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Political Mobilizations of South Asians in Diaspora: Intertwining
Homeland Politics and Host-Society Politics

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Beyond Diaspora: Ambedkarism, Multiculturalism and Caste in the UK

Nicolas Jaoul

[Ambedkar's] mission is universal and it is not a monopoly of any caste, creed or religion; neither does it belong to a particular race or nationality. This is why when I took the office of mayoralty in May last year I made a pledge to devote my year in this office to promote this holy mission. I adopted 'EQUALITY, LIBERTY, JUSTICE and PEACE' as the main theme. British Society over the past years has gradually transformed from monolithic to pluralistic and now we are living in a multi-cultural and multi-racial society. To promote the theme of equality, liberty, justice and peace is essential and badly needed in such a diverse society.

Mayor Bishan Dass' speech to the Ambedkar Mission Society, Bedford, January 18, 1987 (Bains 2016:190)

Introduction

- 1 The above quotation highlights the extraordinary achievement of an educated Dalit man, who fled poverty in Punjab, landed at Heathrow with three pounds in his pocket, and eventually became the Mayor of Wolverhampton 25 years later.¹ Although exceptional, his trajectory is indicative of the Ambedkarite movement's political

trajectory in the UK, from Britain's racial and caste-ridden ghettos to a certain degree of political recognition by society.

- 2 Ambedkar once remarked that wherever they travel, Indians bring their caste with them. However, in the context of Punjabi labor migration to the UK, Dalit immigrants not only carried their caste with them: they also brought Ambedkar's Anticaste ideology and established his movement there as well.²
- 3 The purpose of my three trips to the UK, where I visited Southall, London, Wolverhampton, Coventry and Wales between 2005 and 2007 (some places all three times and others only once), was to meet these overseas Ambedkarites. The first contacts were possible by visiting their organizations and during public events like the Ambedkar birthday celebrations that take place annually on April 14. Formal appointments for interviews often preceded more informal interactions. In July 2006, I also travelled to Punjab to get a glimpse of the UK Ambedkarite's contributions to the local Dalit mobilizations. In this article I will rely on this fieldwork, which was complemented by email conversations with some of the activists, with whom I remained in contact over these years.
- 4 Ambedkarite immigrants initially focused their political engagement on the homeland, but I would like to interrogate to what extent they, like Bishan Dass,³ also have an impact on the British political landscape. Stephane Dufoix and Rogers Brubaker warn us against Migration Studies' excessive emphasis on the notion of diaspora, which ends up being vague and without heuristic value (Dufoix 2008; Brubaker 2006). Brubaker shows that the admitted definition of diaspora generally highlights three main criteria: dispersion, homeland orientation, and boundary-maintenance with host societies, to which he adds a political dimension (Brubaker 2006). However, in order to grasp more fully the political dimensions of migration, we need to look beyond an outward-looking diasporic discourse (Sökefeld 2006). There is therefore a need to take into account other forms of immigrants' social and political engagement in host societies.
- 5 Based on several works on South and Central American emigration, Østergaard-Nielsen points to the ways "migrants challenge or bridge politics in their country of origin and settlement" (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003:4). While keeping in view the attempts at creating a politically engaged "Dalit diaspora" (Kumar 2004; Jaoul 2006a), I will look at the interplays between transnational activism (which combines "homeland politics" in Punjab/India as well as an attempt to take part in the international lobbying with transnational civil society and international institutions) and "immigrant politics" (understood as the attempt to improve the condition of immigrant communities [Østergaard-Nielsen 2003]). I will show that these two forms of activism, instead of being treated as exclusive, in fact appear as mutually constituted domains.
- 6 A pioneer in the study of immigrant politics, Abdelmalek Sayad called for the immigrants and their children to assert themselves politically in French society.⁴ Their activism represented for him an essential step in the fight against political exclusion, which he considered as the source of all other forms of racist exclusions faced by immigrants in France (Sayad [2006] 1991). In the French post-colonial context, the political activism of Algerian immigrants was strongly stigmatized due to the traces left by the Algerian war of independence, thus raising questions regarding the French state's own covert racism (Dhume et al. 2020). Sayad therefore insisted that for immigrants, "(t)o exist is to exist politically" (Sayad 2006:13). The urge to exist politically was felt from the start by Ambedkarite activists, whose fight against

untouchability in India has been premised on political means (Zelliot 1970) and whose very name, “Dalits” (“the crushed ones”), is a political category that has been meant to contest the caste order and to politicize society from below. The Ambedkarite ideology that Dalit immigrants brought with them incited them to pursue their political existence in Britain where, as I will show, casteism, alongside racism, has continued to affect their lives.

- 7 At the institutional level, one major difference between France and the UK is that French post-colonial immigrants were at first deprived of citizenship, until they obtained French nationality. In Britain, on the contrary, Indians and other former colonial subjects of the British crown immediately benefitted from Commonwealth citizenship, including the right to vote. Differing from the French model of cultural assimilation, Britain’s racial equality model of the 1960s, later on renamed Multiculturalism,⁵ promised immigrants a “speedy political incorporation” (Baumann 1998:263). However, the fact that it is premised on a notion of cultural and religious tolerance raises questions regarding the political nature of this model. Etienne Balibar thus argues that “within the framework of bourgeois civic universality at least—the main form of exclusion is differential inclusion” (Balibar 2011:508, my translation from French).
- 8 Based on his ethnography of Southall⁶ from the second part of the 1980s to the early 1990s, Gerd Baumann has highlighted the disjunctions between local patterns of political participation, in which immigrants find themselves confined under the differential regime of multiculturalism, and the larger body politic (Baumann 1998). Although British multiculturalism has been described positively as a moderate model of “inclusive multiculturalism” that supposedly “enhances citizenship” (Spinner-Halev 1999:66) as against a more radical brand of “cultural pluralism” (as in Canada and Australia), Baumann questions the mediation of religious bodies in local governmentality. He argues that this process has countervailed “secularist or secularizing tendencies” (Baumann 1998:275) by pushing “political collectives along religious and congregational boundaries” (Baumann 1998:272). Interestingly, he found out that this “congregationalization”⁷ (Baumann 1998:271) of local governmentality applies specifically to British South Asian communities which are specifically organized on religious and Caste lines, unlike other immigrant communities like the Caribbean. He explains that this system was put in place by “a [British] society that tends to pride itself on its ‘religious tolerance’ and deprecates the ‘political radicalism’ ascribed to many secular organizations of former migrants” (Baumann 1998:269).
- 9 The voluntary participation of South Asian communities in this differential project is undeniable. However, their own criticisms of this model also ought to be highlighted. How did Ambedkarism, which stands for political emancipation and whose struggle against Caste in India has been premised on Dalit political subjectivity (Rao 2009), fare in this institutional landscape? While recalling in a comprehensive manner the main historical phases of Ambedkarism in the UK, I will highlight some of the ways in which the activists negotiated or transgressed those tentative cultural boundaries while keeping up with the political legacy of the Anticaste movement.

