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Awqāt/Aukāt

Why *Aukāt*?

Although its meaning originally was quite different, *aukāṭ* in Hindi has come to mean status, or rather the *trespassing* of one's "natural" or properly subordinate status, with the promise of retribution or punishment.¹ It is never used in an affirmative utterance ("my/our *aukāṭ* is") but only in a negative one, typically couched as a threatening question. "*Terī aukāṭ kyā hai?*" ("What is your status?") really means that you don't have the *aukāṭ* to behave like this before me. It is, therefore, better translated as "How dare you?", "You count for nothing", "You are overstepping the boundaries of your subordinate condition", "I am warning you".

As an interpellation that suggests that the addressee does *not* have the right to speak or behave in a certain way, *aukāṭ* takes us directly to moments of confrontation around status. Its momentary utterance is a symptom of wider dynamics and processes over time. As Judith Butler reminds us, the particular moment of the individual utterance "is never merely a single moment ... [it] is a condensed historicity: it exceeds itself in past and future directions, an effect of prior and future invocations that constitute and escape the instance of utterance" (1997, 3). While *aukāṭ* can be used to refer to perceived slurs and status "infractions" in general, its "condensed historicity" relates particularly to Dalits, and the utterance is addressed to them when they are perceived to overstep their position and they need to be put "back" in their place. Which means *whenever* they try to improve their socio-economic conditions, or simply wear better clothes and footwear, get educated, or refuse demeaning social practices or sexual demands imposed upon them. Paradoxically, while *aukāṭ* as a feminine singular noun meaning "status" hides the original meaning of "times" (m. pl.), it speaks powerfully to changing times.

Aukāt is, therefore, a useful term to grapple with iterative moments of struggle around hierarchy, respect, dignity, and social recognition in contemporary India in which, from one perspective, the hierarchical *status quo* needs to be maintained with the threat of violence, while from the other perspective even modest socio-economic improvements, symbolic affirmations, and claims to dignity and respect can be met with incommensurate retribution, for which a specific term, *narsamhār* or collective homicide, has been coined in Hindi. Against the backdrop of state promises of development and contemporary dreams of socio-economic mobility, Dalit education, aspirations, and mobilization are routinely met with enormous backlashes of anger and often violence. The violence that accompanies *aukāṭ* is, therefore, of a particular, exemplary, kind ("*sabaq sikhānā*" or "teaching a lesson"). Inquiring into the term means inquiring into a whole set of actions and reactions and into the discourse that accompanies such violence. It prompts us to think what terms or expressions are used to the same objective in other dynamics of unequal confrontation (Silva 2017).

Methodologically, *aukāṭ* gives us a different route into the question of political vocabularies from that of "indigenous categories", or translation and translingual practices under colonization. To put it simplistically, intellectual history in South Asia and beyond has so far been approached in one of two ways. Either it has conceived as a matter of translation (with its implied source-and-target model, in which the original retains a special status) or as translingual practice, as in Lydia Liu's *Translingual Practices* (1995) and, more recently, Chris

Bayly's intellectual history of liberalism (2011). Liu reframes source-and-target languages as guest and host languages in order to helpfully lay emphasis on appropriation and on how "guest" concepts begin new lives in the "host" languages. To give one example, the question is not whether the Hindi *loktaṅtra* properly translates or only approximates "democracy", but *how* was "*loktaṅtra*" translated into local political culture, what was its life after it was appropriated? The other approach has been that of *Grundbegriffe*, i.e. the exploration of basic indigenous concepts and their genealogy and shifting meanings; for example, how terms like *nīti* (policy) or *rājya* (rule) or *sūdra* (lower caste, Vajpeyi 2011) have changed over the centuries and across genres and languages (Brunner, Conze, and Koselleck 1972; Hoffmann 2012).

The term *Aukāt* instead takes us to the question of conceptual/political vocabulary from a pragmatic and illocutionary perspective: *when* is it used, *to whom*, and with which *force*? It also takes us away from ideas of caste as a system (Dumont 1980) to a more shifting, yet nonetheless hard, matrix of hierarchical relationships in which the economic and the symbolic are inextricably related. As such, it seems applicable to many other situations of retributive violence, in which movements of self-respect engender excessive violence, forcing us to enquire about the "condensed historicity" of the language that accompanies such violence (Marcus 2002; Reid and Valasik 2020).

