalist vegetarian high caste Hindu culture.” These festivals show attempts to unite various subaltern groups, scheduled castes, tribes and religious minorities against “the common enemy.” As named by the informants, the enemy is Indian nationalism with its caste system and Brahmanical culture. The Dalit experience of “suffering” and “humiliation” and other forms of victimhood serve as uniting motives to which other subaltern groups can relate. Dalits frequently invoke the motive of ultimate “suffering” as a major argument in their claim that they should be at the forefront of Cultural Revolution in India. Cultural deconstruction is believed to be a necessary step in dismantling the caste structure and gaining political power.

The research on Dalit students’ identity politics yields the following conclusions about the subaltern agency. Firstly, the subaltern agency is not autonomous but exists “in the interstices” (Prakash, 1994, p. 1482) of the dominant discourse. In this light, the Dalit identity politics has to be treated with regard to the dominance of the nationalist Hindutva groups, which has been growing since the 1990s. Of particular attention should be the increasing hegemonic claims of Hindu nationalists who emphasise vegetarianism, cow worship and veneration of Hindu gods as the core components of Indianess. The cultural and political assertions by the Dalit students do not happen in a cultural and political vacuum and are not inspired only by their own subjectivity. Rather, they emerge as actual responses to the increasing, yet not all-encompassing hegemony of the dominant discourse. Politically active Dalit students, with cultural and intellectual resources and skills acquired as a result of university education and socio-political activism, venture to construct subaltern history, cultural memory and identity by using the resources not only from what is assumed to be their unique cultural tradition of “suffering” but also from Hindu traditions and the prevailing nationalist discourse. The “counter culture” produced by Dalit students manifests itself through the rejection of the dominant discourse. Simultaneously, it becomes visible through its use of symbols of the dominant Hindu culture as a tool to “counter” Hindu culture and its values. Stated otherwise, the logic of the dominant discourse is used to deconstruct it.

Secondly, as suggested by the analysis of the practices involving naming of the untouchables and the Dalit identity politics, the subaltern is inevitably intrinsically fragmented. The process of acquiring a Dalit identity signifies politicisation of caste identity. On the other hand, the boundaries of what constitutes the category of Dalits are fluid; thus self-identification as Dalit most frequently depends on the context. The ‘primordial’ untouchable identity can develop into various directions, the
politicised Dalit identity being only one of them. Similarly, Dalit/subaltern identity or at least Dalit/subaltern loyalty can be assumed by non-subaltern groups.

Thirdly, the dominant discourse, which in the given context is nationalist Hindu culture, invariably functions as hegemonic landscape that constitutes subaltern culture and political action. Irrespective of how rebellious Dalit politics may appear to be, it is in fact shaped as a response to the dominant discourse. This sole fact shows the ultimate inability of the Dalit identity to be on its own and its indebtedness to dominant modes of thought. Identity politics, based on one's caste culture, adds more to this contradiction. Despite their efforts to liberate themselves from the caste discourse, Dalits are to an extent trapped in it: the discussed trajectories of identity assertion are largely re-constructions and re-interpretations of the dominant discourse.

Finally, “taking pride” in one's caste identity by the students implies inevitable acceptance and unconscious proliferation of the caste discourse. Nonetheless, the ability of the subalterns to influence dominant discourse cannot be denied. Neither can their desire and ability to transcend the status of the dominated to the dominant. The subaltern agency emerges in the ability “to exert pressure” (Prakash, 1994, p. 1481) on the dominant discourse and to manipulate the prescribed ‘primordial’ identity by the construction of secondary political identities. The subaltern agency and its effects on the dominant discourse can be conceptualised further by employing the concept of mimicry introduced by Homi K. Bhabha. By mimicking the coloniser, the colonised reproduces itself in a copy which is “almost the same but not quite” (Bhabha, 1984, p. 126). This blurred copy of the coloniser or the dominant is quite threatening since it has an element of mockery or parody in it, which in a way disrupts and destabilises the authority of the coloniser. The mimicry also implies some uncertainty surrounding the coloniser and the inability to exercise full control on the behaviour of the colonised (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1998, pp. 139-141). By setting a mimicry-based “counter culture” in action, Dalit identity politics opens a new framework, an alternative discursive space, even if constructed in the words of the dominant, but with a target and potency to question and a possibility to change both the present social system and the power relations.

