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# CELEBRATING THE BATTLE OF KOREGAON: CONTESTED HISTORIES AND THE (DE)COLONIAL DALIT SUBJECT

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## ABSTRACT

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Colonialism, and hence decolonisation, is usually associated with European expansion overseas. This paper is premised on the possibility of an internal colonisation within India, a country famously colonised by Britain. My argument is rooted in ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Mumbai among a community of Mahars, a Dalit (formerly “untouchable”) caste that converted to Buddhism en masse in 1956. As a cornerstone of its self-respect, this community embraces an “alternative history” in which its members cast themselves as the original inhabitants of an ancient Buddhist India, subjugated through the imposition of caste Hinduism by Aryan invaders from an unclearly-defined West.

Another strand of this history is the 1818 Battle of Koregaon, in which a Mahar battalion, fighting on behalf of the British, defeated the forces of the local high-caste Hindu rulers. Through an annual commemoration, Dalits frame these rulers as oppressors, while portraying the British as liberators. I ask whether, counterintuitively, this alternative history can be read as “decolonisation in praxis” vis-à-vis Hindu caste oppression. By examining the multiple ways in which this history, and associated scholarship, is intertwined with British colonial knowledge-making I conclude that this is a fruitful but problematic position to adopt.

Every year on January 1<sup>st</sup> large crowds converge on Bhima Koregaon, a village on the outskirts of Pune in western India. Today an educational and business hub, Pune was once the capital of the Maratha Empire which held sway over central India in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Koregaon's draw is an obelisk commemorating an 1818 battle in which a British East India Company battalion defeated the numerically superior forces of the Peshwas, a Hindu Brahman<sup>1</sup> dynasty that ruled over the Maratha Empire in its later stages. Part of the Third Anglo-Maratha war, the Battle of Koregaon was a critical step in the British conquest of western India.<sup>2</sup>

Many of the 500 soldiers in the British-led battalion belonged to the Mahar caste, viewed as "untouchable" (ritually impure) under Peshwa rule, and subject to a variety of humiliating prohibitions.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, many of the crowds who now celebrate the victory at Koregaon are Mahars, although most prefer the label Dalit. This term, deriving from a Marathi-language word meaning "broken", was popularised in the twentieth century by the Mahar-born social reformer Dr Bhimrao "Babasaheb" Ambedkar as a generic term for castes subject to untouchability.<sup>4</sup> In recent decades it has acquired strong cultural and political connotations.<sup>5</sup> A large section of the Mahar community today adheres to Buddhism, following the example of Ambedkar who led a mass conversion in 1956 in an attempt to escape the stranglehold of the Hindu caste system.<sup>6</sup> For these Dalit Buddhists, to celebrate the Battle of Koregaon is to pay tribute to the bravery of their Mahar forebears in fighting the Peshwas, who they regard as brutal oppressors.<sup>7</sup> It is also a tribute to Ambedkar himself who is revered by the community, often to the point of deification, and is credited with initiating this annual pilgrimage.<sup>8</sup>

As this year (2018) was the battle's bicentenary, celebrations were on a grand scale and featured a conference themed around identifying the "neo-Peshwas", or upper-caste oppressors, of today.<sup>9</sup> Inevitably, this boosted the profile of what had hitherto been an

<sup>1</sup> Brahmins (otherwise Brahmins) are usually considered the highest tier of the Hindu caste system.

<sup>2</sup> e.g. B. R. Ambedkar, "The Untouchables and Pax Britannica". In *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches Vol 12*, edited by Vasant Moon, 75-147. (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1993), 83; S. R. Bakshi and Sri Kant Sharma. *The Great Marathas*. (New Delhi: Deep & Deep Publications, 2000), 43; A. R. Kulkarni, *Marathas and the Marathas Country*. (New Delhi: Books & Books, 1996), 176.

<sup>3</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, *The Annihilation of Caste, with Reply to Mahatma Gandhi*. (Mumbai: Government of Maharashtra, 2013), 18; Johannes Beltz, *Mahar, Buddhist and Dalit: Religious Conversion and Socio-political Emancipation*. (New Delhi: Manohar, 2005), 26.

<sup>4</sup> Oliver Mendelsohn and Marika Vicziany, *The Untouchables: Subordination, Poverty and the State in Modern India*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Eleanor Mae Zelliott, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*. 2nd rev. ed. (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1996), 317.

<sup>6</sup> Beltz, *Mahar, Buddhist and Dalit*, 55.

<sup>7</sup> Beltz, *Mahar, Buddhist and Dalit*, 55; Shraddha Kumbhojkar, "Contesting Power, Contesting Memories: The History of the Koregaon Memorial". *Economic & Political Weekly* 47, no. 42 (Oct 2012): 103-107

<sup>8</sup> Kumbhojkar, "Contesting Power", 105.

<sup>9</sup> Chandan Haygunde, "Police nod for Elgaar Parishad comes with conditions attached" *The Indian Express*, December 29, 2017. <http://indianexpress.com/article/cities/pune/bhima-koregaon-battle-police-nod-for-elgaar-parishad-comes-with-conditions-attached-5002955/>

obscure local celebration, and by the afternoon of January 1<sup>st</sup> stories of violence were surfacing in the press. The *Indian Express* reported “incidents of stone pelting and vandalism”<sup>10</sup> and *India Today* later revealed that 50 cars had been damaged and one person killed.<sup>11</sup> Left-leaning online magazine *Scroll* relayed rumours that the attackers were waving saffron flags.<sup>12</sup> For an Indian reader, this detail would immediately align the vandals to the Hindu nationalist right wing, a majoritarian and often upper-caste demographic unlikely to be sympathetic towards Dalits celebrating a British victory. Indeed, through videos circulated over social media, a narrative emerged of an angry upper-caste Hindu mob sabotaging a Dalit celebration they considered “anti-national”.<sup>13</sup>

Even at this point, arguably, the violence was viewed by most as a spot of local bother. It was only the ensuing days’ events that propelled the story into the national spotlight. On January 2<sup>nd</sup>, Dalit groups blocked roads across nearby Mumbai in protest against the Koregaon violence,<sup>14</sup> and on the following day Ambedkar’s grandson, a politician himself, called for a state-wide *bandh* (shutdown) which was vigorously enforced by a broad coalition of Dalit activists.<sup>15</sup> National newspapers fixated on this disruption. The *Times of India* front page on January 4<sup>th</sup> focused almost exclusively on Mumbai, with headlines such as “Cops look on as mobs hold city to ransom”<sup>16</sup> while any meaningful discussion of the original violence was relegated to Page 4. Inevitably, perhaps, this was followed by a backlash in the liberal-left sections of the media which are generally supportive of Dalit causes and critical of the anti-minority jingoism often associated with the Hindu right. Some writers pilloried the predictability of a public response that prioritised traffic disruption over centuries of caste

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<sup>10</sup> PTI, “Pune: Violence marks the Bhima Koregaon battle anniversary event” *Indian Express*, January 1, 2018. <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/pune-violence-mars-bhima-koregaon-battle-anniversary-event-mevani-5007857/>

<sup>11</sup> PTI, “Riots over Dalit’s Koregaon-Bhima battle anniversary celebration in Pune kills 1, destroys 50 cars”. *India Today*, January 1, 2018 <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/violence-mars-bhima-koregaon-battle-anniversary-event-1120253-2018-01-01> (it later transpired that the person killed had been an apparently uninvolved bystander, belonging to a Maratha Hindu caste).