Etymology, Meanings, Affines

One of the interesting things about *auqāt* is its remarkable semantic and grammatical journey away from its etymology. *Auqāt* as indexing status (a status that the addressee does not have) is a feminine singular word, whereas etymologically it is the masculine Arabic broken plural (*awqāt*) of *waqt*, meaning "times". Already in Steingass's *Persian–English Dictionary*, *awqāt* is glossed as: "times, seasons, hours (especially for prayers); *circumstances, state, conditions; means, resources, power, ability*" (*awqāt-guzarī* means "stipend, pension", 2000, 121, emphasis added). This seems roughly equivalent to the English "times" in the expression "fallen on hard times," the meaning given in Platt's Urdu–English dictionary as well (Platt, 1974 [1884]: 106). S.W. Fallon's wonderful *Hindustani–English Dictionary* (1879, 177) adds examples to the definition which shed light on the remarkable journey of *awqāt*. It records it as meaning times, employment or occupation of time (*auqāt basarī*, also "livelihood; means of living; source of income") to: 1. State; condition; circumstances ("Kis tarah awqāt basar hotī hai?", "What are your circumstances?"); 2. Means; appliances; resources ...; 3. Ability; strength, power ("Terī kyā awkāt hai?"). In the two latter meanings, it is indeed a feminine singular noun. The plural meaning of *awqāt* as "times" remains prevalent in Urdu *ghazal* poetry (<https://www.rekhta.org/search/ghazal?q=औक़ात&lang=hi> [accessed 22 March 2021]).

The Urdu–Urdu dictionary *Firoz al-lughāt* (1992, 138) glosses *awqāt* as a feminine singular noun with *haiṣiyat* (status, condition, also feminine singular, possibly the reason behind the grammatical shift), but also with *bisāṭ* (<Ar. chess-cloth/board), something spread out on a cloth and, by extension, the extension of one's capacity to feed and entertain guests. *Haiṣiyat* and *bisāṭ* show their affinity to *awqāt* in the phrases "*Uskī kyā haiṣiyat hai?*" or "*Uskī kyā bisāṭ?*" as "What means do they have to [do something]?" – uttered with doubt or disparagement. *Awqāt, haiṣiyat, bisāṭ* – clearly the vocabulary to speak about status is a rich one. How and when did *awqāt* as "times" change into *aukāt* as "status" is unclear, and

unfortunately I cannot shed more light on it. Do Hindi speakers know the etymology of *aukāṭ*? Not necessarily, and why would it matter?

In both direct or indirect utterances (“What is your *aukāṭ*?”, “What is his/their *aukāṭ*?”), *aukāṭ* is linked to status, honour or dignity (*izzat*, f.) in a strongly hierarchical context. *Izzat* has a parallel life as a key term for personal, family, and clan honour, particularly to police gender behaviour (Chowdhry 1997; Hossain and Welchman 2005; Kannabiran and Kannabiran 2002). It is uttered to ensure that a certain hierarchy is maintained while claiming different hierarchical positions for oneself and for the other. So while *izzat*, as we shall see, can be and is used routinely in an affirmative fashion as a strong claim to respect, commonality, mutuality, and potential equality *against* a hierarchy that is perceived as demeaning and dehumanizing (“we have our *izzat*, too”, “the fight for *izzat* is more important than the one for livelihood”), *aukāṭ* utterances forcefully deny that claim. The threatened action of physical or symbolic violence is in fact aimed at depriving the addressee of dignity or *izzat* and, to employ a common metaphor, “take [their] water down” (*pānī utārnā*). It is supposed to make the other feel cowed and ashamed (*sharminda*) and bring about public humiliation (*zillat*).

In other words, *aukāṭ* and its counterpart *izzat* exist at the intersection of discourses and movements for personal and group dignity and social recognition and the reinforcement of hierarchies of caste, gender, and status. Margrit Pernau suggests that political and religious hierarchies shifted in the nineteenth century from a vocabulary of distance vs proximity (to the king or the person of power or to a sacred space or person), to one of high vs low (personal communication 2018). In the 18th and 19th centuries, complaints in texts against rising lower menial orders often employed the term *kāmin* or *kāmin zāt*, literally lesser (Fallon 1879: 946; Hali 1997: 194). They are not part of the old conceptual vocabulary of caste hierarchy (whether to index professional community, *jāti*, or the four-fold system of *varṇas*) and are not directly connected to purity and pollution, although humiliation may indeed consist in inflicting polluting punishments like rape or face-blackening with cow dung.

