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Diwakar, like me, felt that an education in Hindi had delayed his understanding of social justice. He also argued that Hindi is, by default, casteist, racist and supremacist. To illustrate, he brought up a popular song that his young daughter hummed at home: *Nani teri morni ko mor le gaye, baaki jo bacha tha kaale chor le gaye*—Grandma, the peacocks stole your peahen, and the black thieves took the rest. The thieves, Diwakar pointed out, had to be black.

Hindi carries a blighted legacy. Of course, many other languages do too. English, for one, has the troubling history of colonialism behind it, and has been an instrument of elitism and caste privilege itself. But it could show me things that Hindi keeps hidden because those who have power over Hindi, who have shaped its history, vocabulary, literature and curricula, do not have equal power over English as well. I do not want English to replace Hindi, just as I do not want Hindi to replace other languages. But any language is at its best when it opens minds rather than closes them. Hindi can do more of that one day for all the hundreds of millions of people who speak and think and live in it. If that is to happen, we have to look honestly at its present and past, and ask what we want for Hindi's future.

I was born into Hindi, and brought up in it. It was the language of my parents and siblings, my cousins and friends and all our neighbours in the Dalit ghetto in the small town in Bihar where I spent my childhood. It is still the only language I use with them. I studied for ten years in a Hindi-medium school that followed the curriculum of the Bihar state board. After a two-year intermediate course in Patna, I moved to a journalism college in coastal Karnataka. There the classes were in English, and the students spoke the language on campus; the locals outside spoke Kannada or Tulu. I was not good with either. Stranded, I worked hard on my English.

I was 28 when I read BR Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste*, in English. It was my first introduction to his work, which articulated and explained so much of the caste humiliation I had suffered, and that I had seen inflicted on Dalits everywhere I had been in the country as a journalist. All I have read of Ambedkar has come to me in English—the language he himself wrote in. It is also in English that I have since learnt about Jotirao Phule, Periyar and Malcolm X. These discoveries, and others like them, opened my mind to anti-caste thought, progressive politics and the history of struggles against inequality.

With every sporadic controversy over the imposition of Hindi, I remember what I have learnt in which language. This time the storm was over a draft national education policy, which called for compulsory instruction in Hindi, English and a regional language for all. Many in the non-Hindi-speaking states protested the attempt to force Hindi upon them, and the government withdrew its proposition. Now the winners of this latest skirmish rest, happy to have forced back a threatened incursion, but I cannot rest with them. I still worry about what is left to the many who already live and think in Hindi.

Once, I wondered why my awakening did not come in Hindi. But the more I learn about the language, the less I am surprised that it never did. I realise now that my upbringing in Hindi did not just delay my discovery of Ambedkar, it kept me from understanding the very concepts of justice and equality. It is not that discovering these things in Hindi was absolutely impossible—Ambedkar is translated into the language, for instance, and it has some thinkers and writers of its own concerned with social justice—but, growing up in a Hindi home with a Hindi education in the Hindi belt, the chances of me finding them were impossibly small. This was not an accident. It had

everything to do with who created the language, who developed and propagated it, and whose stamp remains deepest upon it today.

The early texts of what is now called Hindi literature were written in Braj, Bundeli, Awadhi, Kannauji, Khariboli, Marwari, Magahi, Chhattishgarhi and numberous other such dialects that, in many cases, Hindi has since subsumed. What we know as Hindi today, written in the Devanagari script, is a relatively recent creation. The poet Bharatendu Harishchandra, celebrated as the father of modern Hindi literature, lived in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The historian Sumit Sarkar, in his *Modern India: 1885-1974*, writes that literary Hindi was very much "an artificial creation closely associated with Hindu-revivalist movements." Bharatendu, Sarkar notes, "combined pleas for use of swadeshi articles with demands for replacement of Urdu by Hindi in courts, and a ban on cow-slaughter." Around the same period, a historian and linguist named Shivaprasad was promoting another link language, Hindustani. Where Bharatendu's Hindi was highly Sanskritised, Shivaprasad wanted something closer to the languages already popular at the time. The champions of Hindi were especially offended by Hindustani's incorporation of Urdu elements.

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Hindi carried Brahminical and communal impulses from its inception. Later, its installation as a dominant language came to be a demand in the nationalist movement, though even then this was highly contentious. Anil Chamadia, a veteran journalist who has taught at Mahatama Gandhi International Hindi University in Maharashtra, told me that Bharatendu's language prevailed because it appealed to the emergent, Brahmin-dominated nationalist movement and administration. The dominant castes, he said, saw in the Sanskritised tongue a tool to further their *varchasv*, or dominance, over society. Sanskrit, of course, had earlier served exactly that use. Chamadia described Hindi as "*varchasv ki dhara*"—a stream of dominance. Today, he said, those who control the Hindi language are the same who control the dominant societal narrative.

