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On Annihilation of Caste, Are We Asking the Right Question?

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Caste is not merely a structural injustice but a form of symbolic domination-controlling who gets to define social meaning. Annihilating caste requires democratising the symbolic order itself: the right to cultural creation, collective re-imagining, and the power to remake social categories.

Why does caste persist despite decades of democratic politics and reform? A familiar answer within anti-caste thought holds that a society constituted through caste cannot be reformed into equality, because caste is not a discrete injustice but the very organising principle of social life-structuring labour, marriage, status, and political power, among other things.

This is a compelling diagnosis because it captures how deeply caste is woven into both the material and relational dimensions of social life, in ways reformist approaches cannot reach. However, I argue that if we understand caste as a form of symbolic domination, the argument can be sharpened in a way that clarifies not just the limits of reform, but also the deeper democratic deficit at the heart of caste society.

What Caste Actually Is

I would like to propose that caste is best understood not just as a system of economic exploitation or ritual hierarchy or even social psychological dysfunction, but also as a form of symbolic domination. Domination here means a systematic and unfair imbalance of power. What makes caste domination distinctively symbolic is that this imbalance operates through the social production of meaning itself-through who gets to define what counts as pure or impure, respectable or shameful, deserving or undeserving.

These judgments are not handed down only by law or violence; they are woven into everyday social life through the categories and values people use to interpret themselves, each other, and the world. This is what we mean by social meaning-making: the ongoing, collective process through which a society decides what things mean.

In a caste-based society, this symbolic order is produced, shaped, and maintained by Brahmanism: a system that divides people into ranked castes with no fair or rational basis. It ensures that Brahmins and other uppered castes are granted recognition, status, and advantages they have not earned, while lowered castes are misrepresented, demeaned, and denied the social power they would hold in a genuinely democratic society.

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Historically positioned as India's primary cultural producers, uppered castes combined symbolic authority with economic power, giving them outsized control over the production and use of categories through which Indian society understands itself. Caste domination, then, is what happens when lowered castes are subjected to this Brahmanical supremacy-an arbitrary regime of power that elevates some while disadvantaging others.

Consider an example of this dynamic at work. The very fact that uppered castes can call themselves "General Category", distancing themselves from caste and positioning themselves as the neutral "general" against which "particular" lowered castes are defined, is itself an act of symbolic domination.

As Satish Deshpande observes, uppered castes take umbrage at their own connection to caste being invoked except in deferential terms. He points to reports of Sudha Murthy declaring that she is "not part of any backward community" and saw no need to participate in a caste census. But could a Dalit person simply declare themselves "not part of an excluded community" and, on that basis, demand entry to a temple?

The asymmetry is telling-uppered castes can present themselves as above and beyond caste, while lowered castes remain marked by it. And try as they might, lowered castes would face an enormous uphill battle if they demanded that the official designation "General Category" be renamed "Privileged Caste".

This is why, for instance, Anand Teltumbde's account of why reform fails needs to be extended. Reform operates across pre-existing caste categories, but it does not democratise the production of those categories themselves. The process of defining and shaping social categories is not participatory-the majority of people categorised as "lower" castes have little power to influence how their identities and experiences are represented. Caste, in other words, is not just about what one has or lacks; it is about who gets to decide what things mean.

What Caste Does to Democracy

In contrast, what I am calling "symbolic democracy" requires that systems of meaning making and classification in society-those embedded in state practice as well as popular culture-be open to contestation, revision, and collective authorship. Simply gaining formal legal rights or representation is not sufficient for symbolic democracy to be achieved; rather, it concerns the distribution of power over meaning making itself.

A symbolically democratic order is one in which individuals and communities possess an equal capacity to define who they are and to participate in shaping the classificatory schemes through which society is organised. Viewed through the lens of symbolic democracy, therefore, an essential element of uppered castes' hegemony-beyond their economic domination-has been their ability to narrate and describe the world. They have ordained the meaning of social events according to rules about how to behave and how to think that they themselves have laid down.

From this perspective, caste appears not only as the basis of a structure of inequality but also as a bedrock of a fundamentally anti-democratic social system. Its defining feature is not just hierarchy but closure. Caste fixes identities by birth, stabilises their meanings across generations, and enforces their boundaries through both social practice and institutional recognition.

