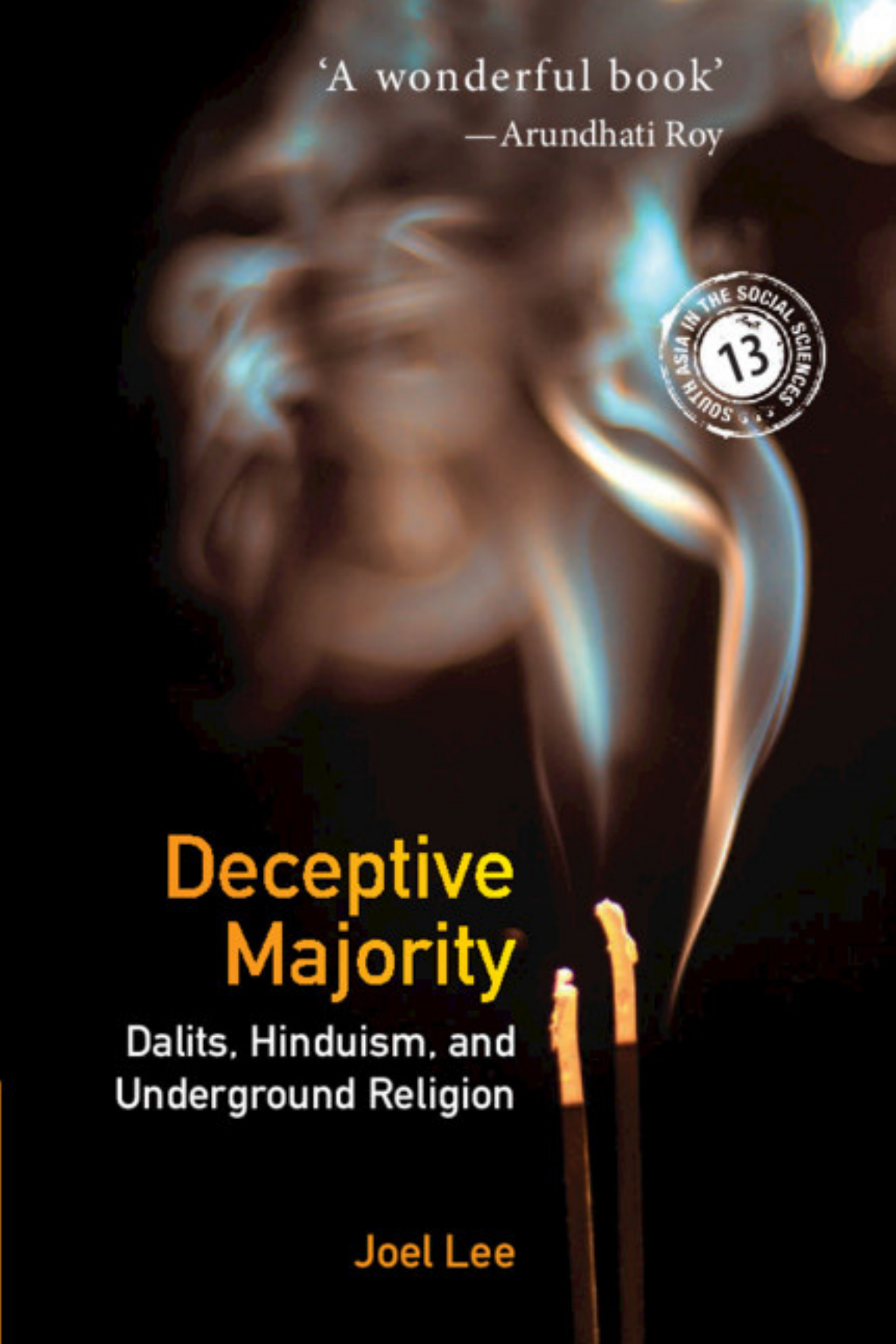
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SOUTH ASIA IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES
13
Deceptive Majority
Dalits, Hinduism, and Underground Religion
Joel Lee

Deceptive Majority

How did it come to be common sense that the vast swath of the population of South Asia once known as 'untouchable' are and always have been Hindu?