In school, we were taught in detail about Mohandas Gandhi, and made to read his autobiography. From this, we understood that the

> assertion over Buddhism. I wished I had been taught this in school and college.

In January 2016, the death of Rohith Vemula, a Dalit scholar driven to suicide at the University of Hyderabad, finally made me stop and put some serious effort into understanding caste. I could not find a copy of *Annihilation of Caste* in Bhubaneswar. A friend in Hyderabad had to send one to me. Finally, Ambedkar gave sense to all I had seen and lived. After reading him, I sympathised with the Kashmiris living under the constant watch of armed troops, the Adivasis being herded off their forest lands by paramilitary forces. I learnt a different view of the caste order, a different history of the Gupta period as a time of violent Brahmin assertion over Buddhism. I wished I had been taught this in school and college.

Sultan Singh Gautam, the owner of an Ambedkarite bookstore in Delhi, was not surprised that it took me especial effort just to find books by and about Ambedkar. Gautam told me that the first Hindi book on Ambedkar was published in 1946, by a Dalit named Ramchandra Banaudha. A couple more efforts followed in the next few decades, but these were never widely published, and circulated only among a handful of Dalit intellectuals. The 1970s saw a boost to Ambedkar's legacy, as the Maharashtra government took it upon itself to start bringing out his trove of unpublished writings and speeches, in the original English. It was only in 1991, on the centenary of Ambedkar's birth, that the central government decided to translate those volumes into 13 Indian languages, Hindi included. But, Gautam said, no publisher, whether public or private, would take them on. Even the publication department of the central government's own ministry of information and broadcasting was not interested. The ministry of social justice took responsibility, and in the mid 1990s the first volume of Ambedkar's writings and speeches finally appeared in Hindi.

The translated volumes struggled to find a home in many libraries, or favour among many booksellers. Gautam said that librarians and vendors tended to put the books where nobody could find them, so that inventories and readership audits would suggest a lack of interest. Based on that, available volumes were removed, and new copies and releases never ordered.

knowledge could be associated with reason instead of religion. Still, reading the constitution in the limited light of what I knew only reinforced a trust in the government's goodness and authority. In debates on Kashmir, I supported the government and the armed forces religiously, and parroted the news reports I was watching and reading. When the government launched Operation Green Hunt, I truly believed it was only killing Maoists. I could not imagine its costs on Adivasi lives.

Shailesh Kumar Diwakar, an assistant professor of political science at Ramjas College, in Delhi University, gave me a personal example of the struggle it takes to bring new ideas into higher education. In his studies, first in Bihar and then at Jawaharlal Nehru University, he, just like me, never encountered Ambedkar or Ambedkarite thinking. This changed only when he was pursuing a master's degree at JNU in the early 2000s, and a professor introduced an optional paper on the Ambedkarite movement in Uttar Pradesh. After that, Diwakar looked for Ambedkar's works in libraries at JNU and Delhi University, but did not find them. He had to ask a friend to send him Ambedkar's books from Maharashtra, where they were more easily available. After he became a faculty member himself, Diwakar sat on a committee that was to revise the undergraduate curriculum for Delhi University. He proposed a paper on Ambedkar's thought. Gandhi was already taught widely, he said he argued, and across multiple disciplines, but Ambedkar was given no attention. He had to threaten to start a protest before the committee agreed to his idea.

As a community reporter in Hyderabad, then a crime reporter in Bhubaneswar, my faith in the government gradually fell away. Funds meant for the development of slums packed with Dalits were being diverted to rich areas that were home only to the dominant castes. Those beaten, raped, murdered, cheated, evicted from their land and homes, those pleading at police stations, courts and human-rights commissions, were almost always Dalits and Adivasis. Caste atrocities outnumbered all other injustices I saw, yet these were the stories least reported, least talked about. But my loss of faith came with ever more confusion. Still, I could not connect the dots.

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Brahminical values of vegetarianism and celibacy were probably keys to success. Ambedkar existed only in a few lines in our General Knowledge classes, and as nothing beyond the man who wrote the constitution.

It was common for students to write "Sri Ganesh" at the top of the page in their notebooks before they began a fresh set of notes—invoking the god of auspicious beginnings, in Hindu belief. During Basant Panchami, we placed our notebooks at the feet of Saraswati, convinced that the Hindu goddess of knowledge would help us with our homework. We learnt to equate knowledge with faith, and to be submissive before authority. Whenever I woke up late, my father would remind me of a poem I had been taught in school: *Utho savere, ragad nahao/ Esh vinay kar sheesh nabao/ Roz badon ke chhuo pair*—Get up early and get a good scrub/ Pray to god and bow your head/ Touch the feet of your elders every day.

My primary-school Hindi teacher was an Upadhayay, a Brahmin. In high school, a Pathak, also a Brahmin, taught the Hindi class. Upadhayay Sir, who was also a professional priest, performed a puja to Saraswati in our school on Basant Panchami. Pathak Sir told us that Sanskrit was the mother of all languages, and that trigonometry was created by the Brahmins of Vedic times, who used triangular *hawan kunds*—fire altars.