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In a caste-based society, the symbolic order is inherited, not collectively, democratically authored. Crucially, those located within this system do not have an equal capacity to redefine it. The lowered castes cannot opt out of caste, nor can they, without great struggle, democratically renegotiate what caste categories mean in any substantive sense.

In his final speech to the Constituent Assembly in November 1949, B.R. Ambedkar issued a warning that has grown more prescient, not less, with time. India, he said, was about to enter into a life of contradictions-political equality guaranteed by the Constitution, but social and economic inequality reproduced through the very fabric of everyday life.

The problem was not simply that formal rights would be inadequately enforced-though that is a problem too. The deeper problem was that political democracy and social democracy operate at fundamentally different registers, and progress in one does not automatically produce progress in the other.

Why Reform Cannot Fix It

Understanding that caste is a form of symbolic domination allows us to restate Teltumbde's argument with greater precision. The problem is not simply that democracy fails to eliminate caste inequality; it is that caste forecloses the very conditions of symbolic democracy. Even where procedural democracy exists in the form of universal suffrage, constitutional rights, and electoral competition, the underlying system of meaning-making remains largely intact and insulated from democratic transformation. Categories such as "Scheduled Caste", "Other Backward Classes", or "General Category" may be necessary for the administration of redistribution policies or political representation, but their social interpretation is not subject to open-ended public redefinition.

This is why reform appears both necessary and insufficient. Policies of reservation, anti-discrimination law, and political representation do redistribute opportunities and recognition, but they do so within a symbolic order that remains fundamentally closed. As a result, political democracy coexists with caste not simply because it is weak or insufficiently well implemented, but also because it does not extend to the level at which caste operates most powerfully-the organisation of social meaning.

The implication is that the annihilation of caste cannot be understood solely in terms of wealth redistribution, legal reform, or liberal representation (what is commonly known as identity politics). It requires a transformation of the symbolic order itself-a shift from inherited, rigid classifications to a genuinely democratic field in which identities and categories can be contested, reworked, and

collectively reshaped. Without such symbolic democratisation, equality remains structurally blocked, not only in practice but also in principle.

Political democracy, operating through universal suffrage and formal rights, addresses citizens as formally equal. But the symbolic order it inherits is not formally equal-it is structured by the very asymmetry that caste produces. The uppered castes like Sudha Murthy inhabit caste without being marked by it. To the general public, whose worldview is shaped by caste, their position appears as the neutral default, the human norm, while the lowered castes are the deviation.

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Political democracy cannot correct this asymmetry because it does not reach the level at which it operates. It can guarantee that every citizen votes (though this is increasingly under attack), has legal recourse, and is formally entitled to public goods. What it cannot do is redistribute the power to define what counts as "general" and what counts as "particular", what counts as merit and what counts as concession, and who belongs to society by right and who by exception. These are questions of symbolic power and their answer determines whether formal political equality translates into the fraternal social recognition that Ambedkar saw as the basis of genuine social democracy.

This is why the annihilation of caste is not only a political, economic, or psychological project but an epistemological one-concerned with how society knows and names itself. Teltumbde is right that reform cannot bring fundamental change, but he frames caste primarily as a form of conditioning, something historically imposed and capable of being undone by a sufficiently comprehensive revolution.

The symbolic domination framework pushes further. Caste is not only lodged in people's minds where consciousness-raising might reach it; it is sedimented into institutions, language, and everyday practice, and it continues to structure perception even when individuals sincerely believe they are acting without caste prejudice.

What Ambedkar called "social democracy"-a form of life in which the power to define the social world is genuinely shared rather than silently reserved for those who have always held it-required exactly this recognition. The task is not just to reform within existing categories but to democratise the production of those categories themselves.

The deeper issue, therefore, is not just that caste resists egalitarian reform; it is that caste prevents the emergence of symbolic democracy. Until the power to define the social world and one's place within it is itself democratised, democracy will remain partial, and equality will remain unattainable. This is what makes the work of anti-caste social movements so challenging.

What Takes the Place of Caste?