Grounded in detailed archival and ethnographic research, *Deceptive Majority* unearths evidence that well before the emergence of twentieth century movements for Dalit liberation, the subset of 'untouchable' castes engaged in sanitation labor in colonial India conceived of themselves as constituting a religious community (*qaum*) separate from both Hindus and Muslims—a community with its own prophet, shrines, rites, legends, and liturgical songs. This book tracks the career of this tradition alongside the effort to encompass it within a newly imagined Hindu body politic—a majoritarian project advanced in complex, distinct, yet convergent ways by colonial administrators, Hindu nationalists, the Congress Party, and Mohandas Gandhi. A sensitive account of contemporary religious life in the north Indian city of Lucknow illuminates both the embrace and the contestation of Hinduization within a Dalit community. A weaving together of the history and ethnography of religion, *Deceptive Majority* reveals the cunning both of the architects of Hindu majoritarianism and of those who quietly undermine it.

Joel Lee is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Williams College, Massachusetts.

SOUTH ASIA IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

South Asia has become a laboratory for devising new institutions and practices of modern social life. Forms of capitalist enterprise, providing welfare and social services, the public role of religion, the management of ethnic conflict, popular culture and mass democracy in the countries of the region have shown a marked divergence from known patterns in other parts of the world. South Asia is now being studied for its relevance to the general theoretical understanding of modernity itself.

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Deceptive Majority

Dalits, Hinduism, and Underground Religion

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In memory of Sakun

Shakuntala Devi (1953–2013)
Portrait by Sanya Darapuri

[A]rtifice was necessary, he had found, for stemming the cold and inhumane blast of the world's contempt.

Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*

Contents

Figures

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I
Untouchability and Alterity, Now and Then

1 Introduction

Signs, the Census, and the Sanitation Labor Castes

The census of India is a vast undertaking. Once a decade, every person residing in India—roughly one-sixth of humanity—is to be counted, named, and known. In 2011, I found myself in the midst of this monumental endeavor.

The scene was Lucknow, famed for its kabobs and culture of *politesse* yet also the capital of the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (or "UP," as it is called), known for its rancorous caste and communal politics. I had not anticipated being present for the decennial census—its fifteenth iteration since the inaugural British attempt in 1871–72—but I arrived in Lucknow, by chance, on the second day of its implementation. Though observing such a state exercise had not figured in my research design, the potential value it held for an ethnographic study was undeniable, and within a few days I began accompanying census workers on their rounds.

My companions were surveying a Dalit neighborhood along a railway track when I began to sense that foundational premises about caste and religious belonging were misplaced. The words with which the enumerators filled their forms told one story, but the silences and circumlocutions of the enumerated seemed to hint at something else.

I wanted to understand Dalit religion. I sought, that is, to learn from those who suffer the structural violence of untouchability how their experience of stigma shapes their sense of religious belonging. My interests lay particularly with the caste cluster that supplies virtually all of South Asia's sanitation workers. Today the sanitation labor castes are widely regarded as simply and self-evidently Hindu. In swaths of north India, indeed, they have a reputation for displays of Hindu zealotry and support for Hindu majoritarianism. Yet little more than a century ago none of this was the case. The sanitation labor castes were known then for defying, in more ways and to a greater extent than other groups, categorization under the religious taxonomy of the colonial state. Far from appearing as straightforwardly Hindu, they featured in the reports of the decennial censuses as a secretive, "chameleon-like" community

whose company Hindus abhorred, a community whose syncretic religious observances generated "a great deal of confusion," making them "the chief disturbing element" in the mapping of India's religions (Rose 1902: 113).

Here, then, was a riddle: how had a community whose social abjection and religious proclivities made it the paradigmatic confounder of order in colonial times come to be regarded in the postcolonial period as commonsense constituents of an unquestioned majority? How had despised outsiders to the house of Hinduism come to be seen as bricks in its very foundation? However this had transpired, the contours of the change seemed to suggest a more fundamental historical relation between the politics of untouchability and the rise of religious majoritarianism—phenomena ordinarily treated as separate or only glancingly related—than is generally admitted. Perhaps observing the census, where caste and religion appear arm in arm as categories through which the state offers its citizens a kind of recognition, might offer some clues.

I was therefore grateful when the census director of UP generously granted me permission to accompany enumerators on their rounds. The census, in one major line of argument, bears responsibility for the reification or calcification of caste and religion as categories of social difference in colonial modernity (Appadurai 1993; Cohn 1987; Dirks 2001; Gottschalk 2013; Kaviraj 1992). Bringing ethnography to bear on this largely historical contention might build upon its insights or reveal its limits. Whereas most accounts of the census consider only the remote guise of the state, as a distant power that determines the categorical schema according to which recognition and other political goods will be distributed, firsthand observation would reveal the state in its proximate guise, as a neighborhood schoolteacher or city employee called in for census duty, bringing local relations of power into play in the generation of official knowledge. It was an opportunity to witness how people talk about caste and religion in those brief, tense conversations between enumerator and enumerated that cumulatively produce such seemingly transparent demographic facts as India's 79.8 percent Hindu majority.