<sup>12</sup> Mridula Chari, “People with saffron flags allegedly attack Dalits going to Bhima Koregaon memorial near Pune” *Scroll.in*, January 1, 2018. <https://scroll.in/latest/863444/people-with-saffron-flags-allegedly-attack-dalits-heading-to-bhima-koregaon-memorial-near-pune>

<sup>13</sup> Anirban Bhattacharya, “Bhima Koregaon and the Dalits’ never-ending search for a nation”. *The Wire*, Jan 5, 2018. <https://thewire.in/caste/bhima-koregaon-dalits-never-ending-search-nation>

<sup>14</sup> Scroll Staff, “Mumbai: Five injured in Dalit protests, police detain at least 100”. *Scroll.in*, January 2, 2018. <https://scroll.in/latest/863568/mumbai-dalit-protests-five-injured-police-detain-at-least-100-traffic-affected>

<sup>15</sup> Express Web Desk. “Mumbai bandh highlights: Jignesh Mevani appeals for peace, says state govt must ensure rule of law” *The Indian Express*, January 3, 2018. <http://indianexpress.com/article/cities/mumbai/mumbai-bandh-live-updates-dalit-marathas-clashes-pune-bhima-koregaon-5008377/>

<sup>16</sup> TNN, “Cops look on as mobs hold city to ransom”. *Times of India*, January 4, 2018.

oppression,<sup>17</sup> while others lamented the exclusion of Dalit voices in a mainstream media “soaked in caste privilege”.<sup>18</sup>

My own involvement in these events came towards the end of a year’s anthropological fieldwork in Lower Parel, in central Mumbai. I had been engaging in participant observation and conducting interviews<sup>19</sup> to investigate social cohesion and identity in a cluster of tenement buildings called the BDD Chawls. These buildings were constructed in the 1920s, primarily to house migrant cotton millworkers from the surrounding rural districts. Many of today’s residents descend from these migrants. A large number are from the Maratha community, a predominantly rural Hindu caste grouping from which the original leadership of the Maratha Empire emerged. Many Marathas are vocal admirers of founding ruler Chhatrapati Shivaji, whose descendants controlled the empire until power passed to the Peshwas. There is also a sizeable Dalit Buddhist minority, mostly from the Mahar caste. Both groups speak Marathi as a first language and they sometimes mix together socially. Nevertheless, old prejudices linger, and a year of throwaway remarks led me to conclude that for many Marathas, their caste superiority was still profoundly internalised.<sup>20</sup>

Caste conflict is a familiar topic in Indian academia, but in line with this journal’s theme I examine it here through the lens of decolonisation. This term, beyond its narrow technical sense of colonised nations gaining independence, is typically used to denote processes of liberation from the psychological frameworks imposed by colonial rule. The work of thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, in a Francophone context, Ashis Nandy, in India and, notably, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, whose *Decolonising the Mind* examines the intimate relationship between colonisation and language, has become canonical in this respect.<sup>21</sup> In recent years, “decolonising” as an ideal has motivated initiatives in universities across the globe, from the famous Rhodes Must Fall movement, radiating out of the University of Cape Town, to

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<sup>17</sup> Rohan Venkataramakrishnan, “Are Dalits really oppressed? Five predictable responses to the Bhima Koregaon bandh” *Scroll.in*, January 3, 2018. <https://scroll.in/article/863684/are-dalits-really-oppressed-five-predictable-responses-to-the-bhima-koregaon-bandh>

<sup>18</sup> Rajesh Rajmani, “Bhima Koregaon and the Savarna gaze” *News Laundry*, January 5, 2018. <https://www.newslaundry.com/2018/01/05/bhima-koregaon-savarna-gaze-media-dalits-caste>

<sup>19</sup> Most of the primary source material used in this paper comes from my research fieldnotes, made in light of numerous conversations with research participants in Hindi, English or Marathi. In some cases I have quoted comments directly in the original language (Hindi or English) while in others I have translated or paraphrased for ease. All names have been changed to protect the identity of the individuals in question. Research was conducted between January 2017 and January 2018 with the help of funding from the Economic and Social Research Council, and a SOAS fieldwork grant.

<sup>20</sup> The exact caste status of the cluster of clans making up the Maratha community is a highly complex issue that I will not attempt to unpick here, except to say that they are non-Brahman Hindus belonging to the “open” category i.e. unlike Dalits, adivasis (tribal communities) and the lower caste grouping referred to as “Other Backward Classes”, they do *not* qualify for the affirmative action schemes operated by the central and state governments.

<sup>21</sup> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: James Currey, 1986.

debates about the dominance of white, male writers in course reading lists at SOAS,<sup>22</sup> among others, as well as in India<sup>23</sup> and South Africa.<sup>24</sup>

Although decolonisation is usually associated with the legacy of European imperialism, it can theoretically be applied to any form of colonialism. Hence, I ask in this paper whether caste oppression, as exemplified by Peshwa rule, can be viewed in colonial terms. If so, can the celebration at Koregaon, particularly when understood as a Dalit reclaiming of Indian history, be considered a form of “decolonisation in praxis”? I will suggest that this is a fruitful but problematic position to adopt given the integral role the British colonial project has played in enabling history to be thus reclaimed.

Before continuing, a word on my own perspective is essential. As a white, British man, I believe I was viewed in the BDD chawls as an outsider with no clear affiliation to a caste, religion or linguistic community. This may in part explain the humbling generosity with which I was welcomed by both Dalits and Marathas. Moreover, my access to the all-male Koregaon expedition was uncomplicated in a way it might not have been for a female researcher. However, it would be misguided to equate my outsider status to neutrality of perspective, especially given the subject matter under consideration.<sup>25</sup> In tension with the obvious fact that my nationality and ethnicity align me, however indirectly, to one of the actors in this debate (i.e. the British colonisers), my own political and academic views lead me instinctively to condemn both casteism and colonialism. Whether this positionality undermines my ability to make a balanced argument on decolonisation in an Indian context, I will leave the reader to decide.