Within contemporary India’s vernacular political lexicon, unlike other terms which we may call affirmative, like *haq* or *adhikār* (right) or indeed *izzat*, *aukāṭ* enjoys a penumbral existence. As already mentioned, it is never used in the affirmative (“Our *aukāṭ* is ...”) but only as a negative reaction to someone else’s self-affirmation or contestation, and it does not appear as part of formal political discourse, whether reported in the press or the news or in speeches, unless as part of a threat. Yet as an utterance is very common. Its meaning is clear to everyone involved, and it often accompanies or is the prelude to violent acts. Perhaps more than *jāti* or caste, it, therefore, helps us understand what appear to be “excessive” acts of real and symbolic violence that have accompanied particularly Dalit mobilization.

Exposing and Narrating *Aukāt*

Although we don’t have linguistic corpora for Hindi, the web has become a kind of archive, and a Hindi google search for *aukāṭ* + *dalit* called up several instances of the use of *aukāṭ* in the news. On 12 May 2018, A Dalit inspector in Chittaranjan Park, a middle-class locality in Delhi, killed himself:

उनके परिजनो ने द हिंदू को बताया कि यहां उनके सीनियर अधिकारी द्वारा भेदभाव किया गया। उनके सीनियर ने कहा कि तुम्हारी औकात मेरे सामने बैठने की नहीं है।

His relatives told *The Hindu* that he was discriminated against by his senior officer, who told him, “You don’t have the *auqāt* to sit in my presence” (

<https://www.theresistancenews.com/india/dalit-inspector-killed-abuse/> [accessed on 20 October 2018]. See also “The Indian Dalits attacked for wearing the wrong shoes”, BBC 19 June 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-44517922> [accessed on 8 Feb 2019]).

Within a middle-class locality of India’s capital city, the Dalit officer’s claim to social recognition and equality through the ordinary act of sitting down, probably repeated over a period of time, ended with a drastic act of self-destruction, exposing what appears to be an incommensurate difference between the ordinary act, the phrase, and its consequences. That the negative utterance appears at all is because it is part of reported speech. Its “condensed historicity” encapsulates the long and troubled history of the relationship between Dalits and the police. In the context of the negative and active role of the police in caste-related crimes, who routinely protect the culprits and harass the Dalit victims, their relatives, and protesters, the remedy is often indicated to be more Dalits in the police (Teltumbde 2008) – but this is what then happens.

My work is with literary texts, which embed terms and utterances within dialogues, characters, and narratives and give us nuances and multiple perspectives. In this chapter, I work through two Hindi texts, one the famous autobiography of the Dalit writer Omprakash Valmiki, *Jūṭhan* (*Joothan*, i.e. Leftovers, 51997), the other a novel, *Tarpan* (Ancestral Offering 2004), by the respected writer Shivmurti, who to my knowledge is not a Dalit (or at least does not present himself as one) but in this novel writes with great insight about caste conflict in contemporary rural north India.

One of the primary aims of Dalit literature, we know, is to “expose” the persistence of caste discrimination, abuse, and violence against Dalits in contemporary rural *and* urban India, and for this reason, we are more likely to find *aukāt* mentioned here. In *Jūṭhan*, we find two occurrences, both uttered by the middle-caste Tagas (Tyagis) in the village in Western Uttar Pradesh in North India where Valmiki grew up in the 1950s and early 1960s. The first instance occurs in the context of *jūṭhan*, the practice of taking leftover food from the plates of the upper caste. After a wedding feast in the Tyagi household for which Valmiki’s parents have worked tirelessly, Valmiki’s mother asks for some “clean” leftovers instead of the usual *jūṭhan*:

Chauhdri jī, now that they’ve all eaten and left ... please give some food on a leaf-plate for my children. They have been waiting for this day, too”. Sukhdev Singh [Tyagi] gestured to the baskets full of dirty leafplates and said: “You’re already taking a basket full of *jūṭhan* ... and now you’re asking for food for the children on top of that? *Stay in your aukāt, chūhrī!* Pick up the basket and clear off.

That day Durga entered my mother’s eyes. I had never seen her like that. She scattered the basket there and then. And told Sukhdev Singh, “You pick it up and take it home. Serve it to your guests tomorrow morning...”

Like a shooting arrow, she stood up, grasped my hand and my sister’s and left. Sukhdev Singh had been about to raise his hand on my mother but she had confronted him like a tiger. With no fear.