To describe the logic of the Dalit student politics, a reference to post-colonial theorist Ashis Nandy (2012) would be pertinent. He claims that only through mutual consensus can humiliation function. In effect, both sides, the oppressor and the oppressed, have to agree on the fact of humiliation, i.e. they have to use the same meaning system to resolve the question of humiliation. If the oppressed subject stops feeling humiliated (denounce the meaning of humiliation even if humiliation practice still continues), if he/she regains his/her pride, humiliation loses its meaning. This can be traced in the logic of Dalit students’ identity politics and “counter culture” which is based on the deconstruction and re-signification of the meaning.
system of the Hindu nationalist discourse, a revision which leads to changes in self-perception. The strategy of ascribing negative meanings to culturally dominant symbolism is similar to many other current social movements in which identity politics of the oppressed, marginalised groups is constructed not only through modern ideals of democracy, human rights and personal freedom but also through the use of the same symbols that had been used to oppress, discriminate and/or under-represent a particular group of people.

Conclusions

Dalit students' identity politics should be understood not only as a rejection of dominant culture but also as a critical mimicry and reversed usage of dominant discourse to “counter” it and to construct cultural difference. Maintaining difference is a major goal, but it is set in action through the concepts and frameworks of dominant discourse, not outside of it, which makes alternative politics to be dependent on the dominant discourse. Thus taken, the subaltern can be analysed as constituting an alternative culture and politics but not as an independent autonomous domain since dominant and subaltern discourses have become reciprocal in the present socio-political context. It can be suggested that Dalit students’ identity politics should be understood as a formation of a systematic way of representing negative experiences of caste “humiliation” through reinterpretation of the dominant discourse. Dalit politics, thus, translates into the creation of a critical “counter” framework not outside but inside the nationalist Hindu discourse which Dalits expose in order to subject it to critique.

References


Received September 20, 2014
Accepted December 12, 2014
Kristina GARALYTĖ

Subalterno autonomiškumo analizė: dalitų studentų identiteto politika Indijoje

Santrauka

Straipsnyje, grindžiamame Haiderabado (Indija) universitetuose atlikto lauko tyrimo duomenimis, analizuojama dalitų (neliečiamųjų) studentų identiteto politika per subalterno studijų teorinę paradigmą. Dalitų studentų rengtos šventės yra parankus atvejis atliekant subalterno autonomiškumo analizę, nes atskleidžia priėstaringą studentų pasirinktą strategiją. Dalitai studentai, pasitelkdami įvairius kultūrinius, istorinius ir politinius išteklius, rekonstruoja savo išskirtinę kultūrą, formuodami ideologinę paradigmą, persmelkiant „neigiamų“ sentimentų, nukreiptų prieš brahmanišką hindų nacionalizmo diskursą. Kartu šis kultūrinio savitumo siekis įgyvendinamas „teigiamai“ perinterpretuojant dominuojančią hinduizmo kultūrą, kas savaime įtraukia dalitus į tą patį dominuojančio diskurso įtakos lauką. Šis dvilypis prieštaringas požiūris į įsivaizduojamą „kitą“ leidžia sieti empirinio tyrimo medžiagą su vienu esminių subalterno studijų klausimu – ar subalternas įkūnija nepriklausomą kultūrinį ir politinį diskursą (Guha), ar visgi savaime yra neišvengiamu dominuojančiojo diskurso dalis (Spivak). Atskleidžiant abipusį dominuojančiojo ir pavaldžiojo santykį ir neišvengiamą jų susisaistymą, remiamasi nuolat vie- 

Reikšminiai žodžiai: subalternas, neliečiamybė, dalitai, kastos, socialiniai judėjimai, identiteto politika, hindų nacionalizmas.

Kristina GARALYTĖ

Vytauto Didžiojo universiteto Sociologijos katedros doktorantė. Mokslinių interesų sritis – po-