## “ANOTHER IMPERIALISM”: PESHWA OPPRESSION AND BRITISH “LIBERATION”

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I attended the Koregaon celebrations with a large party of Dalit Buddhists from the BDD Chawls. Over a hundred bikers set off from Lower Parel at midday on December 31st, while the more cautious among us travelled alongside in a chartered bus. The journey to Koregaon was slow but at times exhilarating as we chanted Ambedkar slogans at every toll-gate we passed, and stopped at Buddhist temples en route for speeches and prayers. When we finally reached our destination, after midnight, it took a few hours for the crowds to thin sufficiently for us to approach the victory obelisk. Although this was the crowning moment of the day it felt perfunctory – a brief speech from the rally organisers, a few more chants of

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<sup>22</sup> Meera Sabaratnam, “Decolonising the curriculum: what’s all the fuss about?”, Study at SOAS blog, January 18, 2017 <https://www.soas.ac.uk/blogs/study/decolonising-curriculum-whats-the-fuss/>

<sup>23</sup> Prasant Mishra, and Susanta Bardhan, “Decolonising English teaching and studies in India: need to review classroom practices and teaching material” *Journal of Teaching and Research in English Literature – Special Issue* n.d. <https://sites.google.com/site/splissueeltailiteraturejournal/articles/decolonizing-english-teaching>

<sup>24</sup> Brian Kamazi, “Decolonising the curriculum – a student call in context”, *University World News*. May 27, 2016. <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20160527145138375>

<sup>25</sup> Indeed, an argument frequently made in favour of decolonising education is precisely that of challenging the assumption of white male neutrality in academic perspective.

“Dr Babasaheb Ambedkarancha – Vijay Aso!”<sup>26</sup> and fifteen minutes of taking selfies before we were shepherded back to the bus. Due to some confusion, the place booked for us to rest for the night was now full, and after much discussion we set off home. By 8am on January 1<sup>st</sup> I was back in Mumbai, oblivious to the chaos about to unfold.

I had become familiar with the Battle of Koregaon long before the events of January 1<sup>st</sup>. Months earlier, Dalit Buddhist friends had insisted I keep the night free to accompany them to the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of a battle between the Mahar Regiment and the Peshwas. No mention was made of the context of the battle in these initial conversations, and it was only through independent online research that I discovered the Mahars had been fighting for the East India Company. Horrified, I asked Anish, one of the most socially and politically active members of the community, why he celebrated a British victory over Indian forces that led to the consolidation of colonial rule in India.

His response was the same as many others I received throughout the year. For many Dalits today, the Battle of Koregaon represents a Dalit victory over Peshwa oppression. Indeed, several advance the opinion that the Mahars’ lot improved under the British, who provided them with a level of protection lacking under Peshwa rule.<sup>27</sup> I would fulminate against the rapaciousness and brutality of British colonialism but my protestations were waved aside. “Dalits and British, we are friends,” said Anish in the wake of the Koregaon events, “since 1818”. While flattered to be associated with Anish’s anti-caste struggles, I found the implication of complicity with British rule a bitter pill to swallow.

A version of this narrative can be found in Ambedkar’s own writing on the Battle of Koregaon. Although no apologist for colonial rule, he responded to those “who look upon this conduct of the Untouchables in joining the British as an act of gross treason” by arguing that it was in fact “quite natural” as “history abounds with illustrations showing how one section of people in a country have shown sympathy with an invader, in the hope that the new comer will release them from the oppressions of their countrymen”.<sup>28</sup> In his famous 1936 treatise *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar illustrates these oppressions in the specific context of the Peshwas:

[T]he untouchable was not allowed to use the public streets if a Hindu was coming along lest he pollute the Hindu shadow... In Poona, the capital of the Peshwa, the untouchable was required to carry, strung from his waist, a broom to sweep away from behind the dust he [treaded] on lest a Hindu walking on the same should be polluted... [and] an earthen pot, strung from his neck wherever he went, for holding his spit lest his spit falling on earth should pollute a Hindu who might unknowingly happen to tread on it.<sup>29</sup>

Far from being a purely historical account, this is presented alongside contemporary examples of casteism to demonstrate that the Congress Party, dominated as it was at the time

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<sup>26</sup> “Triumph be to Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar” (Asang Wankhede pers. comm.)

<sup>27</sup> See also Beltz, *Mahar, Buddhist and Dalit*, 173-4; Romila Thapar, “Some appropriations of the theory of Aryan race relating to the beginnings of Indian history”, in *The Aryan Debate*, ed. Thomas Trautman, 106-128. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 111.

<sup>28</sup> Ambedkar, “Untouchables and Pax Britannica”, 86.

<sup>29</sup> Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, 18.

by upper-caste Hindus, was not fit to assume the mantle of political power after Independence. Four years later, in his *Pakistan, or the Partition of India* the point is more explicitly argued that “the British cannot consent to settle power upon an aggressive Hindu majority and make it its heir, leaving it to deal with the minorities at its sweet pleasure. That would not be ending imperialism. It would be creating another imperialism.”<sup>30</sup>

## INVASIONS FROM THE WEST

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Can it be argued, then, that Peshwa rule was itself a form of colonialism? And thus that the celebration at Koregaon is actually a celebration of decolonisation, albeit problematized by the inconvenient fact that the battle was won for a new set of colonisers? To answer this, we will need to take a closer look at Dalit Buddhist attitudes towards Hinduism itself. It became apparent early in my fieldwork that many of my interlocutors were passionate subscribers to the so-called “Aryan invasion theory”. According to local politician Mahendra, the first Hindus were actually “Eurasian” invaders who came from Central Asia to find places to graze their cows, in the process destroying India’s indigenous Buddhist culture. Another politician, Sandeep, told me that there is genetic evidence to show that Brahmans came from Portugal thousands of years ago and subjugated the local Buddhist community. He told me that Buddhism was not only the original religion of India, but it had been present historically in many countries (an inconclusive debate followed as to whether pre-Columbian America had been Buddhist, and whether Pali, the language of Buddhist liturgy, would have been spoken in ancient Europe). Social worker Manish agreed that outsiders, whom he described as fair-skinned Persians that would have looked rather like me, made slaves of the local population, also intermarrying with them to produce the first Brahmans, who “developed the rules, regulations, arranged all caste.”<sup>31</sup>

Appealing though it might be to many engaged in ongoing anti-caste struggles, especially those aligned to the decolonisation movement, to view the caste system as the legacy of an ancient “western” invasion, the historicity of these accounts is questionable and in some aspects entirely unfounded. Although Buddhism clearly held sway in parts of India in the centuries following the life of the Buddha<sup>32</sup> there is no evidence for a primordial Buddhism preceding the earliest forms of Hinduism. The theory of a violent Aryan invasion has a long history, beginning with a linguistic discovery announced by British judge Sir William Jones in 1786. Tasked by the colonial judiciary with mastering Sanskrit, he found that the language bore “a stronger affinity” to Greek and Latin “than could possibly have been produced by

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<sup>30</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “Pakistan, or the Partition of India”. In *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches Vol 8*, edited by Vasant Moon, 1-483. (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1990), 9. It should be noted that the minority under specific consideration here is the Muslim community rather than the untouchable community.