The early immigrants' homeland politics

- 10 Dalits in Britain mostly hail from Punjab and emigrated after the Second World War.⁸ Considering Dalit poverty in the villages of Punjab, these international travels were more difficult to afford than for other groups like the landowning Jats (Ballard 1994). The Dalit presence in the UK therefore results from their collective strategies of social upliftment that were enmeshed with their political strategies. Emigration represented a collective asset for emancipation, like other forms of Dalit social and economic progress.
- 11 Besides support from families to pay for plane tickets, one needs to take into account solidarity at the administrative level from Dalit officers who had benefitted from positive discrimination. This solidarity enacted a political and moral conception of the subaltern elite which Ambedkar actively defended at the end of his life.⁹ The first batches of Dalit immigrants later on subsidized the travel costs of their relatives and friends through personal loans. Although infra-caste solidarities played their part, my respondents recalled the 1950s and 1960s as a period of inter-caste solidarities among male Punjabi immigrants. All of them were provided equivalent subaltern postings in UK factories irrespective of their caste backgrounds (Ballard 1994). As Bishan Dass—who later rose to the position of Mayor in Wolverhampton—recalls in his autobiography, they were also segregated residentially “in run down inner city areas” where “they were destined to live in squalor” (Bains 2016:41). They faced racism in their work places, where promotions were only available to white workers, as well as in public spaces like the streets and the pubs, where racism “was quite open and an acceptable norm in life” (Bains 2016:41).¹⁰ Notwithstanding their caste, Punjabi immigrants thus experienced a levelling of their social position at the bottom of the British working class. They shared the same goal, which was to support their families back in the villages in order to consolidate their economic positions before returning to live there. Caste and sectarian affiliations thus receded into the background (Nesbitt 1994), while Punjabi immigrant households saw males from different castes live together, support each other (Ballard 1994), like to find jobs in factories (Nesbitt 2010).
- 12 The Anticaste ideology of Ambedkar was imported by politicized Dalit individuals, especially the Chamars or Ravidasis, a large “untouchable caste” (or to be more precise, an endogamous *jati* or birth group) that formed the backbone of the Dalit movement in North India.¹¹ Some of these immigrants were already involved in Ambedkarite organizations in Punjab and Delhi. In my fieldwork and in the British Ambedkarite publications, I often came across individuals having had personal contacts with Ambedkar in person, whose political headquarters and residence in Delhi—where he remained after quitting the Nehru Cabinet in 1951—attracted many Punjabi-educated Dalits living in Delhi, whether students or government employees.
- 13 Beside a majority of illiterate peasants, Dalit immigration thus attracted these upwardly mobile, educated men amongst whom the Ambedkarite movement recruited its cadres. Although the reserved white-collar jobs in the administration that were accessible to them were relatively prestigious and enabled them to rise above poverty, the comparatively higher wages in the UK proved attractive considering the expectations for economic support by their poor families (Interview Sant Ram BA, Wolverhampton, April 16, 2007). Sat Pal Muman thus explained to me that his father,

Darshan Sarhali, who was among the first Ambedkarites to reach Britain, hailed from a relatively well-off family by Dalit standards. He was the son of a traditional council headman, who was well educated in English and Urdu. Before leaving, Sarhali was a government clerk at the ministry of Home Affairs in Delhi. He used to be the secretary of the Ambedkar Bhawan (the headquarters of the Republican Party of India [RPI] as well as of other organizations founded by Ambedkar) in Delhi. When he arrived in the UK in 1962, he settled in Handsworth where he worked at an industrial bakery. Bishan Dass, the future Mayor of Wolverhampton, is another example. He was from a very poor family of 10, but managed to complete higher education despite the many difficulties he describes (Bains 2016). He came to the UK in 1963, initially with the dream of pursuing his higher education, but had to renounce and work in a factory in order to sustain himself and support his family (Bains and Rawat 2017).

- 14 Both Bishan Dass and Sarhali were among the educated young Dalit men who founded the Republican Group of Great Britain (RGGB) in 1964. It was conceived as an overseas satellite of the RPI¹² (Email communication Sat Pal Muman, February 2021). The initial spark came from the RPI's large scale mobilization of December 1964–January 1965 in Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra. Conceived as a peaceful agitation, the movement asked for land distribution, implementation of a minimum wage, fulfilment of job quotas for Dalits, as well as the official recognition of Ambedkar's contribution to nation building. The agitators thus asked for Ambedkar's portrait to be set up in the Indian Parliament, alongside leaders of the nationalist movement. Mass arrests took place although no resistance was opposed, tactically following the model of the Gandhian satyagraha (Duncan 1979), despite Ambedkarism's hostility to Gandhism.
- 15 In his interview with Indian Anticaste activist V.B. Rawat, Bishan Dass recalled that "(t)his agitation in India was a turning point in my life. I talk (sic) to some friends, organized meetings, made some collection and sent some financial support to the Republic Party Punjab branch. Then following on from there we decided to form a Republic Group of Great Britain and increased our membership all over England. I acted as convener, secretary and chair for the group for several years. In those days, there were no computers, IT, telephone lines and typewriters. I used to send dozens handwritten notices for the meeting and used to get leaflets cyclostyled at the Labour Party offices. The main purpose of the Group was to provide some financial and moral support to the Republican Party and people working for Baba Sahib's mission in India" (Bains and Rawat 2017).
- 16 In this early phase, the immigrants still planned to accumulate income for a few years and go back to India. Supporting the movement in Punjab in order to fight casteism, while working towards economic improvement of their families by sending money home were two concomitant strategies to look after their own futures. Despite the preponderance of these exogenous aims, there were also inevitably more immediate, local and pragmatic aspects to this engagement that were tied up with immigrant sociability. Eva-Maria Hardtmann notes that the Ambedkarites established their ideological influence by helping other Dalits solve their housing and work problems, as well as access social services: "The help was given for free and in this way the informal networks grew and developed. In these contacts the knowledge about Ambedkar was transmitted" (Hardtmann 2003:164). Bishan Dass recalls that there was also the pleasure to gather in the evenings in pubs and engage in passionate political discussions on topics "such as Indian politics, religious, social and community matters.

Often discussion and arguments fuelled by alcohol used to become more interesting and tense” (Bains 2016:45).

- 17 In 1965, L.R. Balley, a popular Punjabi leader of the RPI, made a six-month-long visit to the UK, where his own brother had settled in Aldershot two years before. In his hometown of Jalandhar, Balley launched an Ambedkarite monthly, *Bheem Patrika*, in 1958 (originally in Urdu, later on published simultaneously in Hindi, Punjabi and English), as well as a publishing house, *Bheem Patrika Publications*, in 1963. Its first publications were the edited volumes of the Ambedkar speeches (whose first volume, edited by the Delhi-based lawyer Bhagwan Das, appeared in 1963 [Das 1963]).¹³ When I visited him in Punjab, L.R. Balley told me that the purpose of his visit to Britain had been that of “organizing and inspiring” UK Dalits. He described them as “raw hands” who were “committed and practical” and who organized several public meetings for him to engage with the Dalit immigrants (Interview with L.R. Balley, Jalandhar, July 11, 2006). His oratorical skills and the circulation of his publications fulfilled a local demand by homesick, outward looking immigrants. Chanan Chahal, who joined his father in Bedford in 1963 when he was 15 and who later on became one of the pillars and among the best Dalit orators in the UK, evoked his admiration for Balley’s speeches and writings and their ability to reach emotionally ordinary people like himself. Speaking about his first years in Britain, he explained to me during a long recorded interview that took place in his car in a parking lot in Wolverhampton, that although his father brought him to the UK with the hopes he would get well educated, his experience in school was a total failure since he did not speak a word of English: “I wasn’t getting anywhere because I couldn’t understand anything of what’s going on. ... There was a couple of kids that was so jokative (sic) and they laughed all the time and pointing at me you know?” He thus left school at 16, leaving his father bitterly disappointed (Interview Chanan Chahal, Wolverhampton April 15, 2007).¹⁴ Thereafter he took a part-time job in Bedford’s local brick industry where his father also worked, before learning photography as an apprentice thanks to the City and Guild’s program of vocational training. He soon became self-employed as a photographer in Bedford, processing the pictures in his basement and selling them in the community. He became self-educated through the movement’s literature that circulated in Bedford. *Bheem Patrika*’s publications played a major role, especially the volumes of Ambedkar’s speeches which “more or less made our education” (Interview Chanan Chahal, Wolverhampton April 15, 2007).
- 18 Having established how the movement was imported in the UK in the 1960s, I will now show how it started adapting itself and affirming its autonomy from the Indian Ambedkarite organizations in the context of the immigrants’ permanent settlement.