(1997, 21, emphasis added)

The second occurrence is a few years later, when Omprakash is about to sit his High School exams, the first Dalit child in the village to do so. He has one day left to prepare for the maths test but another Tyagi comes looking for free labour to plant sugarcane. Omprakash protests feebly but eventually has to go. At lunch time, food is brought. The Dalit free labourers have to sit in the sun and are given only two rotis with a single piece of pickle, “what you would not give even to a beggar”. Omprakash refuses to take the food. The Tyagi

shouted abuse. But I stood my ground. Protest had already began within me. “Hey you son of a *chūhrā* ... come ... he’s learnt two letters (*do acchar kyā paṛh liyā*) and he’s started to think big about himself ... *abe*, don’t forget your *aukāṭ* ...” [His] words stung my body with a thousand wounds.

(Valmiki 1997, 72)

From the furious reactions of Omprakash’s parents to these *aukāṭ* utterances, we understand that their “condensed historicity” already points to of process of change, when traditional practices of subordination and discrimination are being actively challenged, while the Tyagis’ “stinging words” show that the upper castes have registered the challenge. The phrases sting Omprakash specifically because they diminish and seek to thwart his aspirations. They get recorded in his autobiography to show not only that the education of Dalit children was bitterly resisted and perceived as a breach of deference, but also that any request, however small or inconsequential for the upper castes, was also perceived as such.

Fast-forward to another UP village in the late 1990s. This is a different historical moment, when Mayawati has already become the first Dalit woman chief minister. The term *aukāṭ* does not appear directly in Shivmurti’s novel *Tarpaṇ* (Ancestral Offering 2004), but haunts the novel in the shape of a whole gamut of expressions, views, feelings, and actions connected to Dalit–upper-caste confrontation. Again, the ground has already shifted. Young Dalit men have left the village to work in factories and cities, while young Dalit women prefer to work in the fields of nearby villages so as to avoid traditional ties of subordination as *halwāh* (ploughman) to the village upper caste. Only one Dalit woman, Lavangi, has accepted to work for the local Brahmin landholder and his wife, the *paṇḍitāin*:

For the *paṇḍitāin* it was a matter of prestige [*ijjat, izzat*]. Nowadays to keep a *halwāh* has become a matter of greater prestige than tying an elephant to your front door. This is why the *paṇḍitāin* had swallowed her arrogance [lit. “her horns and tail”] and braved the pandit’s anger to accept Lavangi’s terms. The holding was a field of two *bīghās*, and the master was responsible for the seeds and irrigation. The wages for ploughing and spade work was 6 kg a day. Once a year one pair of dhoti-kurta for her husband and one sari-blouse for her. On feast days a cooked meal for the whole family. [Lavangi] will not touch cowdung, manure and fodder, nor will she touch the broom. This will be the Nepali’s job. Given the way the times had changed so fast, [the *paṇḍitāin*] had to accept.

(Shivmurti 2004, 21)

The novel begins with the pandit’s loafer of a son, Chandar, trying to grab Rajmati, a local Dalit girl, in the fields, only to be chased away when the other Dalit women rush to the spot. It then follows the ripple effects of this non- or quasi-assault. When the girl’s father, Pyare, goes to Chandar’s father, pandit Dharmu, to protest, the fact that he does not offer submission (*pāo-*

lāgī) grates on Dharmu, who however chooses to keep quiet. Not so his wife the *paṇḍitāin*, who after trying to shift the blame onto the girl cries out against the present times:

It's not just the rule of the *chamārin*, all the Chamars and Pasis have started pissing on our heads. Such nerve (*itnī himmat*) to come with a stick to tell us off!

(14)

To which Pyare retorts:

You forget, *paṇḍitāin*. We are not the same Chamars who used to listen and bear everything with our ears and tails cast down. We'll make the ant who tried tasting the sugar pay dearly.

(14)

The pandit stops the matter from escalating by shutting down his wife. He tells Pyare, conciliatorily: "Big or small, everyone has equal dignity" ("*chhoṭā ho ya baṛā. Ijjaṭ sabkī barābar hai*", 14). Here, then, we find the recognition of *ijjaṭ* as honour and self-respect as a shared value that needs to be recognized and accepted.