<sup>31</sup> Similar arguments were encountered by anthropologist Johannes Beltz in his 1990s study of Buddhist communities in Mumbai and Pune, where he was repeatedly informed that Dalits were the “aboriginal Indian ‘race’ that was conquered by the Aryans” and found that “Buddhism is considered to be an ancient universal religion, practised not only in India, but also in many European countries where Pali was once spoken.” (Beltz, *Mahar, Buddhist and Dalit*, 141-144)

<sup>32</sup> Gail Omvedt, *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste*. (New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London: Sage Publications, 2003), 118-125

accident".<sup>33</sup> The wider implication of this is that all northern Indian languages related to Sanskrit belong to the Indo-European language family, which also includes most European languages.<sup>34</sup> Subsequent discoveries, such as the unity of the major South Indian languages in a separate (Dravidian) language family, led to a dominant paradigm among European Indologists in the later nineteenth century of "an ancient clash between a light-skinned [Aryan] race bringing Sanskrit and civilisation to an India inhabited by dark-skinned, savage speakers of Dravidian languages".<sup>35</sup>

This theory found support from missionaries, whose work among lower castes was predicated on the idea of their being "indigenous inhabitants who had been conquered and oppressed by Brahmins who represented the Aryan conquest"<sup>36</sup> and also among colonial historians for whom it provided a justificatory parallel with the British conquest of India.<sup>37</sup> The discovery in the 1920s that architectural ruins unearthed decades previously in the Indus Valley actually belonged to a distinct, ancient civilisation, complicated this narrative. Difficulties in deciphering the language used by the Indus Civilisation has spurred a protracted debate as to whether this represents a pre-Aryan, possibly Dravidian, civilisation or whether it indicates an Aryan presence in India much earlier than hitherto believed.<sup>38</sup> For archaeologist Mortimer Wheeler, the presence of unburied corpses at the Indus Valley site of Mohenjo-daro suggested that it was an indigenous civilisation that had been destroyed by Aryan invaders.<sup>39</sup>

In subsequent decades, due to archaeological evidence of the likely pastoral-agriculturalist lifestyle of the Aryans, the violent invasion narrative has largely been sidelined "in favour of a slower, more gradual migration of Aryans into India."<sup>40</sup> This "Aryan migration theory" is supported by a considerable body of linguistic, literary and genetic evidence<sup>41</sup> generally indicating an earlier homeland in the Pontic Steppe region<sup>42</sup> rather than Portugal as claimed by Sandeep.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in David Anthony, *The horse, the wheel and language: how Bronze Age riders from the Eurasian Steppes shaped the modern world* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 7.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Trautmann, "Introduction", in *The Aryan Debate*, ed. Thomas Trautman, xiii-xliii. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), xxi.

<sup>35</sup> Trautmann, "Introduction", xxxi-xxxiii.

<sup>36</sup> Thapar, "Some appropriations of the theory", 110.

<sup>37</sup> Thapar, "Some appropriations of the theory", 115; Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *The Hindus: an alternative history*. (London: Penguin Press, 2009), 91.

<sup>38</sup> Trautmann, "Introduction", xlii-xliii; Doniger O'Flaherty, *The Hindus*, 91.

<sup>39</sup> Sudeshna Guha, "Negotiating evidence: history, archaeology and the Indus civilisation." *Modern Asian Studies*, 39 no. 2 (May, 2005): 412.

<sup>40</sup> Trautmann, "Introduction", xxxvii.

<sup>41</sup> For a non-technical summary of this evidence, see Doniger O'Flaherty, *The Hindus*, 86-102. For more on textual evidence see Michael Witzel, "Autochthonous Aryans? The evidence from old Indian and Iranian texts". *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies* 7, no 3. (Oct 2016): 1-93. <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:bsz:16-ejvs-8302>. For an example of a recent, and influential genetic study, see Marina Silva et al. "A genetic chronology for the Indian Subcontinent points to heavily sex-biased dispersal" *BMC Evolutionary Biology*, 17, no 88 (March, 2017). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12862-017-0936-9>

<sup>42</sup> Anthony, *The Horse*.

An opposing interpretation, the “Out of India” hypothesis, posits India as the sole historical source of Hindu culture and the Sanskrit language and in its most extreme form maintains that the entire family of Indo-European languages radiated out from an Indian homeland.<sup>43</sup> While few international academics subscribe to this position it has, understandably, gained considerable traction in India where it is often co-opted into the Hindu nationalist agenda. For example, M. S. Gowalkar, the second leader of the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) organisation insisted Hindus were “indigenouse [*sic*] children of the soil always, from time immemorial”.<sup>44</sup> For some “Out of India” advocates, any suggestion that Sanskrit or Hinduism might have their roots from outside India is Eurocentric neo-colonialism. Tellingly, a leading (European) Out of India proponent Koenraad Elst made his name with a study of Hindu revivalism entitled *Decolonizing the Hindu Mind*.<sup>45</sup>

For Elst, of course, there is no question of Aryans as colonisers, and instead he writes of “Islamic and Western colonialism” although is at pains not to conflate the two into a simplistic “anti-Hindu front” as others have done.<sup>46</sup> Golwalkar, for example, describes the “degenerating” effect on Hindu culture from “contact with the debased ‘civilisations’ of the Musalmans and the Europeans” and in the same paragraph refers to the “average Hindu mind, not wholly vitiated by *Western* influences”.<sup>47</sup> I was, in fact, surprised that my Dalit interlocutors never brought up the issue of Islamic conquest in my hearing, and despite Ambedkar having written of the “invasion of India by the Muslim hordes from the north-west”<sup>48</sup> this did not seem to represent another significant “western” invasion for them. As we have seen, moreover, unlike some British colonial administrators, Anish and others did not explicitly draw a parallel between the other two perceived invasions from the west (i.e. Aryan and British), preferring to frame them in opposition to each other: Aryans as oppressors and British as liberators.

## FALSE HISTORY AND COLONISED MINDS

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Just as Hindu nationalism is often predicated on the belief that Hinduism and Sanskrit originated solely within India, for many Dalits, a belief in their own autochthony in the face of Brahmanic invasion is essential to their self-respect. I asked in the previous section whether the Peshwas can be regarded as colonisers. Extending this to the entire Brahmanic superstructure, and the perception of invading Aryans enslaving an aboriginal Buddhist population, it appears that some Dalits indeed view this as form of settler colonialism.

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<sup>43</sup> Doniger O’Flaherty, *The Hindus*, 93.

<sup>44</sup> M. S. Golwalkar, *We, or our nationhood defined*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Nagpur: Harihareshwar Printing Press, 1939), 8.

<sup>45</sup> Koenraad Elst, *Decolonizing the Hindu mind: ideological development of Hindu revivalism*. New Delhi: Rupa & Co. 2001

<sup>46</sup> Elst, *Decolonizing*, 46 and 47. A discussion of Islam and its substantive presence in India from the 12<sup>th</sup> Century onwards is outside the scope of this essay but amply covered in a multiplicity of other sources.

<sup>47</sup> Golwalkar, *Nationhood defined*, 8 (emphasis mine)

<sup>48</sup> Ambedkar, “Pakistan”, 54.