Thus I found myself on a grey February morning going door to door with a pair of census workers, participating in a once-in-ten-years irruption of state officialdom into the weekday routines of a working-class, largely Dalit neighborhood or *bastī* squeezed between the bungalows and bougainvillea of a posh housing colony and the rubbish-strewn tracks of one of Lucknow's

secondary rail lines. Shankar,[1] a municipal clerk, was the enumerator officially responsible for the *bastī*, but on account of his failing eyesight he had brought along his son Narayan, a mass communications student, who carried the clipboard and forms and conducted most of the interviews. In a lane of small brick apartments, a middle-aged woman fielded Narayan's questions from her doorway, giving her family's surname as Gautam. When she disappeared inside to find out her mother-in-law's date of birth, Narayan turned to his father.

"What does Gautam come under?"

"Chamar!" Shankar replied in a loud, somewhat theatrical whisper. "SC!"

Narayan wrote "SC" in the appropriate box, identifying the woman and her family as Scheduled Caste, the governmental designation for Dalit or "untouchable" communities.

When the woman returned, Narayan skipped columns seven and eight; that is, he asked her about neither caste nor religion, but proceeded to literacy status, disabilities and so on before completing the interview and moving to the next home. Though puzzled, I said nothing at the time. Later in the day, in the privacy of the home of a friend and caste fellow of Shankar's, the enumerators filled in the blank columns, marking everyone in the Gautam family thus:

> Caste: SC (Chamar)
> Religion: Hindu

As the father and son explained to me, when Shankar *knew* (*jānte*) a person's caste, there was no need to ask the caste question, and when the caste fell within the Scheduled Castes, there was no need to ask about religion. This method contravened rules in the government's instruction manual for census workers, rules that underscore that the enumerator is "bound to record faithfully whatever religion is returned by the respondent for herself/himself and for other members in the household" and that warn specifically against assuming a correlation between caste names and religion (Chandramouli 2011: 44–45).

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[1] Here and throughout the book names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of my interlocutors. Exceptions are public figures (members of parliament and the UP legislative assembly like Kanhaiyya Lal Balmiki, Narain Din, and Achhe Lal Balmiki in chapter 5, Lucknow's mayor in the afterword), and two individuals, now deceased, who insisted in their interviews with me that their real names be retained: Govind Prasad and Lalta Prasad (chapter 5).

In practice, though, Narayan and Shankar's policy of inferring the caste and religion of Dalit interviewees was the norm—not only for this pair, but for teams of census enumerators I accompanied on their rounds elsewhere in Lucknow as well as in Benares and Mirzapur. The fact that great numbers of Chamars in UP have converted to Buddhism and that the surname Gautam—a name of the Buddha—is preferred by many Dalits precisely on account of its Buddhist resonances was not a consideration for the enumerators. Each Gautam they encountered was recorded as Hindu, without the question having been asked.

So it went at the next home, and the next, and several more after that: each family bore a recognizably Dalit surname, rendering the caste and religion questions, from Shankar and Narayan's point of view, superfluous. A burst of cold rain sent us running for shelter under the blue tarpaulin awning of a chai stall. When it cleared, we made our way to another cluster of brick apartments, where we found a group of women and men watching children play in the puddles while geese noisily snapped up water nearby. As we approached, one of the elderly women in the group, observing us, called out, 'Panditji has come [*Panditjī ā gaye*]!' Not certain I had heard her correctly—and unaware of Shankar and Narayan's caste—I discreetly asked Shankar what the woman had said.

Continuing to walk toward the group, he replied loudly, "She said, 'Pandit ji has come!' Because we are brahmins."

"Brahmins," his son confirmed.

"Brahmins by caste," Shankar added, this time in English.

We were now standing before the elderly woman. Shankar's words seemed to hang suspended in the air during the long, uneasy silence that ensued, until finally one of the men in the group brought over some red plastic chairs, gestured for us to sit, and began to answer Narayan's questions.

"Surname?"

"Balmiki."