Settled Ambedkarites’ encounters with Caste and Race

- 19 The UK’s Ambedkarite movement grew from a handful of supporters in the early 1960s to several hundred in the mid-1960s (Hardtmann 2003). While it was meant to support the movement back home, in India the RPI leadership became divided on the question of political alliances with the Congress (Duncan 1979), thus complicating the task for its UK supporters. The Punjabi leader of the RPI, L.R. Balley, opposed these electoral alliances, favoring instead mass agitations (Juergensmeyer 1982). He therefore chose to

distance himself from electoral politics and to devote himself to his journalistic and publishing activities at Bheem Patrika as a way to spread political consciousness (Juergensmeyer 1982:166). According to Bishan Dass, the infighting of Indian factions took over in the overseas group (RGGB), which “gradually weakened and had to be abandoned” (Bains and Rawat 2017). However, the UK Ambedkarites started realizing that they did not need directives from India to remain politically active on behalf of Dalits from the UK. A new self-confidence was built on the significant success of the first Ambedkarite public demonstration in London in July 1969, where 600 to 700 people according to Chahal—ten times more according to Bains (2016)—marched from Hyde Park towards the Indian High Commission (India House). They denounced the public statement made by the Shankaracharya (prominent religious authority in Hinduism) of Puri’s Jagannath Temple (one of the major Hindu temples, situated in the state of Orissa), in which he publicly justified untouchability. Chahal remembered this London demonstration as a decisive step in the UK Ambedkarite movement, whereby the Anticaste struggle obtained some public visibility outside India for the first time.

- 20 This new-found autonomy accompanied a structural change and a shift of focus of the immigrants who started bringing their families in order to settle in the UK in the late 1960s. Once the British government had adopted its first restriction measures, South Asian immigrants felt the urge to consolidate their presence, inviting their families to join them as per the new criteria for visa dispensations. Incidentally, this is also the moment when independent local Ambedkarite committees were formed, like the Ambedkar Memorial Committee, formed during a meeting in a Wolverhampton pub in July 1969 (Interview D.R. Jassal, April 16, 2007, Wolverhampton). S.L. Ginda, who joined his father when he was 14 in Wolverhampton and later on became a bus driver, recalled that this group of young Ambedkarites was critical of the Indian RPI leadership of the domination of Delhi-based Dalit government officers on the organizations founded by Ambedkar. To demarcate themselves, they focused on the Buddhist approach favored by Ambedkar at the end of his life to complement the RPI’s electoral strategy.¹⁵ The Indian leadership avoided this religious dimension and preferred to remain secular because of the drive to mobilize Hindu Dalits. Navayana Buddhism thus came to be understood by the UK-based Ambedkarites as a purer form of commitment to Ambedkar’s legacy, as opposed to an electoral approach that carried with it ideological compromises. In addition to distributing Hindi and Punjabi Anticaste literature in the local Dalit communities in Britain, the Ambedkar Memorial Committee also published and distributed Ambedkar’s English literature “among the Universities, Libraries and prominent individuals throughout the world” (Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Committee of Great Britain 1972). Ceremonies to commemorate Ambedkar’s struggles became the main focus of these committees, thus planting the seeds of international recognition for their great man who remained totally unknown in the West. The Ambedkar Memorial Committee thus prides itself on having initiated the official celebration of Ambedkar’s birthday by the Indian High Commissioner at India House in London on April 14, 1970 and, two years later, on donating his portrait to the London School of Economics, where he had studied (Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Committee of Great Britain 1972). The India House event was repeated each year as a political “pilgrimage” to London in which the different Dalit communities participated regardless of their sectarian identities and their sub-castes (Interview D. Jassal and S.L. Ginda, April 16, 2007, Wolverhampton).

- 21 Following suit in 1972, the Bheem Association (after Ambedkar's first name) was formed in Bedford "to bring awareness of the problems of Untouchables amongst Europeans in general and Indians in particular" (ACCCUK vol. 3:131). It focused on printing and distributing Punjabi translations of Ambedkar and republishing other Punjabi texts from Balley's Bheem Patrika publications (ACCCUK vol. 3:131). Likewise, the Ambedkar International Mission was founded in London in 1974 at the initiative of Shyam Khobragade, the brother of Barrister D. Khobragade, an RPI leader from Maharashtra. Shyam's intent was to promote his brother's party, the RPI (Khobragade) internationally (email communication Sat Pal Muman, June 2021).¹⁶ The Ambedkar International Mission managed to get a portrait of Dr. Ambedkar set up permanently at the Indian High Commission, London, in 1978 (email communication Sat Pal Muman, February 2021).
- 22 Some sort of emulation was thus created between these local committees that had similar activities, although each one sought to distinguish itself from the others and innovate in some way. For example, in addition to these local initiatives that mostly aimed to commemorate Ambedkar and to inscribe the movement's presence in Britain, some political experiments with British local elections also took place. In 1971, 2 candidates stood for the local elections in Southall with RGGB investitures and "received 265 out of 42,000 votes cast" (Juergensmeyer 1982:249 n12). In 1976, Chanan Chahal stood for the local elections in Bedford borough as an RGGB candidate, whose results are not mentioned (ACCCUK 1992 vol.4). In 1973, Bishan Dass, the former secretary of the RGGB (Bains 2016), stood for local borough elections, but as a Labour Party nominee, thus entering the field of mainstream politics. Although he lost, he eventually won the next election in 1975 and became a councilor. In his autobiography, he underlines that besides himself, at that time there were only two other non-white councilors in the UK. His decision to stand for the elections was motivated by the urge to fight racism (Bains 2016). At the Bilston factory where he worked, only white people were promoted and even trade unions turned a deaf ear to immigrants. He had previously joined the Anti-Nazi league and took his decision to join the Labour Party in 1968 after hearing Enoch Powell's popular speech "Rivers of blood," which denounced the taking over of entire towns by Commonwealth immigrants and asked for remigration. Echoing Sayad's remark in the introduction of this article on the importance of combatting racism by taking an active part in the political process, Bishan Dass observed that standing for election "was not just about winning a council seat but the beginning of a new era in the history of this country. The ethnic minorities who were thinking of themselves as being aliens in this wonderland suddenly started realizing that they had equal rights here" (Bains 2016:48). He presents his involvement in the Labour Party as congruent with his Ambedkarite commitment, recalling that the Labour Party granted Independence to India and stood for socialism and racial equality, which he parallels with the fight against Caste in India (Bains 2016; Bains and Rawat 2017). His motivation was to strike a blow both against racism within the Labour Party, as well as against Indian casteism, which he started encountering personally in the late 1970s. His autobiography indeed reveals how Race and Caste became intricate realities in the racially mixed localities where British Indians settled, thus highlighting the peculiarity of the Dalits' experience of British multicultural society, where their experience of discrimination was two-fold. The first casteist incident he recalls happened in 1978, three years after he became elected as councilor.¹⁷ The unacceptability of a Dalit's upward mobility to upper caste Jats once again came to the