In the histories recounted to me, Aryan invaders colonised not only the bodies but also the *minds* of the aboriginal population. For example, during the Hindu festival of Gudi Padwa I asked Mahendra if he would be taking part in the celebrations. “No” he said firmly. “Hindus blindly follow, but Buddhists always ask ‘why?’”. The expression “blindly follow” was used repeatedly in reference to Hindu customs, and Manish described the way the Aryan invaders had indoctrinated the indigenous population: “*Unko hammering kiya – aap log Hindu hain, aap log Hindu hain, aap log Hindu hain*” ([The Brahmans] hammered it into them – you’re Hindu, Hindu, Hindu). Sandeep was vociferous on this point during Ganesh Chaturthi, Mumbai’s biggest Hindu festival, telling me that Ganesh was a “fake god”, like all Hindu deities. Any “ancient” Ganesh carvings I might have seen were simply elephant figures that had been modified by fraudulent Brahmans to lend credence to their “false history”.

“False history” was an expression used frequently. Sandeep dismissed the Hindu epics as false history and he told me this history had been authored by Brahmans to brainwash Indians into complying with the caste system. More recently, according to Anish, the Mahars’ bravery at Koregaon and elsewhere has been edited out of mainstream, Brahman-controlled history. It was Ambedkar who managed to see through this fog, he explained, and after reading 50,000 books Ambedkar devised an “alternative history” of India that exposed the Aryan invasion and celebrated the unsung heroism of the Mahars. “*Ye hamara itihaas hai*” he said more than once: this is our (Dalit) history.<sup>49</sup>

## THE ROOTS OF ALTERNATIVE HISTORY

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But whose history is it? Reading through post-Koregaon broadsides against the upper-caste dominance over mainstream Indian media, I started seeing parallels, in the themes of exclusion and hegemony, between the Dalit Buddhists’ concept of false/alternative history and the decolonisation agenda in higher education. But while Anish’s alternative history appears “decolonised” with respect to Brahmanic imperialism, it is as much a bequest of the British colonial encounter as it is of Ambedkar himself, particularly where the Aryan invasion theory is concerned. I therefore attempt to examine the roots of this history, firstly by returning to Ambedkar.

Born in 1891 to a Mahar military family, Bhimrao Ambedkar was, unusually for his caste, educated in Elphinstone College in Bombay, before studying at Columbia University under a scholarship from the Maharaja of Baroda, and later at the London School of Economics. Ambedkar’s subsequent career defies disciplinary categorisation and he is remembered variously as a lawyer, economist, writer, politician and social reformer. The fact that his most significant life events and achievements are celebrated with the fervour usually accorded to religious festivals is testament to the towering position he occupies in Dalit Buddhist cosmology.

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<sup>49</sup>A recent initiative in this area is Dalit History Month, a collaborative social media project now in its fourth year. See “Dalit History Month”. dalitdiva. <https://www.tiki-toki.com/timeline/entry/423929/Dalit-History-Month/>

Every year in March, his 1927 crusade for untouchables to gain access to a public water tank in Mahad, southern Maharashtra<sup>50</sup> is celebrated with a pilgrimage to the site of the tank, now branded *krantibhumi*, Land of Revolution. On his birthday (Ambedkar Jayanti) on April 14<sup>th</sup>, Dalit-dominated neighbourhoods including the BDD Chawls erupt with speeches, flags and rambunctious processions. On India's Independence Day (August 15<sup>th</sup>) and Republic Day (January 26<sup>th</sup>) Dalit Buddhist celebrations place a distinctive emphasis on Ambedkar's role as lead author of the Indian Constitution. Come October, the mass conversion to Buddhism is celebrated as Dhamma Chakra Pravartan Din (Religious Conversion Day) with lectures and cultural programmes, while on Ambedkar's death anniversary on December 6<sup>th</sup>, Dalit groups from across India converge on Chaityabhoomi, the site of his cremation in central Mumbai.

The exact status accorded to Ambedkar by the Dalit Buddhist community is matter for debate. On the one hand, I was told many times that Buddhism is a scientific religion<sup>51</sup> in which there is no place for the fake gods of Hinduism. On the other, Ambedkar was often referred to in explicitly religious terms. During the Republic Day celebrations, Anish explained to me that Ambedkar is like a god, a mother and a father to him, while on another occasion he told me that "we only worship Ambedkar and Gautam Buddha. No other gods." Beltz notes that many accounts of Ambedkar's life "are more eulogies than historical descriptions, and can be studied as hagiography".<sup>52</sup> Great importance is attached to Ambedkar's writing in the Dalit Buddhist community, as attested by aspects of the alternative histor(ies) recounted to me. In some cases, I formed the impression that this attachment arose through discussion and through reading *about* Ambedkar rather than through direct engagement with Ambedkar's own texts.

I have already referred to the catalogue of Peshwa oppressions made in the *Annihilation of Caste* and the explicitly anti-caste interpretation of the Battle of Koregaon made in *The Untouchables and Pax Britannica*. The theme of historical conflict between Buddhists and Brahmans is dealt with at length in a number of Ambedkar's essays including *Revolution and Counter-Revolution*<sup>53</sup> where Hinduism is framed as "inequalitarian and oppressive" in opposition to the "advanced, egalitarian and rational mode" of Buddhism.<sup>54</sup> In *The Untouchables: who were they and why they became untouchables*, Ambedkar argues that the prohibition against cow slaughter and eating beef, so central to our understanding of Hinduism today, actually arose as a way for Brahmans to assert their superiority over

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<sup>50</sup> Maharashtra is the state in which both Mumbai and Pune (i.e. including Koregaon) are situated, and where the majority of the BDD Chawl residents, Dalit and Maratha, trace their roots.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Beltz, *Mahar, Buddhist and Dalit*, 44-45 and Omvedt, *Buddhism in India*, 139-42 for Buddhism and scientific rationalism.

<sup>52</sup> Beltz, *Mahar, Buddhist and Dalit*, 113

<sup>53</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "Revolution and Counter-revolution". In *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches Vol 3*, compiled by Vasant Moon, 151-429. Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1987.

<sup>54</sup> Gail Omvedt, *Dalit Visions: The Anti-caste Movement and the Construction of an Indian Identity*. Revised edition. (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2006), 49-50.

