

## **PREAMBLE**

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This text accompanies

*Constitutions*

Curator: Swapnaa Tamhane

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Some years back at my friend's wedding in North Carolina, I was amongst a Marathi community of deeply religious Deshastha Brahmin who had immigrated to the United States in the late sixties. While my family is from a sub-caste of the Kshatriyas, my parents only really extended what that entailed through a socio-cultural lens in relation to recipes or customs. We eat meat, fish, and drink alcohol. One afternoon, we women were in the kitchen cleaning and tasking, making food and tea for the men sitting in the living room chatting. It was a familiar scene. As I was drying some mugs, a lady, with the edges of her hair highlighted in a glossy-orangey-brown to hide the greys, sidled up to me and asked: "Are you Deshastha?" She didn't even add on the "Brahmin" part. I looked at her quite surprised and said, "Nope, we're not that high up." I was furious and insulted that these caste hierarchies were asserting themselves in an irrelevant suburb of North America from a woman with an American-twanged-Indian-accent gained from forty years of living in Ohio. I found it ridiculous and oppressive.

Somehow in the days following, I was not taken too seriously.

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In 2020, signs reading "Dalit Lives Matter" appeared amid the Black Lives Matter protests during the global response to the murder of George Floyd. Announcing solidarity between

those who share oppression, activists drew attention to the rape and murder of a nineteen-year old Dalit woman in Hathras, Uttar Pradesh on September 14, 2020. Solidarity between Dalits and African American people is not new. In 1873, the anti-caste revolutionary Jyotirao Phule dedicated his treatise *Gulamgiri* (Slavery) to Black emancipation.<sup>1</sup> In 2014, Judge Rohulamin Quander and the African American Legacy Families at the United States Congress presented the “Declaration of Empathy” petition recognizing the modern-day slavery of Dalits. Visiting India in 1959, Martin Luther King Jr. was convinced the country had made better progress against caste untouchability than Americans had against racial segregation. However, Hindu-Brahmin supremacy has kept its upper caste foot stomped firmly onto Dalits, Bahujans, and Adivasis<sup>2</sup> who continue to be brutally exploited within pre-determined divisions of labour, all because of their birth. As the Dalit doctoral student Rohith Vemula (1989-2016) wrote in his suicide note: “My birth is my fatal accident.”

The Constitution of India was written 1949 and put into effect on January 26, 1950. It included a document on *States and Minorities* by Dr. Bhimrao R. Ambedkar, Chairman of the committee for the drafting of the Constitution. As someone himself from the Mahar caste, he relayed a plan for the protection and empowerment of the Scheduled Castes or what he called “Untouchables,” including the abolishment of untouchability and punishment by law of any discriminatory acts. “Untouchable” would eventually change to “Dalit,” which translates as crushed or broken, and allowing for an ideological and self-determined shift from an “Untouchable” to an “ex-Untouchable.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Vijay Prashad, “Afro-Dalits of the Earth, Unite!,” *African Studies Review* 43, no. 1 (2000): 196. Jyotibhai and Savitribai Phule were instrumental in initiating discussions around eradicating untouchability and the education of women.

<sup>2</sup> Bahujan means “many,” hence all the majority of people in India who are Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Castes, therefore, not only Dalits.

<sup>3</sup> Padma D. Maitland, “Black Buddha: The Visual and Material Cultures of the Dalit Movement and the Black Panther Party,” in *Global Raciality: Empire, Postcoloniality, Decoloniality*, ed. P. Bacchetta, et al. (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 173

Earlier in 2020, protests led primarily by Muslim working-class women from the Shaheen Bagh neighbourhood in Delhi arose to contest the announcement of the Citizenship Amendment Bill and the National Register of Citizens.<sup>4</sup> The current Hindu nationalist government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), passed this bill providing amnesty and citizenship to non-Muslim refugees and illegal immigrants from neighbouring Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. The bill's aim is to delegitimize the citizenship of Muslims and is one part of the BJP's campaign to "Hinduize" the country, contrary to the Constitution that declares no specific religion for Indian citizenship.