Hearing this, Narayan marked dashes under the columns for caste and religion—he would fill them in later as "SC" and "Hindu"—and proceeded to other questions. After finishing with this man's family, Narayan turned to the next-door neighbor, Rajesh, who had just emerged from a bath and answered questions standing in a towel and tee-shirt. After his family's form was complete—again with everyone marked "Hindu" though the question had not been posed—another neighbor stepped forward to be interviewed, while Rajesh lingered to observe.

Narayan asked the neighbor, "And what work do you do in the municipality?"

The man did not reply.

"Sanitation worker [*Safāī karamchārī*]," said Shankar, speaking for the man and gesturing at his son to fill in the space accordingly.

"Wait," said Rajesh, still standing in his towel and watching the enumerators. "You all never asked me what work *I* do."

"I put you down as 'worker' [*karamchārī*]," said Narayan.

Rajesh explained that he worked as a network technician for a telecommunications company. "It's not as though all of us are sanitation workers," he continued. "We also have big positions. We have officers."

"Only in a few houses," Narayan retorted.

"But this is discrimination [*Yeh to bhed-bhāv hai*]. I'm not a sanitation worker."

"I wrote 'worker.' 'Worker' is alright."

"'Worker' is totally misleading. Even big officers are 'workers.' Also," here Rajesh pointed at the column where Narayan had written surnames, "that should be *V*almiki, not *B*almiki."

"Yes, yes, I'll fix it," Narayan replied with unconcealed irritation. But he changed nothing—neither the spelling of the caste title nor the designation of type of labor.

Behind this row of brick apartments ran a dirt lane along which stood a line of *jhoṁpṛī*s: improvised dwellings of brick, mud, thatch, tin, and plastic. Beyond the *jhoṁpṛī*s lay the railway tracks. In a home on this lane we were met at the door by a woman in a *salwār-qamīz* who looked the three of us over and asked, "What's this about? What's this for?"

Ignoring her, Narayan said, "Head of household?" The woman eyed him coolly and disappeared inside. A silver-bearded man emerged wearing a pink tee-shirt and a *lungi* perforated here and there by cigarette burns. From his threshold he fielded the enumerators' questions. He worked as a sweeper in a private hospital; his children took up whatever work they could find, in sanitation or anything else.

"Caste?"

After a substantial pause, he said, "Balmiki."

Narayan came to the religion column, and this time he chose to ask. "You're Hindu, aren't you [*Āp Hindu haiṁ, na*]?"

A long silence ensued. The hospital sweeper idly observed children playing in the lane while Narayan looked to his father and Shankar began to fidget. Finally the man said, "Yes, Hindu."

Shankar, visibly perturbed by the man's hesitation, pursued the matter. "You're not, for instance, Lal Begi, are you? Because, you know, there are Lal Begis who are Muslim."

"You mean the Dilliwals," the man replied. He then delivered a roundabout discourse on the essential interchangeability of the terms Lal Begi, Balmiki, Dilliwal, Panch Sau Tirasi (the number 583), and other names by which his caste is known locally. He neither affirmed nor repudiated the allegation of Muslim-ness.

Shankar reiterated his contention that some Lal Begis are Muslim, and again probed whether the man was Lal Begi. His interlocutor said nothing but watched Shankar and Narayan impassively. Eventually, Narayan wrote "Hindu" in the religion column of the form and wrapped up the interview.

A few doors down we came to a one-room brick structure before which plastic tarps had been stretched to shelter an open cooking area. Stooped beneath this was a woman in a green sweater, stirring a pot of boiling lentils. She stood up, greeted us, and asked, "What will we get out of this?"

"This is the census," said Narayan.

"You people are the future of India!" Shankar added.

When Narayan came to the caste question she answered, "Balmiki." Narayan proceeded to column seven, religion, and again decided to ask. "Your religion is Hindu [*Dharm Hindu hī hai*]?"

"No." She spoke quietly but distinctly. I was startled by her response but tried not to indicate it. Narayan and Shankar gave no apparent reaction. Nobody spoke. The pot of lentils steamed and bubbled.

After an interval, Narayan repeated the question with slightly different wording, "You're Hindu [*Hindu haiṅ*]?"

"Yes."

Shankar turned to me as though to explain the necessity of the question, "Some people do convert [*Kuchh log dharmparivartan karte haiṅ*]."