fore and spoilt his campaign to renew his mandate as a councilor during the 1979 municipal elections. Some Jat Communists from the Indian Workers Association (IWA) who “felt unable to accept a candidate who belonged to a scheduled caste” (Bains 2016:59), had fielded their own candidate (the president of the IWA himself) against him, actively campaigned against him and even indulged in abuses, rumors, threats and light physical violence (his supporters’ cars were stoned by children). In the next council elections of 1983, the IWA president’s maneuvers to deselect him were reversed by the Labour Party and eventually condemned by the IWA that disowned its president, thus forcing him to apologize. The year after, however, white racism took over to prevent his due nomination as mayor, which he denounced publicly as “underlying racial prejudice within the Labour group” (Bains 2016:65), a statement of racism that hit the front page in the local press. He eventually achieved mayorship of Wolverhampton in the year 1986–87. Having become the mayor of this large town, he made a point to highlight his Ambedkarite commitments and secular credentials at every possible occasion. At the mayor-making ceremony, he concluded his speech by recalling his commitments to “the teachings of my guru Dr. Ambedkar who struggled so hard for the poor and deprived people of India, the struggle of the trade union movement and the policies of the Labour Party. All these seem to me to point in the same direction, the promotion of equality, liberty and fraternity” (Bains 2016:86). Two months later, he ostensibly refused to perform the civic Sunday ceremony in the premises of the Anglican church that traditionally follows the mayor’s nomination. A compromise was reached with the Anglican church, whereby the event was organized at the Civic Hall in presence of the different religious and civil representatives (including the Anglican bishop). In his speech, Bishan Dass justified this step as a necessary evolution in order to come to terms with the multiracial reality of the town as well as to learn from history and to prevent the formation in Britain of racist regimes like Nazism and Apartheid (Bains 2016).

- 23 He eventually managed to overcome the racist prejudices and to gain acceptance from “all the different communities living here in Wolverhampton” (Bains and Rawat 2017). However, casteist prejudices against him and his “wife Ram Piari who took over the gracious role of the Mayoress” (Bains and Rawat 2017) continued in the Sikh Gurdwaras or “temples,” as he inadvertently calls them (Bhushan and Dass 2017). Interestingly therefore, for a Dalit, these religious communitarian spaces became the place where caste hatred could manifest itself, notwithstanding his official social position.
- 24 Bishan Dass’ breakthrough in mainstream politics however remained an exceptional achievement. Although this showcased the possibility for Ambedkarism to seek acceptability as part of the British political landscape, in reality the movement continued to remain confined to a relatively small and marginal Dalit ideological circle even within the UK Dalit community. In the following two sections, I will show that, while remaining divided, Ambedkarites continued to advocate a political conception of Dalit immigrants both as international actors and as active citizens in the British multicultural society.

The FABO UK: Working for Ambedkar's international recognition

- 25 In India, the Ambedkarite movement's fragmentation that started in the second half of the 1960s with the split of the RPI became a permanent feature. The Dalit Panthers were formed in 1972 by young Dalit writers and students in Maharashtra as a revolt against the RPI leadership's compromises and lack of efficacy. However, while promoting a proletarian model of Dalit political consciousness based on street politics and dismissing electoral politics, they themselves became divided on ideological issues and personal rivalries within two years of their formation (Mendelsohn and Vicziani 1998). The movement of government employees that was launched simultaneously by Kanshi Ram in the early 1970s, which gave birth to the Bahujan Samaj Party in 1984 (Jaoul 2021[forthcoming]), itself took an aggressive stand towards both the RPI and the Panthers. Kanshi Ram, a Ravidasi from Punjab (Mendelsohn and Vicziani 1998) developed a strong base among Dalit government employees across former Ambedkarite strongholds including in his home state (Chandra 2000). This elicited hostile reactions from the Punjabi leader L.R. Balley, which in turn led to tensions in the UK between his followers and Kanshi Ram's. In order to save their movement from these divisions, UK Ambedkarites were therefore prompted to distance themselves from Indian politics and to pursue their own path. In a previous article in French, I have shown how the Ambedkarite model of a politically engaged subaltern elite thus became readapted into a model of a politically active Dalit diaspora whose role was mainly conceived of as a transnational pressure group meant to foster international awareness on caste issues (Jaoul 2006a).
- 26 The large demonstration organized in London in 1977, again from Hyde Park to India House, to protest events of caste violence in India, illustrates this new orientation. It differed from the one organized in 1969 which sought to attract the attention of the Indian authorities. This time, the organizers submitted a memorandum asking the British government to take sides, thus acting as a transnational pressure group seeking to influence the British government's diplomatic relations with India. Although their demand was refused by the British government with the justification that this was an internal matter in which they could not interfere, the demonstration was a success in terms of mobilization and visibility according to one of the organizers (Interview Chanan Chahal, Wolverhampton, April 15, 2007). In this way, mobilization focused on an international aim proved to be efficient for engaging the British Dalit communities.
- 27 A major inspiration behind the trans-nationalization of the movement was Bhagwan Das (1927–2010), a Delhi-based lawyer, publisher and writer who became Ambedkar's research assistant during the last years of his life. Associated with Balley's Bheem Patrika publications for a time, he left after publishing the first two volumes of *Thus Spoke Ambedkar*. He founded the Ambedkar Mission Society in 1968 in Delhi with the aim of bringing some uniformity and coherence to a scattered movement (Juegensmeyer 1982). In 1970, Das travelled to Kyoto (Japan) for the World Conference of Religions for Peace where he highlighted the plight of Dalits. One of his aims was to help coordinate Ambedkarites living abroad (Darapuri 2010, Shura Dara Puri email communication, February 2021). In 1983, Das spent three weeks in Bedford while on his way to Geneva to be auditioned on caste violence against Dalits in India by the UN's Sub-Commission on Human Rights (Dara Puri 2016). His Geneva trip was financed by

Bedford's Bheem Association. During this visit, "he suggested us to change the name to Ambedkar Mission Society to become a part of an international mission of Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar" (Kumar and Rawat 2017). As Chahal, who was also part of this group, recalled, its specific aim was "to liaise with the Ambedkarite movement throughout the world" (Interview with Chanan Chahal, Wolverhampton, April 15, 2007).

- 28 The Ambedkar Buddhist Council UK (ABC UK) was set up in 1982 as a first attempt to federate local Ambedkarite committees in the UK to speak with one voice and gain international credibility (Email communication Sat Pal Muman, March 2021). However, the underlying political rivalries between K. Ram's and L.R. Balley's supporters surfaced through these initiatives.¹⁸
- 29 In 1985, a second similar attempt at federation took place in view of commemorating the Ambedkar centenary in 1991: the Federation of Ambedkarite and Buddhist Organisations of the UK (FABO UK) was founded in Southall at the initiative of the Ambedkar International Mission (Interview Chanan Chahal April 15, 2007). In 1986, the ABC (UK) eventually merged with the FABO UK at a meeting held under the chairmanship of an Indian guest, Sohan Lal Shastri. As a longtime associate of Ambedkar and a writer (Email communication with S. Anand, April 2021), Shastri commanded sufficient moral authority to bring the two groups together.¹⁹ Working on the basis of the concrete, pragmatic agenda of Ambedkar's centenary, and avoiding as much as possible the partisan issues that easily degenerated into bitter and at times even violent conflict, they started donating books, portraits and busts of Ambedkar to the different institutions where he studied in London (London School of Economics and Gray's Inn) (Jaoul 2006a).

Figure 1



Bhagwan Dass speaking at the Grand Birthday Centenary Celebrations at the Commonwealth Hall (London), April 14th 1991. Chanan Chahal is sitting beside him.