The preamble to the Constitution of India appears in Sohrab Hura's *Scramble* (2020) along with iconic portraits of independent India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Ambedkar. Drawing closer to Nehru's portrait an eerie hybrid image emerges as an outline of current prime minister Narendra Modi emerges with his artificial benevolent smile showing his good-Hindu-non-meat-eating teeth. Lurking over the portrait of Ambedkar is the Minister of Home Affairs, Amit Shah, known for his viral image campaigns. The preamble appears like a graphic image file, its ever-shifting words declaring a secular and democratic republic, guaranteeing its citizens liberty, equality, fraternity and justice. But Hura renders it difficult to read, alluding to the pit-in-the-stomach feeling that the current government is slowly replacing or erasing history, not only within the Constitution, but broadly. For instance, Nehru under the BJP is supplanted for Vinayak Damodar "Veer" Savarkar, author of the political ideologies of Hindutva and *Hindu Rashtrav* that imagine India as a Hindu nation.<sup>5</sup> *Scramble* documents a nationalist agenda underway to rewrite India's secular history through electoral autocracy.

Hura adopts again revising or re-telling processes in the moving image work *The Lost Head & The Bird* (2016-2019) where the head of the main protagonist Madhu has been stolen by a spiteful lover. Hura narrates twelve slightly different versions of the story as Madhu

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<sup>4</sup> The National Register of Citizens only records people who have paperwork or proof that they came to India the day before Bangladesh became independent on 25 March, 1971.

<sup>5</sup> Hindutva is an ideology purported by the political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party that aims to shape Indian life and culture under the rubrics of Hinduism. While Hindutva had been defined by Savarkar, the BJP have been successfully defeating the Congress Party by creating communal rifts and divides between Hindus and Muslims.

appears headless as a flashing image, leaving a retinal trace. These minute shifts in narrative mirror the spread of fake news through social media outlets. The narrative then builds through a series of diptychs that gain a frenetic pace towards a speeding vortex of viral and media images. These pairings draw from his photobook *The Coast* (2019) documenting what Hura considers to be the edge of India and the peripheral line holding the country together. Life along the coastline in Tamil Nadu, its people and their rituals, along with the ocean, are Hura's way of infusing the sensation of how the country has changed with the pervasiveness of caste and religious violence.

Over the years Hura's work has shifted from documentary to the metaphorical, embodying the perversion of supremacist nationalism once lying dormant and now the Modi government's primary platform. The foreboding sense in the images, at first impalpable, relays the absurdity experienced daily in the newspapers and on the evening news as anchors shout at each other. As an artist, Hura asks how one differentiates between viral images as they become a new and dominant language: "For image-makers it has also become increasingly necessary to find vocabularies of subterfuge with codes and clues that might help bypass unwanted interference."<sup>6</sup>

The disembodiment and irrationality that Hura holds up as the country's mirror, is then used by artist Prajakta Potnis to map that state inside the body itself. She speaks about the toxic and overburdened body, as well as the body as a mass or mob, be they the protestors at Shaheen Bagh, the migrant workers walking for days and days after Modi called a COVID lockdown within four hours on March 24, 2020, or the farmers protesting in Delhi for over six months now. She says that once everything is taken away, the body is all one has to dissent with.<sup>7</sup> For Potnis there is a toxicity in the whole environment in India. It enters bodies, mobile phones, homes and imaginations, and can be traced back to the destruction of the Babri Masjid

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<sup>6</sup> Sohrab Hura, "Images are Masks," 2021, unpublished

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Prajakta Potnis, September 19, 2021.

in 1992 by a Hindu mob.<sup>8</sup> In her work, this toxicity is relayed through foam—an ever-expanding mass of tiny bubbles formed through agitation—a material and symbolic choice used to communicate how the Modi government’s narrative creates growing fear by dividing people and communities. Potnis’ series begins with X-ray images inspired by her retired uncle who once worked in a detergent factory some forty years prior. Lying dormant in his lungs from these years were traces of various cleaning agents that one day began to form bubbles, frothing and completely damaging his lungs. Although he worked in a closed office away from a factory floor, his body still absorbed and generated “foam.” Photographing everyday domestic materials like steel cleaning wool or tubes with X-ray film, the objects become familiar yet alien internal organs we did not even know we have. After making this body of work, Potnis came across philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of the body without organs, understood as a number of organs that lack structure, organization, or hierarchies. The body without organs is both alive or passive, with unbounded emotions flowing over and through, and is hence, possibly, free. The imprint of capitalism and labour, not merely on the surface of the body, but hiding surreptitiously within it, is experienced in *The Floating Island* (2019-20) where foam amasses, gathers, and recedes repeatedly. Drawings directly on the gallery wall of a right and left lung are muted beneath sheets of polyurethane foam in *Toxic Drawing* (2020). Suffocated, the lungs become organs without a body.