What was going on here? The woman offered no explanation for her *volte-face*, delivered in the same steady tone as her initial reply. Equally flummoxing was Narayan's bald disregard of her initial response, as though such words could not be countenanced. If his father sought to assure me—or himself?—of the normativity of Dalit Hindu-ness by pointing to the rare event of formal

conversion to another religion (*dharmparivartan*) as its only exception, this effort seemed undercut by his own repeated insinuation that the family at the previous house might be crypto-Muslim Lal Begis. And what to make of the man whose reticence and elliptical speech elicited this charge? Caste titles and religious labels mingled and converged in his periphrastic response to Shankar's queries, suggesting a mode of belonging at variance with prevailing regimes of distinction, indecipherable in the language of the state. Why was the enumerator so vexed by this man's studied ambiguity? If his silences were to speak, what would they say?

The Story Line in Brief

The book that lies ahead attempts to answer this question. Without giving the plot away entirely, let me sketch its trajectory, indicating in brief some of its key historical and ethnographic arguments. This is a study of the disparate yet deeply entwined histories of religion among the sanitation labor castes and Hindu majoritarianism. One cannot be told without the other: no account of Dalit religion in modernity can afford to ignore the past century of interventions in that domain by Hindu nationalists and the state, as those interventions have produced the very terms in which discussion is now legible. Hindu majoritarianism, for its part, has been driven by the fear of Dalit religious autonomy—a fear partly in response to collective practices of the sanitation labor castes in the colonial period—from its very inception. If the interreligious antagonism known in India as communalism has long been animated by the politics of caste (Basu 1996; Hansen 1999; Menon 2010), some of the most foundational sociological assumptions about caste have been manufactured, largely undetected, by communalism.

This book is an effort to make sense of that February morning with the enumerators in Lucknow: why the woman stirring lentils first told Narayan that she was not Hindu, and then, when asked again, that she was. Or why the man in the pink tee-shirt replied so obliquely to the question of religion, or, equally, why his long pauses incited the enumerator to say, "You're not, for instance, Lal Begi are you?" Attentiveness to contradiction and circumlocution, as well as to non-verbal signs like silence and gesture, may guide us toward insights altogether at odds with the "final word" of authorized discourse. It is one of my arguments that a semiotic approach to the study of caste and religious belonging—an approach attentive to signifying practices, the composition and interpretation of signs by which identitarian affiliations are

sustained—makes possible the apprehension of social phenomena that have remained opaque to other analytical traditions. These phenomena challenge established paradigms in the study of religion in South Asia and trouble some of the ethical presuppositions that modernity urges on us regarding secrecy, subterfuge, and self-identification.

Contemporary politics in South Asia is predicated on the figure of the primordially Hindu untouchable—a figure that conceptually confines Dalits within the framework of Hinduism, securing for Hindus a demographic majority in the present and a claim to religious and cultural hegemony in the past. In this book I argue that the idea of the transhistorically Hindu untouchable emerged scarcely a century ago, and that it ran athwart the collective self-perception of the sanitation labor castes. Drawing on a range of sources from the 1870s to the 1920s, I contend that the sanitation labor castes of north India during that period widely understood themselves as neither Hindu nor Muslim but as members of a *qaum* or *ummat*—a cohesive, autonomous socioreligious community—centered on Lal Beg, an antinomian prophet (*paighambar*) who moved in a largely Islamicate narrative world. Hindus and Muslims, moreover, acknowledged the religious alterity of the Lal Begis, as they were called. Thus Hindu census enumerators in the colonial period often refused to record the sanitation labor castes as their co-religionists. The colonial administrative decision to classify untouchables as Hindus by default contradicted prevailing sociological common sense. In chapter 2, I analyze evidence from the liturgical songs and other oral traditions of the Lal Begis that speak to Dalit perceptions of self and other in that period.

All of this began to change as techniques of colonial governance stimulated a politics of numbers in which castes and religious groups, increasingly assuming the politicized character of "enumerated communities" (Kaviraj 1992), vied to constitute majorities in local, provincial, and pan-Indian representative bodies in the early decades of the twentieth century. These conditions gave rise among some Hindus to the "fear of small numbers" that Arjun Appadurai (2006: 52) names as a signal feature in the emergence of majoritarianism globally. It was in the context of a Hindu fear of small numbers—of being a "dying race" demographically and politically threatened by growing Muslim and Christian numbers—that the Arya Samaj, a Hindu reformist organization, systematically took up efforts at *achhutodhhār* or "untouchable uplift," and to persuade Hindus and Dalits to reimagine one another as co-religionists. I will show that the idea that the sanitation labor castes and other Dalits are and always have