- 30 The Ambedkar centenary celebrations, organized on a grand scale in the presence of British officials, were occasions to recall Ambedkar's adherence to political liberalism and his democratic credentials, thereby highlighting the movement's compatibility with the liberal, democratic values espoused by the Western world. In contrast with Bishan Dass who talked of Ambedkar's socialism to underline his compatibility with the Labour Party when he became Mayor in 1986, a few years later the FABO UK's discourse put the emphasis on Ambedkar as a champion of democracy, thus fitting into the post-1989 ideological scenario of the so-called victory of the west's liberal politics over socialism.
- 31 The four commemorative volumes of the Ambedkar centenary published by the Ambedkar Centenary Celebration Committee (a FABO UK special committee) between 1989 and 1992 begin with letters of support from Indian and British politicians and government officials, such as prime ministers John Major and Narasimha Rao. These displays of official support are followed by letters from public figures of the international establishment from both the "first" and the "third" world, ranging from Queen Elizabeth II to Nelson Mandela, Rajiv Gandhi, V.P. Singh, Margaret Thatcher and George Bush. Through these official tributes that celebrated him both as a statesman and a liberator of the oppressed, Ambedkar's international stature was posthumously performed.
- 32 The "international directory of who's who" of the Ambedkarite movement in India and abroad (volumes 3 and 4, 1991 and 1992) betrays the elitism that foregrounded the movement's search for international respectability through consolidation of its social capital. In volume 4, an introductory note asked "those who deserve to be included in the directory to send their bio-data" in order "to record distinguished Ambedkarites living in different parts of the world with considerable success in their profession" (ACCC 1992:127). The General Secretary of FABO UK, a wealthy manufacturer and exporter in the shoe business, explained to me that this part of the publication was of special importance to him and that he put considerable efforts into it (Interview with FABO UK president, Southall, December 2005).²⁰
- 33 Later in the 1990s, while the preparations for the World Conference Against Racism to be held in 2001 in Durban became the order of the day, the FABO UK receded into the background as professional NGOs and human rights organizations took over. In Europe, the campaign was organized by the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN), founded in 2000 in Denmark mostly by European Christian NGOs working with Dalits in South India. Their aim was to organize human rights advocacy campaigns and lobby on behalf of Dalits at the level of the United Nations and the European Union.²¹ The director of the UK branch, the DSN UK, was Revd David Haslam, a Methodist Minister who earlier took part in the mobilizations against Apartheid, and Jeremy Corbyn (the Left leader of the Labour Party) became its chairman. Although he saw these collaborations with non-Dalit actors of transnational civil society as fruitful, Chanan Chahal told me he disliked the way these campaigns' rhetorics of Human rights depoliticized the caste issue. In particular, he deplored their use of the word Dalit in a way which he found charitable and pitiful, betraying the spirit of Dalit pride. He complained about the lack of means at the disposal of the self-financed Ambedkarite movement, which made it difficult to compete with these professional organizations (Interview Chanan Chahal, Wolverhampton April 15, 2007). Ambedkarites thus felt somehow put down as dominated actors in the field of transnational activism and even

dispossessed to some extent from their struggle by non-Dalit, white, professional actors. However, a group of five UK Ambedkarites went to Durban, at the urging of Balram Sampla, one of the UK Ambedkarite movement's oldest activists.²²

- 34 As in the case of the 1977 demonstration, these efforts to participate in this international lobbying enabled the Ambedkarites achieve some recognition within their communities as international spokespersons for Dalits. This thus helped them reaffirm their leadership as international representatives of the global Dalit community, while the religious and caste-based Dalit organizations took over the Dalit communities' domestic leadership, establishing their influence in the UK's Indian localities, as the next section will now show.

Figure 2



London joint demonstration against Dalit massacre in Kumher village (Rajasthan), June 1992.

Figure 3



London joint demonstration against Dalit massacre in Kumher village (Rajasthan), June 1992. On the left, Chanan Chahal is speaking on the microphone. Dr. Chaman Lal Mamman (Ambedkar Memorial Committee, Wolvehampton) is holding the megaphone. Sat Pal Muman is seen on the right in the background, under the umbrella.

The British manufacture of caste: religious-based assertion in a multicultural set up

- 35 Although both seek to improve the social condition of Dalits, the Ambedkarite project ideologically exceeds the notion of “Dalit assertion”. Ambedkarism aims to abolish castes in a radical and systemic way (Ambedkar [1936] 2014). Ambedkar insisted that caste abolition necessarily implied a religious revolution. This meant substituting Hinduism, which he denounced as the religious matrix of caste, with Buddhism, which he understood as India’s enlightened philosophy, and as the ancient cultural foundations on which a modern politics of collective emancipation could be built for India.
- 36 Contrasting with this revolutionary project, Dalit assertion is a form of subaltern caste assertion that stakes out a claim to a better place for Dalits in mainstream social, political and Hindu religious life, generally on the basis of Hinduized *jati* (or “caste”) identities and sectarian movements. However, from a factual point of view, the Ambedkarite movement and Dalit caste assertion have often intersected and fed into one another.²³ The process of Dalit assertion preceded Ambedkarism and initially took a radical turn with the appearance of regional Dalit movements in the 1920s. In Punjab, the Ad Dharm movement was at first supported by the two main Dalit caste groups (Chooras and Chamars, although the latter, in larger numbers, were the main supporters). These two castes became divided on sectarian lines in the mid-1930s between the Ravidasi Chamars and the Chooras whose Valmiki sectarian identity emerged in the 1930s under the influence of high caste reformers opposed to

untouchability but defending the Hindu caste system (Prashad 2000). This caste/sectarian division between Chooras and Chamars also had political consequences, with the Valmikis/Chooras supporting Gandhian reformism and the Congress, while the Ravidasi/Chamar leaders accepted Ambedkar's leadership.

- 37 In the multicultural system of local governmentality that was put in place in the UK once the immigrants started settling permanently, the faith-based organizations of South Asian immigrants flourished. The religious-based organizations of both the Ravidasis and the Valmikis started getting incentives to build Temples in their localities, to the detriment of the Ambedkarite ideology's influence within these communities. Baumann's ethnographic account of the construction of the Southall Ravidasi Temple in 1989 highlights the social and political significance of such a religious event in Southall.

Two years later, one could see, in the political geography of Southall town and its London Borough of Ealing, a firm recognition of a new ethno-religious community. "The Ravidasis" had become, in the words of a local councilor, "a community force to be reckoned with." Having once lived beyond the margins of local political society, as invisible as they had been "untouchable," the newly congregationalized Ravidasi community was now firmly expected to make its voice heard in all civic political contestations (Baumann 1998:272).

- 38 The prestigious Ravidasi building in Southall hence proved that Dalits could organize and assert themselves on a Caste and sectarian basis and get recognition in British society's multicultural ghettos.
- 39 Although the religious bias of multiculturalism was not conducive to the Ambedkarite emphasis on political organization, they did not, however, abandon the struggle for local influence. Following suit, in 1993, an Ambedkar Center thus also came up in Southall. Much more modest in size and appearance, it was set up in an ordinary house jointly purchased by two members of the FABO UK (H.L. Virdee and the president who preferred to remain anonymous). They were conscious of the strategic importance of establishing Ambedkar's ideological presence in Southall, a major South Asian center in the UK. Revelatory of the Ambedkarites' attempt to keep a foothold in the religious domain, the house has a Buddh Vihar (Buddhist prayer hall) in the basement, besides a guest room and a library that can also accommodate people on mattresses at night. During my stays in Southall, I was offered accommodation there, sharing daily life with Indian visitors on their way to/from Heathrow airport.
- 40 Moving through Southall, I also spent a few evenings chatting with the committee members of the Ravidasi Temple (its official designation) that Baumann mentioned, a large, well designed white structure. Despite this architectural spectacle of affluence, the resurfacing of caste inequalities among British Indians came up spontaneously during discussions with the temple committee members. Like the activists at the Ambedkar center where I stayed, those who sat in the office of the Temple in the evenings did relatively well, mostly by turning to self-employment and opening local stores in the wake of the industrial decline of the 1970s. Although they felt they did better than South Asian Muslims, they however alleged that on the whole, Dalits did comparatively less well than Jats and high-caste Hindus, many of whom now enjoyed luxurious lifestyles and flourishing businesses. They also observed that, among these higher castes, the second generation who were born in UK mostly went into prestigious professions like medicine and the law. These perceived differences were thus articulated along religious and Caste lines and were compared with these communities'

economic backgrounds in Punjab. Their explanation for the Dalits' poorer performance, compared to the Jats' was that being poorer in Punjab, their families' expectations for remittances represented a heavier burden that limited their own investment capacities in the UK.