The kitchen for Potnis, explored in previous series of works, is a political space that engages multiple bodies of various castes who share this environment in domestic acts of labour. The body without organs stares out at us in *Night Vision* (2018) as rings of a counter gas stove flicker and slowly become a set of eyes. Traditionally, upper caste Hindus would not allow a Dalit to prepare or touch their food. In recent years, there has been a growing acknowledgement and understanding that the food histories of India have been dominated by

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<sup>8</sup> The Babri Masjid in Ayodhya was a historical religious space that through centuries was a mosque, but also declared the birthplace of the Hindu god, Rama. The mosque was attacked by a violent crowd organized by the Hindu nationalist right-wing paramilitary organization, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the BJP, and was one of the first live events to be broadcast on television, therefore inciting anger throughout the country almost immediately leading to communal violence between Hindus and Muslims. Many artists responded with protests understanding that the very idea of secularism had ended on that day.

the Brahmin upper castes. Rajyashri Goody's *Is Hunger Gnawing At Your Belly?* (2017- ongoing) includes fifteen booklets of recipes gathered from autobiographies by Dalit writers. Through this work, Goody critiques how recipe books assume some basic facts: that one has access to a kitchen, to utensils, to an education. She talks about the impossibility of a Dalit recipe book when discrimination is experienced through the stomach and Dalits could not access to literacy: reading, education and writing were forbidden, and it was dictated that ears would be filled with tin or lac resin if a Dalit listened to a recitation of a Veda, and his or her tongue would be cut if he recited a Vedic text. Although the texts appear as recipes, the instructions are impossible to follow. One involves collecting dirty plates from outside of a wedding venue, while another calls for cooking two-day old food; each exposes the brutal reality of having no rights.

The dictates from the *Manusmriti*, written in 100 CE, prescribe a caste system defined by birth, which remains as *the* authoritative Hindu code for living. In the *Manusmriti*, the *chaturvarnas* or four castes within Hinduism are Brahmins, or priests, to whom teaching and studying of the Vedas was assigned, while the Kshatriyas were the soldiers or protectors, the Vaisya were traders and money lenders, and the Sudras served the first three castes. Beyond the *chaturvarnas* are the *avarna* or *Ati-Sudras*, otherwise Tribals or Scheduled Castes and who Ambedkar termed the Untouchables, those who are regarded as polluting to upper caste Hindus.<sup>9</sup> In 1927, Ambedkar publicly burned a copy of the *Manusmriti* in protest of the denial of access to literacy for Dalits. For Goody, the *Manusmriti* is a sign of the systemic invisibilization of Dalit oppression: "This is the book that says my community can't be educated. We can't even read it."<sup>10</sup> Her work *The Milk Of The Tigress* (2021) is a selection of Dalit literature borrowed from Concordia University's Webster Library and represents a historical and contemporary collection of writing. The books sit on shelves coated in the pulp of the *Manusmriti*. Though they contest upper caste narratives that have ignored experiences of casteism, Goody's interest is in the written word's power to overturn this system of labour, class, and racial division. With

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<sup>9</sup> While *varnas* refers to the four divisions of Hindu society, *jati* refers to birth and hereditary communities.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Rajyashri Goody, October 10, 2021

her sculpture *What Is The Caste Of Water?* (2017), she addresses the universal right to water and points to dictates on impurity in the *Manusmriti*. The artwork quotes Ambedkar's act of defiance in 1927 when he and 10 000 Dalit men, women and children drank from a village water tank which Dalits were barred from using. Their actions horrified the local Brahmins, who believed they then had to "cleanse" the water by adding 108 pots of *panchagavya*—a mixture of cow urine, cow dung, milk, ghee, and curd amongst a number of ingredients. Goody's sculpture comprises 108 glasses filled with *panchagavya* presented as precious objects on plinths. Over time the water will evaporate leaving rings as evidence of the purification process.

The year 2022 marks seventy-five years of decolonization from British rule. In 1946, just prior to Independence, Ambedkar wrote to civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois asking for advice on petitioning the United Nations for Dalit rights as the National Negro Congress had for African Americans. Du Bois replied on July 31, 1946, with an acknowledgement and sympathy towards the Untouchables of India and shared the African American statement. The artist Sajan Mani utilizes his own "Black Dalit body" as both subject matter and medium to write out the Constitution in Malayalam script in charcoal for the work, *When the Hands Start Singing* (2021). This writing/drawing action is practiced in order to literally defy the suppression of literacy and discuss the evolution and evocation of a Dalit consciousness in South India. Mani relays histories of casteism and labour, pointing to colonialism and extraction. A child of rubber tappers, Mani's parents work within a brutal cash crop farming system under tire companies that sees 40% of natural rubber from India exported annually. Historian P. Sanal Mohan has traced the rise of Dalit consciousness and the role of Dalit poet and activist Poykayil Appachan (1879-1939), who founded the socio-religion *Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha* (God's Church of Obvious Salvation) and the first English school for Dalits.<sup>11</sup> Appachan's songs, poems, and speeches expressed subaltern dissent and were met with suppression and have only as recently as 2006 been translated and circulated. Mani has transcribed his poems for performances and works, such as *Wake Up Call for Ancestors* (2021) where they appear on rubber along with