But while Pyare is reluctantly willing to end matters there, the younger Dalits in the village all want to take it further. Dalit men and women debate whether to report the incident at the police thana/station or not (lit. "do the police-thana", "*thānā-pulis karnā*", a verb in itself, 15) – some say it will only bring further abuse, humiliation, and expense without any result, some say it is necessary in order to teach Chandar a lesson. Enters Bhaiji, a Dalit activist, who urges Pyare to report the matter to the police as actual rape. Pyare is reluctant since this is not strictly true, but Bhaiji assures him that the police will do nothing otherwise. This opens an interesting grey space in the novel: Chandar wanted to rape Rajmati and would have done so (in fact, we learn that Rajmati's elder sister was raped and eventually killed herself by jumping into a well); assault is a crime but the police would not prosecute it. Does it mean that the Dalits are morally "wrong"? Or rather that they are willing to "play the game" instead of avoiding confrontation? As Teltumbde points out, Dalits have been caught in a "damn if you do, damned if you don't" situation. Damned if they don't protest continuing discrimination and abuse so as to avoid retaliation (since discrimination thrives on its normalisation and acceptance), and damned if they protest because the retribution is often terrible and far exceeds the violence of the original act. (Teltumbde 2008: 176) He reminds Pyare of past struggles for better pay:

That was class struggle (*varga saṅgharṣ*). This is caste struggle (*varṇa saṅgharṣ*). For *ijjaṭ*. The fight for *ijjaṭ* is more important than that for *roṭī*. This is why the *sarkār* has given us a separate law for this struggle. The Harijan Act! It's with this law that we'll put this snake in check.

(26)

What Bhaiji is referring to is the relatively new Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989 (or POA Act), which came into effect in January 1990. However, as Teltumbde (2008) shows, the Act neither prevents such atrocities nor helps bring their perpetrators to account. What the novel shows is that skilful manoeuvring can use the Act as part of its strategy.

The first encounter with the "everyday state" to file an F.I.R. (First Information Report) at the nearby police thana is indeed a humiliating and fruitless experience. But soon, with Bhaiji's help, Pyare and his son learn how to forge alliances and exert pressure on the police to act. Chandar gets arrested. This comes as a terrible shock to the *paṇḍitāin*, but Pyare is

satisfied (lit. “his heart was cooled”, 43) and he even imagines that Chandar will be taken to the village on a donkey to get their daughter Rajpati to smear blacksoot on his face... As it turns out, Chandar is locked in only for one day. The next day he comes roaring into the Chamar quarter on his motorcycle with a rifle slung across his shoulder and a bandana tied around his head (45). The Dalits fear that this time Rajpati will be raped for real and bundle her away to safety.

Yet Bhaiji does not give up, and with the help of the local Muslim Member of the state Legislative Assembly, he manages to initiate a court case. Chandar is arrested again, and again it is a matter of *ijjat*, of prestige and dignity – a currency and a game that everyone understands. The *paṇḍitāin* (“Handcuffs! Handcuffs she has put on him, that *chamārin* ... now it’s their time to rule in this *kaljug*”, the dark age); the policeman who slaps Chandar and rejects the Hindu caste card (“We are neither Hindus nor Muslims, we are policemen”, 60) only to accept money to wait a little before taking him away; the Pandit who undertakes elaborate transactions in order to avoid Chandar being taken through the local bazaar in handcuffs; and the Dalits’ lawyer who knows that just remanding Chandar in custody and pushing trial dates forward is a symbolic victory. Rajpati’s brother celebrates with sweets and a feast, while Dalits from nearby villages help pay the lawyers’ fees with a subscription. When, after two months, Chandar is finally released on bail, Bhaiji cries foul play but Rajpati’s brother tells him:

We made him grind the police mill for sixty days. He used to wander with his head high, bellowing like a bull. Now he’s got blacksoot on his face. Isn’t it extraordinary?
(93)

Meanwhile, in jail Chandar has made new friends and learnt a new style: he wants to be released with great fanfare, just as criminals and jailed politicians do, and he comes home in an open jeep amidst gunshots and slogans of, “Long live Chandar! Chandar *bhaiyā zindābād*” (93–94). His new friends start coming to the village on their roaring motorcycles and stop menacingly before Rajpati’s house in the Chamar quarter. Chandar has vowed revenge on Rajpati’s brother and on Bhaiji, daring the latter to enter the village again. Finally, when one day Lavangi betrays Bhaiji’s whereabouts to Chandar, Chandar goes out hunting Bhaiji with his gun so as to frighten him. Bhaiji scarpers up a tree, but while Chandar circles under the tree like a wolf, Rajpati’s brother hits him on the head and finally – urged on by Bhaiji (“Cut the bastard’s nose! There won’t be another chance. Your name will spread all around”, 107) – he cuts off Chandar’s nose, the ultimate humiliation.