- 41 The resurgence of caste distinctions among Punjabi immigrants in the 1970s is acknowledged by scholars of South Asian immigration (Ballard 1994; Dhanda 2013; Juergensmeyer 1982; Nesbitt 1994; Vertovec 1998). Chanan Chahal's report on caste, published jointly by the FABO UK and the DSN in 2009 (the last year of his life), provides an indigenous Anticaste perspective, which highlights the role played by religion in this process. After recalling the period of inter-caste solidarities between single men, he explains that

the families began to arrive and so did the caste consciousness. The arrival of the priests²⁴ was the final blow to the newly found caste unity. The priests' intervention in the caste issues made it impossible for the lower castes to worship under the same roof. There was no picketing at the doors of these religious places, nor any physical action to throw out the lower castes. But subtle hints were dropped, to make lower caste people conscious of their inferior or lowly status. Continued harassment and mental torture of such kind compelled these people to move out and establish their own places of worship, which have resulted in as many places of worship as there are castes in the area. (Chahal 2009:41)

- 42 The first generation of inter-caste religious buildings that came up in the 1960s were individual houses, sheds or small churches refurbished into Indian places of worship thanks to the voluntary labor (*seva*) of the Sikh community, irrespective of caste. Getting involved in these works became a source of social standing for individuals. The steering committees thus became coveted centers of power, generating rivalries and splits mostly based on Caste (Ballard 1994). In the 1970s, Hindu and Sikh "twice migrants"²⁵ accelerated these dynamics of casteification of social life in British Indian localities. These relatively prosperous and socially conservative immigrants who joined their respective communities in the UK invested in new Temples and Gurdwaras (Bhachu 1985). Their arrival thus changed the local landscape not only architecturally but also socially by fueling the congregational/caste dynamics that had already begun to form. As Ambedkarite activist Sat Pal Muman pointed out, their conservative influence was detrimental to the Ambedkarites, to the benefit of Ravidasi and Valmiki religious organizations (Email communication Sat Pal Muman, March 2021).
- 43 For instance, at the initiative of an affluent family recently arrived from Kenya, Valmikis built their own Temple in Coventry in 1978—the first Valmiki temple in the UK (Email communication with Eleanor Nesbitt, April 2021). Previously, the Valmikis had been prohibited from using kitchen utensils in the local Gurdwara. Nesbitt makes the point that the caste pride associated with these religious structures helped Dalits find a psychological compensation both for white racism and for casteism, which affected them specifically as Dalits (Nesbitt 1994).
- 44 Several hypotheses can be made regarding the continuing consolidation of Caste in British society. I already highlighted the role of two subsequent streams of immigrants (the families who joined them, followed by the "twice migrants" from East Africa) that reorganized social life in Indian localities in the UK around caste solidarities and identities after a period of apparent castelessness in the early 1960s.²⁶ However, as against a culturalist view that explains the existence of caste in Britain as a mere import of anthropological features carried with them by the immigrants (Ballard 1994),

there are also British institutional factors at play. Baumann described the resurgence of Caste as a local process “intimately tied” (Baumann 1998:271) to the local administrations’ approach to South Asian immigrants. His study of Southall from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s highlights the mediations between elected councilors and caste-based religious structures channeling “public resources of the greatest political and economic importance” (Baumann 1998:270) like subsidized housing, distribution of public funds to volunteer organizations, religious congregations, etc. Confirming these findings, John Zavos notes the enrolment of these religious organizations in the process of urban renovation in the early 1990s (Zavos 2009), while Steven Vertovec mentions their regular inclusion “in local government consultations about community relations matters” (Vertovec 1998:170–71). In December 2005, spending time with the board members of the Southall Ravidasi Temple, I myself was able to witness their mediations with the local administrations, providing applications to their parishioners, helping them to fill them out, writing letters of support testifying to their being good parishioners for admission in faith-based schools, etc. These different elements thus all point to the impact of these caste-based religious bodies on the local lives of British Indian citizens.

The marginalization of the Ambedkarites in the religious field

- 45 The Ambedkarites initially preferred to remain secular in order to avoid any religious contention with their respective caste communities. The popularity of Ravidasi and Valmiki religious structures among settled Dalits therefore placed them on a difficult footing. In comparison with these religious centers that offer local communities religious services, a source of pride, as well intermediation with the local administration and its resources, the Ambedkarites had little to offer to the families of settled immigrants, apart from political sociability. The stakes were especially important in the larger Ravidasi community, to which most of the Ambedkarites belonged. As observed by Juergensmeyer, some of them wished to remain part of the Ravidasi structures for reasons of strategy, in order to influence their community from the inside. Juergensmeyer highlighted the tensions that sprang from this strategy, even leading to instances of exclusion of the Ambedkarites (Juergensmeyer 1982). Chanan Chahal’s own experience in Bedford as an Ambedkarite community leader of the Ravidasis is an example. Taking the lead in the creation of a Ravidas Bhawan (Ravidas House) in 1973, he however insisted on giving a secular content to this community center, which he purposely refused to name “Ravidas Gurdwara” or “temple” to avoid any religious connotation. However, his attempt to use it for Ambedkarite meetings was opposed by the *Granthis* (Sikh learned men officiating in Gurdwaras, whom he calls as priests and pujaris), who started being brought from India on popular demand and soon started imposing their control over the premises.

At that time we had given a pledge that we’ll create debates, we’ll create regular discussions, and have so much more. And when that place was established, because it was dominated by elderly people, they said “we want a religious place. Let’s put a Sikh Granth [religious book].” But once a pujari [Hindu ritual specialist] or priest came, when we talked about social issues, they’d object: “This is a place of worship, you should worship God here!” So I thought, we’re going in the wrong direction here. ... So I had to make a decision, whether to go with the flow and keep that

respectability and the leadership or follow the conscience and move away. So we left that and moved to Buddhist movement full-fledged.²⁷ (Interview Chanan Chahal, Wolverhampton April 15, 2007)