Buddhists who they perceived as a threat.<sup>55</sup> Those Buddhists who continued to eat beef were branded untouchable.<sup>56</sup> The concluding sentences of *The Untouchables* point very clearly to a need for “alternative history”:

We can, therefore, say with some confidence that Untouchability was born some time about 400 A.D. It is born out of the struggle for supremacy between Buddhism and Brahmanism which has so completely moulded the history of India and the study of which is so woefully neglected by students of Indian history.<sup>57</sup>

Given Ambedkar’s clear intellectual influence on Dalit thinking today, it would be natural to assume that the Aryan invasion theory, so prominent in my interlocutors’ world views, was a position that he had adopted himself. In reality, Ambedkar explicitly rejected the theory in his treatise *Who were the Shudras*, in which he states that the “theory of invasion is an invention,” and even the notion of an Aryan race is “so absurd that it ought to have been dead long ago”.<sup>58</sup>

How, then, has the Aryan invasion theory come to occupy such a central place in contemporary Dalit thought? A partial answer can be found in the writings of Jyotirao Phule, a nineteenth century Maharashtrian anti-caste reformer. In addition to being a seminal influence on Ambedkar, Phule is best known for his pioneering work with his wife Savitri to promote education for girls and lower castes.<sup>59</sup> While he does not have the same stature among Dalit Buddhists as Ambedkar, Phule is nevertheless enshrined in the pantheon of respected social reformers, and his image is a common sight in Dalit-owned spaces. My interlocutors frequently cited Phule as part of their heritage and often ritually invoked him alongside Ambedkar at their functions. His writing, mostly in the form of short Marathi pamphlets, is more accessible than Ambedkar’s dense treatises,<sup>60</sup> so the currency his ideas hold today is hardly surprising.

Indeed, much of the alternative history I heard resonates with Phule. For Phule, the Aryans were responsible for the earliest and most damaging invasion of India, since they “solidified their power using a hierarchical and unequalitarian religious ideology”.<sup>61</sup> Phule, like Sandeep and Mahendra, argued that the resulting ideology, Hinduism, “is not a

<sup>55</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “The untouchables: who were they and why they became untouchables?” In *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches Vol 7*, edited by Vasant Moon, 239-382. (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1990), 311-379.

<sup>56</sup> Indeed, many Dalit Buddhists in the BDD Chawls continue to eat beef today, in the form of buffalo meat given the legal restrictions on beef eating in Maharashtra, and invest in it the pride and symbolism of not being Hindu.

<sup>57</sup> Ambedkar, “The untouchables”, 379.

<sup>58</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “Who were the Shudras?”. In *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches Vol 7*, edited by Vasant Moon, 9-229. (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1990), 78 and 80.

<sup>59</sup> Thapar, “Some appropriations of the theory”, 111.

<sup>60</sup> Gopal Guru, “Liberating Jyotiba Phule: Selected Writings of Jyotiba Phule by G. P. Deshpande and Jyotiba Phule.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 38, no 35 (Aug-Sept 2003): 3703-3704. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4413968>.

<sup>61</sup> Omvedt, *Dalit Visions*, 20-21. Also see Thapar, “Some appropriations of the theory”, 110; and Rosalind O’Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict, and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-century Western India*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 141.

legitimate religion but superstition, a bag of tricks, a weapon of domination".<sup>62</sup> Like Manish, he explicitly compared caste oppression to slavery in his treatise *Gulamgiri* (Slavery)<sup>63</sup> which he dedicated to the "good people of the United States".<sup>64</sup>

Phule's claiming a pre-Aryan status for the lower castes (including untouchables) can be understood within the hybrid milieu of Indian colonial-era thought. He was famously influenced by Thomas Paine, as well as by the Scottish mission school that he attended and with which he later remained involved.<sup>65</sup> His ideology can also be placed in the context of a growing number of non-Brahman movements across India which "all began to argue in terms of the Aryan conquest and brahman exploitation through religion."<sup>66</sup> Most notable of these was that of activist E.V. "Periyar" Ramasamy whose demand for an independent Dravidian state was premised on an aboriginal Dravidian population of south India that had been conquered and oppressed by Aryans.<sup>67</sup>

## DECOLONISED OR ANTI-NATIONAL?

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Having explored the roots of Anish's alternative history, I now ask how successfully it can be considered "decolonisation in praxis" and contend that we face several challenges. First, the theory of a violent Aryan invasion (as opposed to a migration) has not only been rejected by Ambedkar and much contemporary scholarship, but it is also inextricably tied to British and European knowledge production. Second, while the Battle of Koregaon can be framed as a victory against casteism, this does not erase its role as a catalyst for British colonial expansion. The most that can be said is that it led to the replacement of one imperialism by another. Finally, having implicitly framed Ambedkar as a "decolonised" thinker in regard to Brahmanic imperialism, the logical next step is to examine his relationship with the British colonial project and the traces this has left in the Dalit Buddhist community today.

Like Phule, Ambedkar drew on a wide range of material from within and outside India. The influences of his Columbia University professors are often cited,<sup>68</sup> notably the pragmatist John Dewey whom Ambedkar refers to in *Annihilation of Caste* as "my teacher... to whom I owe so much".<sup>69</sup> In itself, this is nothing remarkable – even the most strident advocate of decolonisation would be hard-pressed to insist on only following thinkers wholly uninfluenced by European-American academia – but it usefully prompts an examination of the broader context of Ambedkar's writing. For example, as he readily admits in the preface

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<sup>62</sup> Omvedt, *Dalit Visions*, 22.

<sup>63</sup> Jagannatham Begari, "Jyotirao Phule: A Revolutionary Social Reformer." *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 71, no. 2 (2010): 399-412. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42753704>.

<sup>64</sup> Zelliott, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, 82.

<sup>65</sup> O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict, and Ideology*, 108-131.

<sup>66</sup> Omvedt, *Dalit Visions*, 35.

<sup>67</sup> Anita Diehl, *E.V. Ramaswami Naicker-Periyar: a study of the influence of a personality in contemporary South India*. (Stockholm, Goteborg, Lund: Esselte Studium, 1977), 70-77.

<sup>68</sup> Beltz, *Mahar, Buddhist and Dalit*, 48; Zelliott, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, 80.

<sup>69</sup> Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, 74.

to *Who were the Shudras?* he could not read Sanskrit<sup>70</sup> and his access to ancient Hindu texts was entirely through the medium of English translations. He rightly suggests that this “deficiency... should not disqualify [him] altogether from operating in this field”<sup>71</sup> but nevertheless by today’s standards it undermines his stature as a historian of ancient India and an emancipator from the “spiritual subjugation”<sup>72</sup> imposed by colonial languages.

Likewise, Ambedkar’s adoption of Buddhism cannot be understood in isolation from the wider Buddhist revival in India and Sri Lanka in which the role of outside scholars was crucial. The interpretation of ancient Buddhist texts such as the Ashokan rock edicts owes much to British officials including James Prinsep and Alexander Cunningham.<sup>73</sup> T. W. Rhys Davids, a civil servant in Sri Lanka, founded the Pali Text Society in 1881 making English translations of the Buddhist canon widely available for the first time.<sup>74</sup> Colonel Olcott and Helena Blavatsky, founders of the Theosophical Society in New York, came to Sri Lanka in the 1880s and converted to Buddhism. Olcott, in particular, was instrumental in the intellectual and spiritual development of some of South Asia’s most influential Buddhist reformers including Anagarika Dharmapala in Sri Lanka.<sup>75</sup> This milieu of “Buddhist Modernism... essentially based on Western sources and English translations of the scriptures... [and] greatly inspired by the nineteenth-century scientific and evolutionist ideology”<sup>76</sup> heavily influenced Ambedkar, and lives on in my interlocutors’ claims that Buddhism is “scientifically proven” and that the Buddha was the first scientist.