We were taught that in the Gupta period society was founded on the principle of Varna—the gradation of people on the basis of birth into Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras and untouchables. This, we were led to believe, was a golden age. Kunwar Singh, a zamindar who rebelled against the British in 1857, and from whom a vicious landlords' militia took its name in the 1970s and 1980s, was presented as a hero. Tilka Manjhi, an Adivasi leader who fought the British in the 1780s, was never mentioned.

Around the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the Hindi media convinced everyone around me that the dispute really was about the birthplace of Ram. I, too, walked the streets in procession with saffron flags in my hands, a proud defender of the Hinduism that deemed my people untouchable. It never occurred to me to ask why I lived in a ghetto, while those who led such processions—Kurmi OBCs, Babhan Brahmins, Thakur Rajputs—lived in larger houses in better areas. My neighbours were Pasis, who tapped and sold toddy, and dhobis, who washed clothes and kept donkeys to ferry them.

It was meekly accepted that people of the dominant castes addressed us as "*neecha jaat*" or "harijans," or by the countless other caste abuses that Hindi offered. Every Holi, the local music industry came up with new songs to bash the outcastes. Yadavs, Kurmis, Thakurs and Brahmins in our *mohalla* played these songs at deafening volumes as they danced and built human pyramids to break the *matka*.

My early encounters with literature made no difference. By and large, the big names of Hindi writing were, and are, dominant-caste men. The one writer I have constantly heard mentioned to assert that Hindi literature does deal with caste oppression and social injustice is Premchand. But I read several of his stories in school, and many more of them later, and never felt that they offered empowerment.

Premchand, a Kayastha, was an original member of the Progressive Writers' Association. Sharad Jaiswal, who teaches at Mahatma Gandhi International Hindi University, pointed me to *Hans*, the literary magazine that Premchand founded, which Jaiswal described as the "voice of social justice." One Premchand story understood to be especially anti-caste is "*Thakur ka kuan*." In it, an ailing Dalit man needs clean water, and his wife, Gangi, has no choice but to fetch it from a Thakur's well. As Gangi tries to draw water from it on the sly, the Thakur's door opens and she flees back to her home. The story does nothing to explain systematic oppression, or to inspire the wronged to fight back. The Thakur appears as an individual evil, not as part of a society built on the exploitation of the oppressed castes. Premchand describes the Dalit couple as "*badnaseeb*"—unlucky—to not have access to the Thakur's well.

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"*Kafan*," another Premchand story, is thought to deal with Dalit deprivation. Its protagonists are two desperately poor Chamars, a father and son. They sit eating fire-baked potatoes outside their shack one night while the son's wife goes through labour inside. The woman dies in the morning, unattended. The duo collect money for her funeral from the village's zamindar and moneylenders, then drink it all

away. Premchand writes, "*Yeh toh unki prakriti thi*"—such was their nature. In my reading, the story perpetuates a typical dominant-caste view of Dalits: as alcoholic, incompetent, lazy, greedy.

Chamadia and Jaiswal disagreed with my reading of Premchand. Chamadia argued that Premchand had played a positive role in Hindi literature, particularly when judged against the intellectual climate of his time, the first third of the twentieth century. Jaiswal made sure to add that the 1960s and 1970s saw the arrival of leftist writers who made class and social justice the main basis of their writing. But even Chamadia agreed that Hindi literature had given little room to Dalit and Adivasi voices.

Chamadia took the example of Heera Dom, a Dalit. His poem "*Achhut kee shikayat*," was published in Bhojpuri in the journal *Saraswati*, in 1924, and is said to have been among the very first poems on Dalits. Chamadia said the poem was an exception. The kind of writing it represented, he explained, could never become part of the mainstream or develop as a separate genre in Hindi.

Part of "*Achhut kee shikayat*," translated into English as "Untouchable's Complaint," reads,

> Our body is made of flesh and bone,
> Similar body the Brahmin has got.
> He is worshipped in every house,
> As the whole region has become his host.
> We do not go close to the well,
> We get drinking water from mud.

Shahnawaz Alam, a veteran journalist from Uttar Pradesh who recently turned to politics, pointed out to me that Hindi literature is steeped in rural romanticism. Even the writing of the likes of Sumitranandan Pant, famed as a poet of the left, is full of phrases along the lines of, as Alam channeled it, "*gramya jeevan sada aur saral hota hai*"—village life is simple and easy. Pant, a Brahmin, would never have had to live on the edges of the village, under threat of violence, denied the use of common wells and roads as Dalits in rural areas still often are.

In journalism college, for the first time, the constitution Ambedkar wrote was considered worth serious study, though Ambedkar himself still was not. This unlocked a window in my mind—I saw that