- 46 Distancing themselves from the beginning from these Ravidasi organizations, a small group of committed Ambedkarites decided to stick to Navayana Buddhism.²⁸ They had already taken *diksha* (Buddhist initiation) in Punjab before migrating to the UK. However, in Punjab the movement did not pick up. As the president of the Punjab unit of the Bharatya Bauddh Mahasabha launched by Ambedkar, explained to me, a *diksha* ceremony took place in 1959 in Chak Hakim village (Phagwara district), where hundreds of people were initiated. But most of those who took *diksha* and stayed there eventually went back to the Ravidasi fold, while those who migrated aimed to restart the movement from Britain (Interview Sagli Ram Bauddh, Siddharth Nagar, Jhalandar, July 11, 2006).²⁹ There, the first *diksha* took place on the occasion of the launching of the Ambedkar Buddhist Society in Birmingham in 1973 (Ratan Lal Sampla, ACCCUK vol. 4). Thus, Navayana Buddhism in the UK couldn't match the dynamism of the Ravidasi temples and remained confined to a small number of ideologically committed Ambedkarite families.
- 47 In the 2000s, the FABO UK activists started contemplating restarting the Navayana movement, this time from Punjab. This represented an uphill task considering the Ravidasi sect's impressive development thanks to the large remittances of the Ravidasi diaspora in the UK (Juergensmeyer 1982), as well as relatively well-off communities in Canada, the USA, Australia, etc. (Singh 2012). Presenting itself as "a milestone in the revival of Buddhist movement in Punjab" (Ven. Maharjan and Birdi 2006:5), the Punjab Buddhist Society (PBS) UK was founded by members of the FABO UK in Wolverhampton in March 2003. It worked tirelessly towards the construction of a monumental Buddh Vihar close to Ludhiana, where one of them donated his land (Interview Chanan Chahal, Wolverhampton April 15, 2007). Following the defection of an important contributor, an even larger project was subsequently formed by Wolverhampton's Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Committee in emulation. Hence, in October 2006, two similar projects were inaugurated in Punjab on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Ambedkar's *diksha*. Several UK Ambedkarite activists put considerable amounts from their personal savings into these projects, in order to cover some unexpected additional costs and to meet the deadlines.
- 48 Harbans Lal Virdee, an early adept of Buddhism in the UK and a prominent activist of the FABO UK who co-founded the Ambedkar center of Southall in 1993, gave me an idea of what this new focus on Buddhist proselytism in Punjab could mean for activists of his generation. Like many others, he left his village to join his father as a teenager. He now occupied a position as supervisor in a factory. Anticipating his coming retirement, he planned to fully dedicate his time to Buddhist proselytism in Punjab. Rather than settle there permanently, he planned to share his time between India and England, where his family lived (Interview H.L. Virdee, December 2005, Southall). As he explained this, a man in his thirties who had listened to our conversation in Southall's Ambedkar center commented with a strong cockney accent "we'd all like to do that!", thus echoing the "6 months here /6 months there mantra" that symbolizes a life of achievement for retired Punjabi immigrants (Raj 2003:172, quoted in Zavos 2010:13). By giving a political twist to this shared ethos of Punjabi immigrants, the turn to Buddhism thus seemed to have something to do with the prospects of maintaining one's activism during retirement while seeking a religious consecration for their engaged lives.

- 49 Interestingly, it also implies a return to homeland politics, as a way of reverting to their initial aim of promoting Ambedkarism in Punjab. I will now turn to a political initiative of a radically different nature, which gave Ambedkarism a new lease on life in the realm of immigrant politics.

Fighting against Caste in the UK

- 50 Shifting radically from the focus on Caste in India, the caste discrimination taking place inside British Indian communities was reported for the first time in 2000 by Sat Pal Muman at a public Conference organized by Voice of Dalit International (VODI), a London based Dalit Christian NGO. Going against the common belief that caste feelings among Indian immigrants were bound to decrease with the passing of generations, his paper argued that Caste found a fertile ground in Britain and continued to negatively affect the lives of the second generation. It thus highlighted the constant public displays of Jat chauvinism in the British Indian media as a way of keeping caste consciousness alive among youngsters to the detriment of young British Dalits. Pointing to article 3(2) of the 1976 Race Relations Act that specifies that a racial group can be made up of sub-groups to which the law also applies, the paper argued for the first time for the penalization of caste discrimination in Britain. Considering that “no firm conclusion can be drawn as to whether Casteism is Racism,” it called for the adoption of a specific law: “Caste discrimination is likely to play a key role in the future as we move towards an ever-increasing Asian population in Britain. The British law will need to be brought into line with an emerging new social order in Britain” (Muman 2000).
- 51 With this aim, Sat Pal Muman founded Castewatch UK in 2003 along with two representatives from the main two Dalit communities in the UK: Pashori Lal, a Coventry-based Ravidasi working as a small entrepreneur in computer training; and Davinder Prasad, an IT engineer in a British-based American aerospace company, the former General Secretary of Coventry’s Valmiki Temple and a magistrate in a local court. As engineers from the first generation of immigrants, the three of them nevertheless spoke to the professional aspirations of the second generation. By representing the main three Punjabi Dalit religious affiliations in the UK (Ravidasis, Valmikis and Ambedkarite Buddhists), they also sought to transcend sectarian, caste and ideological differences. They therefore decided to leave any religious dimension outside of the organization.
- 52 Although sidelining the religious part of the Ambedkarite legacy, the campaign against Caste in the UK can therefore be viewed as an attempt to adapt Ambedkarism in order to pass it on to the second generation. Sat Pal Muman’s own trajectory as a software engineer who grew up in an atmosphere saturated by Ambedkarite activism goes in this direction. The son of Darshan Sarhali, whose role as one of the pioneers of the British Ambedkarite movement was described in the first section, Muman accompanied his father in his activism and became the secretary of the Ambedkar International Mission, a position he has uninterruptedly occupied since 1981. After joining his father in the UK in 1967 when he was 11, his schooling was facilitated by his good mastery of English, which he had already learned in India while staying with his educated uncles who were government employees in Delhi. Possessing this educational capital thus facilitated his professional mobility. After studying Physics at London University, he opted for

professional training in computer education in 1977 and travelled to the USA and Europe for employment before settling with his family in the UK. Thanks to his professional background and his mindset, Muman thus bridged the generations.

- 53 While taking the Anticaste struggle into the new domain of immigrant politics, he did not totally give up on the first generation activists' focus on the caste situation in India. In our meeting in London, he thus argued that "[i]f the British Parliament introduces a bill against caste, it will send shock waves in India" (Interview Sat Pal Muman, 10 December 2005, London), an argument that other first generation activists also took seriously (Bains and Rawat 2017, Chahal 2009).
- 54 As against the larger British public that treated Caste as an issue internal to the Indian minority that could thus be set aside as irrelevant to the public debate, the campaign pointed to the limits of the multiculturalist model, presenting Caste as a more general topic deserving public attention. While multiculturalism remained somehow consensual for decades (except for the far right), it started becoming a matter of public debate after the publication of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain's report (Farar 2021). The controversial report, published in 2000, insisted on the "formal declaration that the UK is a multicultural society," which also implied rethinking "the national story and national identity" and recognizing that "colonialism and Empire were integral to its making" (CMEB 2000).³⁰ Its understanding of British society as a "community of communities and a community of citizens—both a multicultural and a liberal society," (CMEB 2000)³¹ was the main point of contention. However, its insistence on a cultural understanding of Human Rights also raised specific concerns for the victims of caste. Thus, the ambiguous idea that "equality must be defined in a culturally sensitive way and applied in a discriminating but not discriminatory manner" (CMEB 2000)³² could seem to imply, without saying it outright, advocating tolerance of caste practices is one of those "legitimate ways of life" (CMEB 2000)³³ to be protected. A BBC Radio 4 broadcast on "The caste divide" in April 2003 explored these problems from the Dalits' point of view, eliciting strong reactions among British Indians, as well as among the broader British community. Using the opportunity, Castewatch UK was formally launched after this broadcast in order to take a stand in this debate. By elaborating on the cases that Radio 4 highlighted, it made the point that Caste was not just a private matter, but that it had an impact on the social and professional life of British Dalits. The personal story of Ram Lakha, a Ravidasi councilor of Coventry who was prevented from standing for the next municipal elections by Jat Labour Party members, thereby repeating Bishan Dass' story, became emblematic of the embeddedness of these hidden injustices in British institutions and public life.³⁴
- 55 Castewatch UK also raised educational concerns regarding the problematic ways in which school textbooks represented Caste when explaining British religious diversity to children. During my visit to Coventry in December 2005, Davinder Prasad and Pashori Lal showed me a school textbook that presented the caste system as a religiously sanctioned and therefore acceptable division of labor (Penney 1995). It referred to Dalits as "Harijans," an outdated term³⁵ that Gandhi popularized in the early 1930s in order to counter Ambedkar's mobilizations for Dalit rights.³⁶
- 56 One year after it was formed, Castewatch UK allied with the Dalit Solidarity Network UK to intervene in the public debate on the single Equality Bill, a new law project by which the Labour government planned to merge the different layers of anti-discriminatory legislation together into a single act (Hepple 2010). Although it initially