I am reminded of a conversation I had with a brilliant young teacher in Chhattisgarh many years ago. We were in a reading group reading *Annihilation of Caste* (1936). She asked me, "*Par didi, agar hum jati ke bina jeeyenge to hum kaise jeeyenge, janwaron ki tarah?*" ("If we don't have caste to help us live together, then how will we live? Like animals?").

At first glance, this might seem like the voice of someone trapped in regressive thinking, unable to imagine life beyond caste. But, over the years, I have come to see that she was asking a greatly generative question. What she was really asking was: if caste organises everything-work, marriage, opportunity, the texture of everyday life-then to annihilate caste is not simply to remove something. It is to rebuild the world that caste has made.

Her question- what takes caste's place? -deserves a concrete answer. It forces us to reckon with the fact that the annihilation of caste requires not just dismantling something but building something else-a different way of organising social meaning. If the annihilation of caste requires not just "structural revolution and psychological transformation" but the democratisation of the symbolic order itself, then we need to ask: what does it actually mean to democratise the power to make meaning? What would a genuinely different social world look like and what it would take to build it?

I would argue that it must include the right to cultural creation-the right not just to speak within the existing symbolic order but also to participate in remaking it. Democratic theory has long held that democracy requires the fullest possible participation of citizens in public life, but this principle has almost always been understood in political terms-the right to vote, to stand for election, or to petition

the state. Symbolic democracy extends this principle to the domain of meaning itself, insisting that genuine participation must include the power to shape the categories, narratives, and representations through which society understands itself.

In a caste society, this power has been systematically monopolised. Schools determine whose histories are worth teaching. Publishing and media houses and film studios determine whose stories are worth telling and whose aesthetics count as "Indian culture". Policy think tanks and universities determine whose knowledge counts as expertise.

These are institutions through which the symbolic order is daily reproduced and its hierarchies naturalised. All these institutions are dominated by the uppered castes. And both liberals and conservatives among the uppered castes have historically not just been complicit in the erasure of anti-caste radicals and their contributions, but also often openly hostile towards their aspirations and ideas.

> In these spaces, ascribed identities are questioned. Categories and meanings associated with those categories, handed down by the dominant social order, are questioned or refused or inverted or rewritten.

Redistributing this power requires concrete institutional measures. Ideally, it would include public funding for non-commercial cultural production, support for knowledge-making that happens outside universities and mainstream media, and resources directed specifically toward economically and culturally marginalised artists, writers, journalists, independent scholars, and community activists who are currently excluded from the means of symbolic production. But if that seems like a pipe dream, it is essential to recognise that the symbolic order is already contested from below.

What theorists call "subaltern counterpublics"-the online portals such as Roundtable India, Savari, and the Ambedkarian Chronicle, cultural centres such as the Pa. Ranjith-founded Neelam Cultural Centre and his production house Neelam Productions, the student-led Ambedkarite organisations in universities, the anti-caste literary movements, and the social media spaces where oppressed communities speak with each other-are sites of symbolic disobedience. In these spaces, ascribed identities are questioned. Categories and meanings associated with those categories, handed down by the dominant social order, are questioned or refused or inverted or rewritten.

When Ambedkarite writers and film-makers insist on telling their own experience in their own language, when communities reject the insidious, harmful and stigmatising stereotypes that come along with the vocabulary of "backwardness" imposed on them by the state, and when anti-caste movements demand that "merit" be recognised as unearned privilege accumulated through generations of dominance that is cloaked and concealed to obscure its true source, they are practicing exactly this kind of disobedience. They are disrupting the unspoken rules of the symbolic order and constructing a new meaning of social categories and processes.

This kind of disruption is symbolic democratisation. It is already being practiced, despite the fact that it is constantly under pressure, and it deserves recognition and support.

The creative and imaginative labour that anti-caste movements are called upon to undertake, to offer alternative ways of organising social life and meaning making is challenging on its own. But it is even more difficult to do when we as a society remain embedded within a caste-saturated world that continues to harden around us.

To do this democratically, through struggle and collective re-imagining rather than imposition, is an extraordinarily demanding task. It is precisely for this reason that I think dismissing anti-caste movements as failures misunderstands the extraordinary difficulty and the extraordinary importance of what they are attempting. Perhaps, then, the teacher in Chhattisgarh was asking the right question and until we take it seriously, we will keep answering the wrong one.

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