After this scandal, even graver retaliation is feared – the papers announce *narsaṃhār*, a truckful of constables arrive to avert it, and there is general mayhem. But instead of Rajpati’s brother, it’s her father Pyare who hands himself in to the police. Not so much to save his son but to expiate the sin of generations of Dalits who bore these humiliations in silence. (His eldest daughter, Rajpati’s elder sister, was also raped and committed suicide by throwing herself into a well.) He, in fact, *asks* to be taken in handcuffs on foot through the bazaar so that everyone can see. And to the lawyer who tries to convince him to deny the charge, Pyare says: “No *vakīl sāhab*, I have to go jail. I have to expiate by eating jail fare. To expiate my sin, that I bore those people’s oppression (*zor-julm*) for so long with my ears and tail cast down”. His wife, too, tells the lawyer: “Don’t stop him now *vakīl sāhab*. This is his *mukti*. This is his *tarpan*” (116), the ritual water offering to one’s ancestors without which they’ll find no peace. The fight for self-

respect is equated with ritual expiation to Dalit ancestors and with freedom (*mukti*) from the eternal cycle of rebirths, the ultimate religious goal.

Conclusion

Aukāt, to conclude, is the flipside of *izzat*, of dignity and self-respect. *Izzat* invokes a shared mutuality, if not equality (“Big or small, everyone has equal *izzat*”), and challenges the zero-sum mentality of *aukāt*, which thinks that your greater status diminishes mine. But we can see the mentality of *aukāt* at work in many contexts in which historical privilege, whether of white supremacy, patriarchy, or other systems of gender, ethnic, or age-related power inequality, and discrimination, is challenged and responds with extreme retributory violence in an attempt to re-assert control and reinstate what it perceives to be the “natural order” of things. For this reason, *aukāt* usefully directs us to concepts that are used as threats and as challenges, and prompts us to consider the “dense historicity” behind their utterances. *Aukāt* contains a “dense historicity” that works both at an individual and a collective level, as Valmiki’s autobiography showed: the promising Dalit boy who is swotting for his exams must be “shown his place”, and both he, his family and caste fellows understand that it is not just individual retribution but an attempt to push back change for all of them. Here, the novel *Tarpan* fudges things a bit by setting up the confrontation between Dalits and a lumpenized Brahmin. As scholars like Anand Teltumbde and K. Srinivasalu have pointed out, the majority of “excessive” retributive violence against Dalits in recent decades has not been at the hands of the upper castes but of low-middling castes (“Other Backward Castes” or OBCs in official parlance). The point to take away is that, as in the novel itself, what is at stake is not so much the “ritual hierarchy” of the caste system (Dumont 1980) but the reproduction of socio-economic and symbolic subordination. On the Dalits’ side, too, the economic and the symbolic are inextricably tied together – do Dalits choose to work outside the village because of better wages or because even hard manual work outside the village comes with *izzat*?

A further point that Shivmurti’s novel reveals is that the state is inevitably part of this game – to learn how to “play the game”, to exert influence and counter-influence, to “do the state” as one “does” the thana-police, is crucial. Whereas earlier there was no way to expiate *brahmandokh*, the terrible sin of killing a Brahmin, now, Chandar’s uncle says, there is *chamardokh*, “and nothing cuts through the law of *chamardokh*” (95).

Finally, *aukāt* signals confrontation, and this is why, as we well know from the news, the stakes are extremely high, a matter of life and death. But whereas earlier it was only the high castes who spoke of *aukāt*, now Dalits, too, also use the term with similar illocutionary force. After a recent incident (7 May 2017) in which Thakurs entered a Dalit *basti* in North-Western Uttar Pradesh armed with naked swords, killing one, wounding many others, and setting fire to houses, a Dalit boy said in an interview:

“Most people had gone out to reap wheat. Had they fought face to face they’d found out their *aukāt*”. While Sandeep was speaking his eyes show clearly his pain and anger. (Kaif 2017)

The fact that it is now Dalit youth who utter the work *aukāt* as a threat, that subject and indirect object – *who* and *to whom* – have changed, signals a new “condensed historicity” of struggle.

Those using *aukāṭ* may or may not know that it originally meant “times”, but they are making a point about times changing anyway.

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¹ I would like to dedicate this chapter to Prof Anand Teltumbde, one of India’s most brilliant intellectuals, and professor at the Goa Institute of Management, who was arrested by the Pune police on 2 February 2019 in relation to the 2018 clashes between the middle-caste Marathas and Dalits at the 200th-anniversary celebration of the Bhima Koregaon battle of 1818; several activists were arrested and charged of being Naxalites. Despite a stay order of the Supreme Court of India, the police refused to release Prof Teltumbde.