been Hindu—an idea that struck some contemporary observers as offensive and others as absurd—was mooted for the first time in the 1910s and 1920s by the Arya Samaj as a strategy of what we may call *majoritarian inclusion*, an effort to secure a majority against a potential rival by incorporating a heretofore despised outgroup. In chapter 3, I describe this effort and the skepticism with which it was often met through a reading of key Arya Samaj materials, unearthing in the process the degree to which Arya Samajists wrestled with their own *ghṛṇā*—a north Indian emotion-concept similar to disgust—as they began working with Dalits, and the ways in which Arya Samaj authors encouraged fellow Hindus to suspend the *ghṛṇā* they felt toward Dalits and to redirect it, instead, at Muslims. It is in these Arya Samaj texts, as well, that the sanitation labor castes were first provided a Hindu pedigree in the form of a genealogical connection to Rishi Valmiki, author of the Sanskrit epic the Ramayana.

It was not until the 1930s, though, that the newly conceived figure of the primordially Hindu untouchable came to appear credible to a larger public. Though the colonial state and the Arya Samaj had laid the groundwork, the political maneuvers and representational interventions that were decisive in giving majoritarian inclusion the mass traction it ultimately achieved were those of Gandhi, the Harijan Sevak Sangh ("Servants of Untouchables Society"), the Indian National Congress, and literary figures inspired by Gandhi such as Rabindranath Tagore and Mulk Raj Anand. Their contributions to the discursive and political confinement of Dalits within Hinduism are the subject of chapter 4. "I know infinitely more than you do what Harijans *are*," Gandhi (1934d) said to his "untouchable" critics in 1934, referring to their caste fellows with his preferred nomenclature of Harijan or "people of Hari"—Hari being a Vaishnava Hindu name for god—"[I know] where they live, what their number is and to what condition they have been reduced." The mahatma's welding together of an enumerative, panoptic, governmental imagination with a decidedly brahminical social ontology set his approach apart; his monological manner of speaking *for* largely overrode the Arya Samaj's dialogical effort to speak *to* and to *persuade*. Thus the missionary majoritarianism of the 1910s and 1920s yielded to the trustee majoritarianism of the 1930s and 1940s, culminating in the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order of 1950, which declared that "no person who professes a religion different from the Hindu religion shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Caste," and in doing so, elevated the Gandhian representational strategy to the law of the land, securing postcolonial India's Hindu majority by fiat.

How did Hinduization work out on the ground? In chapter 5 we return to Lucknow for a more fine-grained and local study of majoritarian inclusion and its resistance from the late 1940s onward, based on interviews with many of the individuals directly involved and archival materials their families have preserved. Seizing on the institutional space opened for Dalits by the Arya Samaj and the Congress, a subset of the sanitation labor castes took up—and in the taking up, altered—the majoritarian project. Once the Congress's strategy achieved the status of law, apparent signs of Hinduization, like the wholesale refashioning of names, swiftly followed. The ancient Sanskrit poet Rishi Valmiki, who had no following among the sanitation labor castes of Lucknow before 1947, was introduced to the community as their ancestor. Valmiki became the sign of a new regime of recognition: a government holiday in honor of Valmiki was instituted, streets and parks were renamed after the *rishi*, and Congress and Harijan Sevak Sangh leaders like Ghanshyamdas Birla began funding Valmiki statues and temples intended for the sanitation labor castes.

More contested within the community was the abandonment or repudiation of Lal Beg that the advocates of Hinduization championed, and corresponding transformations in ritual, in the food, drink, and equipment of nuptial and death ceremonies, and in everyday relations with Muslim neighbors. The degree to which leaders of the newly named Balmiki community succeeded in bringing about their reforms correlated with their capacity to deliver concrete goods of housing, access to education, stable employment, and the curtailment of untouchability practices. Leaders tackled the latter by means of one of the strategies of majoritarian inclusion bequeathed them by the Arya Samaj: pursuing legal action against practitioners of untouchability—so long as the offenders were Muslim, not Hindu.