Given the hybrid intellectual climate of Ambedkar’s time, seeking purity of ideas and influence is clearly inappropriate. More substantial questions, however, have been raised over Ambedkar’s role in India’s independence movement. In particular, his support for the creation of Pakistan has been “seen by many as a betrayal of the nationalist cause”<sup>77</sup> and in a controversial biography, politician-journalist Arun Shourie claims that “[t]here is not one instance... in which Ambedkar participated in any activity connected with the struggle to free the country.”<sup>78</sup>

Ambedkar’s own address to the 1930 Round Table Conference, called by the British Government to discuss constitutional reform, reflects a nuanced but clear position:

Before the British, we were in the loathsome condition due to our untouchability. Has the British Government done anything to remove it? Before the British, we could not enter the temple. Can we enter now? Before the British, we were denied entry

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<sup>70</sup> Ambedkar, “Who were the Shudras?”, 11. (This is not a coincidence, of course: as a Mahar, Ambedkar was unable to persuade any Brahman to defile themselves by teaching him the sacred language of Hinduism.)

<sup>71</sup> Ambedkar, “Who were the Shudras?”, 11.

<sup>72</sup> Ngūgĩ Wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the mind*, 9

<sup>73</sup> Zelliott, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, 189.

<sup>74</sup> Omvedt, *Buddhism in India*, 234.

<sup>75</sup> Beltz, *Mahar, Buddhist and Dalit*, 44-5; Omvedt, *Buddhism in India*, 234; Zelliott, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, 189.

<sup>76</sup> Beltz, *Mahar, Buddhist and Dalit*, 72.

<sup>77</sup> Shabnum Tejani, “The necessary conditions for democracy: B. R. Ambedkar on nationalism, minorities and Pakistan.” *Economic & Political Weekly* 48, no. 50 (Dec 2013): 115.

<sup>78</sup> Arun Shourie, *Worshipping false gods: Ambedkar and the facts which have been erased*. (New Delhi: ASA Publications, 1997), 3.

into the Police Force. Does the British Government admit us in the Force? Before the British, we were not allowed to serve in the Military. Is that career now open to us? To none of these questions can we give an affirmative answer. That the British, who have held so large a sway over us for such a long time, have done some good we cheerfully acknowledge. But there is certainly no fundamental change in our position.... [The British] are quite incompetent to tackle our problems.<sup>79</sup>

Of course, a commitment to removing a colonial power does not require unambiguous loyalty to every independence movement at all costs. We have seen Ambedkar's fears of an "aggressive Hindu majority... creating another Imperialism"<sup>80</sup> and the 1930-2 Round Table Conferences further illustrate how Ambedkar's concerns over Hindu majoritarianism might be viewed as playing into British hands. Part of a series of legislative reforms through which the British government extended voting rights to Indians in a limited way, the conferences featured debates over dividing the electorate on religious lines. The 1909 Indian Councils Act<sup>81</sup> had already provided for a separate electorate for Muslims, and this was followed by the instigation of separate electorates for other religious minorities. At the Round Table Conferences Ambedkar argued, not for the first time, for separate electorates<sup>82</sup> for the "Depressed Classes"<sup>83</sup> to promote their fair representation and adequate participation in public life. This move was opposed by the Indian National Congress, and in particular Gandhi who feared this would lead to division and bloodshed and responded with a "fast unto death".<sup>84</sup> A compromise was reached under the Poona Pact (1932) which reserved seats for the Depressed Classes under a common Hindu electorate.<sup>85</sup>

On the one hand, attempts to compartmentalise the Indian electorate can be seen as a cynical British "divide and rule" ploy. In his compelling critique of colonial rule, Shashi Tharoor, while sympathetic to Ambedkar's cause, describes the "British attempt to separate the Depressed Classes" as a "strategy of fragmenting Indian nationalism and breaking the incipient unity of the Indian masses".<sup>86</sup> Beltz, on the other hand, in his history-ethnography of Maharashtrian Buddhism, presents Ambedkar's demands as a move born out of frustration at the lack of upper-caste commitment to combatting untouchability.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "Dr Ambedkar at the Round Table Conferences". In *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches Vol 2*, compiled by Vasant Moon, 503-792. (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1982), 504

<sup>80</sup> Ambedkar, "Pakistan", 9.

<sup>81</sup> Commonly referred to as the Morley-Minto Reforms after the principle architects of the Act.

<sup>82</sup> Ambedkar, "Round Table Conferences", 533-551.

<sup>83</sup> Ambedkar used "Depressed Classes" to refer to "untouchables within the Hindu religion but outside Hindu society", and this is the definition that, after much debate, was accepted more generally by the 1931-2 Indian Franchise Committee (C. J. Fuller, "Colonial anthropology and the decline of the Raj: caste, religion and political change in India in the early twentieth century". *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, 26 no. 3 [2016]: 482.)

<sup>84</sup> Tejani, "The necessary conditions", 115; Zelliott, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, 166-7.

<sup>85</sup> Beltz, *Mahar, Buddhist and Dalit*, 49-50; Zelliott, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, 168-169.

<sup>86</sup> Shashi Tharoor, *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India*. (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2016), 147

<sup>87</sup> Beltz, *Mahar, Buddhist and Dalit*, 49.

I saw no such ambiguity in my Dalit Buddhist interlocutors' perspectives on Ambedkar's nationalism. The focus of the community's Republic Day celebrations I attended at the BDD Chawls was the garlanding of Ambedkar's portrait. Anish later took me aside to explain that they were celebrating Ambedkar's lead authorship of the Indian constitution. At a Buddhist musical programme later in the year, a singer delivered a charged paean to both Maratha Emperor Shivaji and Ambedkar. But whereas "Shivrao" wielded a sword, the song went, Bhimrao changed India with a pen. Gandhi and Narendra Modi also featured en route to the song's climax, a dramatic pause followed by a declamation that "*Bhimrao Bharat ka baap hai*" (Bhimrao [Ambedkar] is the father of India) to which the crowd erupted in cheers and applause.

A well-known epigram attributed to Ambedkar, "We are Indians, firstly and lastly" was printed on the back of t-shirts produced for the BDD Chawls 2016 Ambedkar Jayanti celebrations and still worn regularly by members of the Dalit Buddhist community. Following a dispute over outside space with a group of upper-caste Hindu neighbours, Manish told me that the Hindus don't believe in the principle "We are Indians, firstly and lastly" and that caste is more important to them than nation. I heard something similar from Mahendra, who told me to a chorus of agreement that Buddhists are the only community celebrating Independence Day. In response to my expressions of disbelief he conceded that other communities do celebrate in a small way, but that Hindus generally waste their time with religious festivals. Every building should have a flag, he said, and people should respect the national anthem if India is to become a superpower. Simultaneously, Mahendra argued, only the Buddhists will protest government decisions. Again, I disputed this, and he agreed that other communities sometimes protest but not to the same extent, and that Muslims, in particular, only protest to safeguard their own interests rather than those of the nation.