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<sup>11</sup> P. Sanal Mōhan, *Modernity of Slavery: Struggles Against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala* (London: Oxford University Press, 2015).

serigraphs of Thanda Pulayan, an indigenous slave caste in Kerala emancipated in 1854 with little change to their status. At his parents' insistence, Mani attended Malayalam school and began to learn English after the fourth grade. The large drawing investigates contemporary Malayalam language to consider its own historical understanding of itself. Currently a resident of Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart, Mani has been reading the Malayalam manuscripts of Stuttgart-born missionary to Kerala, Hermann Gundert (1814-1893),<sup>12</sup> who was the first to compile a Malayalam grammar book in 1859 and a Malayalam-English dictionary in 1872.

B.R. Ambedkar's writings, like Appachan's, have too been suppressed. Arundhati Roy exposes how the text to Ambedkar's 1936 speech *Annihilation of Caste*<sup>13</sup> is not included on university syllabi, and how a publishing and distribution clamp upholds the Hindu caste system.<sup>14</sup> Roy names this as a social apartheid, further witnessed in the mass exodus of migrant workers from cities towards their villages following Modi's sudden COVID lockdown announcement. At that moment, artist Birender Yadav was stuck in his basement sick with the virus and working with whatever supplies he had on hand. The series *Life Tools* (2021) was produced during this period, soft pastel drawings of bodies without organs, tools that grow feet or double-ended hands that become supports. Yadav is from a family of coal miners in Dhanbad and his father worked as a blacksmith. For someone from his social position, to decide to be an artist and to choose another kind of labour is unheard of. The first in his family to pursue a higher education, Yadav was sent to Benares to study for a bachelor's in art and design to assist his father in casting metals at the foundry. In Benares, he encountered trafficked workers who he realized were indigenous people displaced by the clearing of forests for mining purposes, without identity papers and now forced to produce bricks in charcoal burning kilns. Yadav's past works have included documenting what bonded labour looks like by gathering thumbprints

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<sup>12</sup> He is the maternal grandfather of Herman Hesse, author of *Siddhartha*.

<sup>13</sup> *Annihilation of Caste* is a publication of an undelivered speech that he was invited to give in 1936 for the Jat-Pat-Todak-Mandal, a group of liberal Hindus seeking social reform of which Ambedkar was selected as president to which he reluctantly agreed. Once it was understood what Ambedkar was going to lecture about, he was disinvented and went ahead to self-publish this speech in 1937. In it, he highlights how Untouchables are forbidden from public schools, wells, or streets.

<sup>14</sup> Arundhati Roy, *The Doctor and the Saint: Caste, Race, and the Annihilation of Caste, The Debate Between B.R. Ambedkar and M.K. Gandhi* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017).



and portraits of each brick maker. Among the drawings in *Life Tools* is a pile of bricks presented on a high stool as though a living being with fresh grass or hair sprouting between the cracks. The pile also resembles a modernist architectural structure without windows or an entrance, an enclosed structure that looks within itself and has no escape routes.

This exhibition brings together five artists from India who are of a similar generation. Through their artwork, they each critique oppression created by the social inequality of caste and labour divisions while also addressing the suffocating atmosphere developed over almost thirty years by a far-right government. The artworks by Rajyashri Goody, Sohrab Hura, Sajan Mani, Prajakta Potnis and Birender Yadav each consider how the constitutions of body and state are imbricated in one another.

The last inclusion in this exhibition is the poem *Man, You Should Explode* in Marathi by activist Namdeo Dhasal (1949-2014), who was from the same Mahar caste as Ambedkar and grew up in Mumbai's red-light district. Inspired by Ambedkar and the American Black Panthers, Dhasal founded the Dalit Panther movement in 1972 along with Raja Dhale, J.V. Pawar, and Arun Dangle, all poets and writers who established the presence of Dalit literature. More than seventy years later, Dhasal's poetry continues to mirror the Dalit experience despite Ambedkar's efforts and the Constitution to protect his community. As founder of the Bhim Army, Chandrashekar Azad Ravan says, "Every day, we die a thousand deaths."