Yet this is not only a tale of people coming to inhabit the categorical niches allotted them by the postcolonial state. Part of what I am tracking is a process of this sort—what Ian Hacking (1985) calls "dynamic nominalism" or simply "making up people." But there is more than this to the history and present of the religious life of the sanitation labor castes, and we will need to turn from historical to ethnographic methods to arrive at other key findings of this book. Having witnessed the decline of Lal Beg and the ascendance of Valmiki over the twentieth century, we turn in chapters 6 and 7 to the practices by which the old caste prophet is remembered and the new caste god is celebrated in Lucknow today. Here we analyze ways in which normative ideas of appropriate modes of signifying and relating to the sacred—semiotic ideologies—structure religious

practice and self-representation, and ways in which signifying practices render certain social realities hypervisible (and hyperaudible) while making others, equally real, invisible or concealed in plain sight. Through a description and analysis of processions (*jhāṅkiyāṅ*) and speech-making functions (*kāryakram*) on Valmiki Jayanti—the annual celebration of Valmiki's advent in the world—we examine how a declamatory mode of identitarian self-disclosure has come to characterize Dalit religious practice, and perhaps religious ways of being in South Asia more generally, and we obtain a feel for the texture and the limits of the inclusion the sanitation labor castes have been offered as Hindus.

Of all the "weapons of the weak" identified in James Scott's (1987) influential formulation—the "foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage," and other everyday tactics by which disprivileged groups "avoid direct, symbolic confrontation with authority" even while securing a measure of relief from structural violence—surely the most difficult to study is dissimulation. While all of these "infrapolitical" (Scott 2012) techniques keep a low profile in the historical record, the latter not only does not announce itself as a form of politics, it actively conceals its own tracks. Methodological and epistemological questions fly thick here: when the very definition of successful dissimulation is invisibility, and unsuccessful efforts are necessarily disavowable and disavowed, then on what basis can an enquirer make anything more than a speculative claim about the practice? Chapter 7 contends with these and related questions while giving an account of gestures, ways of signifying the sacred, and what happens now on the day that colonial accounts described as the annual feast of Lal Beg. This chapter contains developments that are better not summarized in advance. My interlocutors taught me that valuable knowledge is not disclosed quickly, in the first week or even the first year of a relationship, but only after a certain thickness of context and commitment to understanding is established. I have structured the book accordingly. For now, suffice it to say that the continuing vitality of traditions of tactical concealment may lead us to reconsider what Hinduization may have meant all along.

The Sanitation Labor Castes

To speak of caste is to conjure a babel of discourses all at once. The English word routinely translates two distinct concepts present in Sanskrit and the vernacular languages—*varṇa*, the four ranked classes or "colors" of brahman, kshatriya, vaishya, and shudra that together constitute the social organism

in conceptualizations of society from the Purusha Sukta of the *Rig Veda* onward, and *jāti*, meaning species (cognate, in fact, with the Latin "genus"), the multitudinous endogamous hereditary groups that regulate reproduction and set the terms of interaction in actual social life. At the same time caste also conveys the early modern European ideology of blood purity encoded in its own Iberian etymology, as reflected in the application of *casta* (related to "chaste") to social groups in New Spain as well as in Portuguese Goa. British imperialism decisively influenced the history of European representations of Indian society, fashioning caste into a trope, a sign of India's difference from the West, a ready justification of the "rule of colonial difference" (Chatterjee 1993: 18) that has cast a long shadow over popular and scholarly discussions of the social form (Appadurai 1988; Dirks 2001). Yet the critical historicization of the European trope of caste does not preclude analysis of the social form—caste qua *jāti*—that, in places like Lucknow, continues to exert profound and far-reaching influence over collective life, from sex and diet to political representation and waste management. Though related in complicated ways, the two are distinct intellectual projects, oriented, as it were, toward different "castes."

South Asian history over the longue durée renders a view of caste as a "highly involuted, politicized form of ethnic ranking shaped by the constant exercise of socio-economic power" (S. Guha 2013: 2). An "adaptive structure" (Lynch 1969: 3), it continues to ensure inherited advantage for some and disadvantage for others through interpersonal and institutional networks that have made accommodations with, rather than fallen victim to, such consequential political, economic and technological changes of the last century as the universal franchise, the democratization of education, the integration into a cash economy of agrarian systems of labor exchange, and the mechanization of a host of traditionally caste-based crafts and forms of labor (Natrajan 2012; Subramanian 2019). Organizing social perception and inscribing meaning onto bodies so perceived, caste, in a more intimate register, is both a "state of mind" (Dumont 1980: 34) and "a form of *embodiment*" (Rao 2003: 5). Like its equally insidious cousin race, caste works its way simultaneously into large-scale institutional systems and the interstices of our bodies and minds.