In fact, precisely this charge is often levied at Dalit protests such as those following the Koregaon violence.<sup>88</sup> I have described how the Battle of Koregaon celebrations were branded "anti-national" by many upper-caste Hindu commentators, and how some of my interlocutors were unapologetic in their admiration for British rule when compared to that of the Peshwas. The importance of British military recruitment in uplifting the Mahar community has been pointed out by Zelliott, who notes that most nineteenth century Mahar leaders had served in the British Army, effectively "expos[ing] them to British institutions much before the dissemination of western culture took place on a large scale".<sup>89</sup> Notwithstanding the subsequent disbanding of the Mahar regiment for several decades<sup>90</sup> due to a racially-motivated shift in British recruitment policy,<sup>91</sup> my Mahar friends remain proud of their caste's military credentials and link to the British. Indeed, they rarely referenced their Mahar identity except when recounting the exploits of the Mahar Regiment.

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<sup>88</sup> Venkataramakrishnan, "Are Dalits really oppressed?"

<sup>89</sup> Zelliott, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, 90

<sup>90</sup> Zelliott, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, 325

<sup>91</sup> Gavin Rand, "'Martial Races' and 'Imperial Subjects': violence and governance in colonial India, 1857-1914" *European Review of History* 13, no. 1 (Jan, 2011): <https://doi.org/10.1080/13507480600586726>

The ability to reconcile multiple narratives and identities – Mahar, Dalit, Buddhist, British beneficiary and proud Indian – struck me most forcibly during a conversation at the rally with one of the organisers, Pradeep. All day on our journey I had been hearing chants of praise not only to Ambedkar but also to Chhatrapati Shivaji. Surprised at Shivaji’s inclusion on a day celebrating a military blow to the empire he founded, I asked Pradeep if he saw any contradiction in this. His response threw me: the Battle of Koregaon was a battle against the Peshwas, not the Marathas. “But the Peshwas ruled the Maratha Empire!” I replied. He shook his head and reminded me that Shivaji had been a just leader who ruled for the benefit of all his subjects, and it was only later that the Peshwas assumed power and oppressed the lower castes. This crystallised my impression, formed throughout the year, that for Maharashtra Dalit Buddhists, pride in Shivaji indexed their own pride in being Maharashtra, and by extension Indian, and belonged in an entirely separate identity category to their hatred of the Peshwas.<sup>92</sup>

Furthermore, Pradeep told me, “Peshwa” did not simply refer to the erstwhile rulers of Maharashtra, but to upper-caste oppressors throughout India. Although sceptical, I nodded, remembering the “neo-Peshwa” against whom Dalit forces had united at the anniversary conference. He scrolled through his phone, saying he wanted to show me something that would make me understand. When he found it, I was surprised to see a Marathi news article citing DNA evidence that the Aryans had come from outside India. “*Ye final proof hai*” (this is final proof) he said. Final proof that Dalits were the original Indians, celebrating a victory against one colonialism while proud of their country’s independence from the colonialism that followed.

## CONCLUSION: DECOLONISATION IN PRACTICE?

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Navigating an academic path to decolonisation in practice risks ruffling many feathers and demands a fearless clarity of argument. Regarding the Battle of Koregaon, we must begin by acknowledging the motivation behind the annual pilgrimage: a celebration of victory over oppression and a commitment to continuing this fight. This is the story as I first heard it, and the same clear-cut narrative can be found elsewhere.<sup>93</sup> However, an honest academic study requires us to grapple with the battle’s broader context as a British colonial victory, and here we reach an awkward fork in our path.

One route takes us to the absolutist position that British colonialism was uniformly damaging to Indian society, and thus the Koregaon celebrations are at best naive and at worst a threat to India’s postcolonial unity. As demonstrated in January 2018, this logic has been used to violently question Dalit loyalties at a time when Indian political discourse has taken a highly nationalistic turn. The other route forces us to downplay our anti-imperial fervour in favour of a robust condemnation of casteism. Like Ambedkar, we must

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<sup>92</sup> A richly informative discussion on the historical tensions *between* the Maratha and Brahmin communities in western India can be found in Chapter 2 of Thomas Blom Hansen, *Wages of violence: naming and identity in postcolonial Bombay*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2001), 20-36.

<sup>93</sup> For example, see how the Battle of Koregaon is described on “Dalit History Month”. dalitdiva. <https://www.tiki-toki.com/timeline/entry/423929/Dalit-History-Month/>

“cheerfully acknowledge” the possibility that the British did “some good”<sup>94</sup> for the Mahars in comparison to their systematic abuse and humiliation under Peshwa rule. Arguably, British rule benefitted them through military recruitment and employment opportunities.<sup>95</sup> But this narrative plays dangerously into the hands of imperial apologists, who readily endorse the claim that sections of Indian society benefitted from colonial rule. It is therefore crucial to make this argument with the backdrop of the multiple scars inflicted by colonialism, not least the drastic weakening of India’s economy,<sup>96</sup> which had a deleterious impact on the whole of Indian society, Mahars included.

Reconciling these two paths, we must appreciate that Dalits were “both externally and internally colonised”, and one way they responded to the British colonial project was to “erase their existing cultural memory and build a new one” by “promot[ing] alternative histories”.<sup>97</sup> As we have seen, these alternative histories are often too deeply intertwined with the (British) colonial enterprise to be treated as uncomplicated narratives of decolonisation. Ultimately, I suggest that we can only hope to approach decolonisation in praxis here by juggling these competing narratives while acknowledging our own theoretical biases but simultaneously respecting the deep conviction underpinning Anish’s alternative history: that India can only truly be independent when it is free from *all* forms of colonisation.

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<sup>94</sup> Ambedkar, “Round Table Conferences”, 504.

<sup>95</sup> Zelliott, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, 88-93.

<sup>96</sup> Tharoor, *An Era of Darkness*, 4

<sup>97</sup> Peter Robb, “Memory, place and British memorials in early Calcutta: transcript of a lecture by Peter Robb”. In *Memory, identity and the colonial encounter in India: essays in honour of Peter Robb*, edited by Ezra Rashkow, Sanjukta Ghosh, Upal Chakrabarti, 31-53. (First ed. London: Taylor and Francis, 2017.), 46

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After a Natural Science undergraduate degree and seven years in environmental consulting, I came to SOAS to study anthropology in 2014. I initially completed the MA Social Anthropology with Distinction, focusing on South Asia, and was subsequently awarded Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funding to undertake a PhD. I spent a year (Jan 2017 to Jan 2018) conducting fieldwork in Mumbai researching issues of social interaction and identity in a small neighbourhood. In particular, I grappled with questions of belonging and difference among the various communities living there. I am currently in the process of writing up my PhD thesis. Outside academia I compose and perform on the piano.