Among the most apposite characterizations of caste for our purposes is that of Bhimrao Ambedkar, India's first law minister and a towering figure in anti-caste theory and praxis, when he describes it as an "ascending scale of reverence

and a descending scale of contempt" (Ambedkar 1990: 26). This framing draws attention to affect, suggesting ways that caste shapes the inculcation of emotion norms and the cultivation of distinctive emotional repertoires according to social location (Guru 2009b; Lee 2020; Lynch 1990). The affective structure of caste will play a significant role in our story of majoritarian inclusion. Ambedkar's formulation is felicitous as well for its foregrounding of hierarchy, that hoary element of caste analysis that innumerable popular and scholarly accounts, partly in response to its perceived overemphasis in the work of Louis Dumont, have sought to consign to the dustbin of social theory, yet which refuses to cede ground in the empirical domain of quotidian social relations. While there is a desire in several quarters for the concerns of prestige, purity–pollution, and inherent quality-substance in a ranked system to be seen as located in the past, it would be disingenuous to downplay their force in the caste-segregated *bastī*s of Lucknow at the center of this study, where hierarchy is inscribed in the organization of urban space and the sensory matter that circulates within it (Lee 2017), in the dispensation of resources, in the ubiquity of the vertical metaphor in references to caste status in everyday speech, and in the distribution of waste and death labor.

The nether terminus of Ambedkar's "ascending scale of reverence and descending scale of contempt"—its lowermost extremity, subject to demonstrations of intense affect peculiar to such a location on such a gradation—is inhabited, according to broad consensus, by the sanitation labor castes. Novelist Madan Dikshit (1996: 40) cites a Hindi proverb: there is "no insult worse than whore, no caste lower than Mehtar." This adunation of sexual and caste hierarchies indexes the constitutive significance for the preservation of caste order of control over women's sexuality; caste is nothing if not a patriarchal endeavor (Chakravarti 2019). Further, the adage points to a parallelism between subordinated threats to the order of endogamy: the whore whose womb cannot be harnessed to the project of caste reproduction (Ramberg 2014: 146–77), and the Mehtar—a collective term for the sanitation labor castes—long known for accepting into its ranks persons and groups excommunicated from "higher" social locations, frequently for having transgressed prohibitions against sex or marriage outside caste (Shyamlal 1997). As a destination for downward mobility, as receivers of and minglers with refractory elements, the Mehtar community, like the proverbial whore, embodies a principle of mixing that is antithetical to the principle of discernment and separation essential to caste endogamy and prized in brahminical thought more broadly.

Mehtar, a Persian word that in the Mughal period denoted prince and now designates sanitation worker, is but one of the welter of names by which the protagonists of this book are known. We have seen already that Lal Begi and Valmiki/Balmiki designate this group as well, and that these terms seem haunted by a past that troubles both the namers and the named. Caste nomenclature is a vexed domain, a field of contestation in which every name bears the affective charge of a history of usage as a term of awe and deference, scorn and revulsion, or gradations of esteem in between. Reflecting on the struggles of Dalits to wrest control of the labels by which they are known on this uneven field, Ambedkar observed:

> The name "Untouchable" is a bad name. It repels, forbids, and stinks. The social attitude of the Hindu towards the Untouchable is determined by the very name... [T]he Bhangis call themselves Balmikis.... [T]hey give themselves other names which may be likened to the process of undergoing protective discolouration....The name matters and matters a great deal. For, the name can make a revolution in the status of the Untouchables. But the name must be the name of a community outside Hinduism and beyond its power of spoliation and degradation. (Ambedkar 1992: 419–20)

Ambedkar's portrayal of a grappling over names invested with ideological content and charged with affective force—the name "repels, forbids," but can also "make a revolution"—assumes that words alter reality rather than merely describing it, and that naming constitutes a tactical maneuver in an agonistic social field more than an exercise in disinterested classification. Ambedkar's implicit theory of signs, that is, converges with those of mathematician-philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1955: 269–89), for whom signs are assessed not in terms of correspondence to pre-given meanings but in terms of their consequences in the world, and linguistic philosopher Valentin Vološinov (1973: 23), for whom the "sign is the arena of class struggle." The analysis of the politics of naming, knowledge, concealment and recognition that runs throughout this book is well served by such a framework. It helps account for the striking instability of nomenclature over time at the "lower" reaches of the caste order. When different classes (castes, in our case) belong to the same sign community (that is, speak the same language), the divergent ideological assessments they make of a given phenomenon come to intersect in the sign that represents it. Shot through with these various evaluative "accents," the sign becomes what Vološinov calls "multiaccentual": the casteist contempt with