produced encouraging results, the campaign for the inclusion of caste in this new legislation was hampered by the counter-mobilization of British Hindu organizations. Setting the Labour Party's traditional reliance on the Indian electorate to the side, these Hindu organizations obtained the support of the Conservatives. In the UK's 2010 general elections, they made "covert appeals to the community, asking them to keep in mind these caste consultations while voting" (Purohit 2017) for the first time. Although adopted by British Parliament in April 2010 (just before the elections), the single Equality Act omitted caste discrimination, which was left to be dealt with at a later stage, using the absence of a proper definition of Caste as a pretext. However, the conservatives' electoral victory reversed the tide, which had until then been in favor of Dalits. As a result, the matter is still pending today, although in 2013 the British Parliament imposed a statutory duty on the government regarding this matter (Waughray 2018).³⁷

- 57 In his above mentioned 2000 speech, Muman had already anticipated this Hindu backlash. However, the virulence of the Hindu organizations' rhetoric and their clever reliance on postcolonial scholarship and colonial guilt in order to warn the British public against any intervention in the Indian community's so-called internal domain (Hindu council UK 2008, Hindu Forum of Britain 2008) was unexpected (Dhanda 2015).
- 58 The politicization of British Hindus that this campaign against caste legislation has revealed confirms Zavos' findings on the role of Hindu "umbrella organizations."³⁸ Seeking the British Hindu temples' mandates and "project(ing) themselves as public authorities on Hinduness" (Zavos 2009:882), these organizations became increasingly connected to Hindu right-wing ideology (Hindutva), whose influence in Britain "is subterranean, folded implicitly into the emerging 'faith relations' industry which is now such a feature of social policy formation" (Zavos 2010:18).
- 59 These organizations' hostile reaction against the legislation on caste revealed a newfound self-confidence of the largely Gujarati Hindu community's economic and electoral strength in the UK. David Mosse shows that by introducing the template of "Hindu hurt" in British public discourse, these organizations imported "an Indian Hindu-nationalist discourse into UK politics," therefore building discursive "connections to powerful allies in India" (2020:19). Their virulent campaign also revealed a clear intent to use their lobbying capacities to push for a more radical multicultural agenda in order to prevent any "intrusion" from the state into their caste sociability (Mosse 2020). The vigor of the backlash interestingly contrasts with the avoidance of any direct conflict with Dalits by Hindu Nationalists in India, where the Dalit vote is much more decisive and where Hindutva promotes the social integration of Dalits within Hinduism, notwithstanding the caste contradictions. These events thus revealed the contrast between the caste status quo in India and the UK. What they revealed is the relative political weakness of Dalits in Britain where they only represent a minority within a minority that can easily be overpowered by the numerically and economically significant Hindu community.³⁹
- 60 The Sikh Council's reaction was less aggressive (Takhar 2017). It mainly insisted that "the Sikh faith not ... be referenced in any definition of caste" (Sikh Council UK 2015). Disowning Indian constitutional values, it nevertheless advised the UK government to "not follow the example of India where caste discrimination legislation rather than eliminating caste discrimination has actually entrenched caste identities and discrimination further" (Sikh Council UK 2015). However, the pro-legislation Dalit

organizations and their supporters astutely reversed the Hindu Organizations' accusation of colonial intrusion by urging British legislators to catch up with the Indian Constitution's "guarantee of protection under law (as Ambedkar understood)" (Mosse 2020:22).

- 61 How did this controversy affect Ambedkarism in the UK? Although initially faithful to British liberal values, Ambedkarite activists came to realize that Multiculturalism might enforce the casteist worldview of their more powerful Hindu opponents. This campaign thus created a new common ground for British Dalits, while Ambedkar's relevance became reaffirmed. Although busy with their agenda of Buddhist revival in Punjab, Ambedkarite old timers thus felt compelled by the turn of things to give their full backing to the legalistic struggle started by Castewatch UK.
- 62 In his "response to the Hindu Council UK report on the denial of the caste system and its effects" published jointly by FABO UK and the Dalit Solidarity Network the year of his premature death, Chanan Chahal thus made clear that there were enough reasons to be apprehensive regarding the future of Caste in Britain:

Due to higher education and financial enhancement Indians are fast coming into positions of influence, they may soon be making recruitment and dismissal decisions in manufacturing, banking, local and national administration, health and social services, etc., and Caste prejudice will, most definitely raise its ugly head, if nothing is done to curtail it. Parliamentarians from the British governing and opposition parties together must ensure the people who migrated to Britain to escape Caste prejudice and victimization are protected from Caste atrocities. They have lived here from the early fifties, peacefully and honorably. They have been productive members of society. They have abided by the law and promoted equality, liberty and fraternity. The minority fundamentalists must not be allowed to undermine this process of integration or bring the evil of Caste from the Indian subcontinent to law-abiding Britain. (Chahal 2009:46)

Conclusion

- 63 In July 2007, Chanan Chahal invited me to stay at his home in Wales for a few days. He was keen to show me his personal library of Ambedkarite books in which he took pride, and so was I. He explained that one of the purposes for inviting me was to get tips from a professional scholar on how to write academically. He was strongly committed to writing a second book on caste—this time in English—, which would be more authoritative than his first Punjabi pamphlet. My guess is that due to the ultimate return of his illness (from which he thought to be cured, despite his daily visits to the hospital where I accompanied him), he did not have the time to end this book project, and that this text is what eventually came out as the report quoted above. One thing that Chahal often stressed during our conversations at the pub where we spent time in the evenings, discussing Ambedkarism passionately over a couple of pints, was that the Dalit struggle needed to accept all those who wished to struggle for equality and join hands with them. In its UK journey, it had successfully gained prestigious British supporters,⁴⁰ as Jeremy Corbyn's foreword to Chahal's report ultimately testified (Corbyn 2009).
- 64 The various initiatives tried out by UK Ambedkarites since the 1960s point to an effective laboratory for the global struggle against caste. The initial focus on homeland politics at times spilled over, thus scattering the seeds of Anticaste discourse in the UK's mainstream political domain. Bishan Dass' decision to join the Labour Party in the

1970s as a way to put a check on both the racist and casteist tendencies that Dalits encountered in Wolverhampton was a bold and successful first step in this direction. By insisting on “opening up differences within ‘difference’” (Dhanda 2015:34), the ongoing campaign against Caste now posits British Dalits as British citizens concerned with the evolution of British multicultural society. In this radically new perspective, the local meanings of the Ambedkarite ideology evolved, from a cultural importation that non-Indians could afford to ignore or at best treat as another exotic cultural item of Multicultural Britain, to local currency and political significance. What Ambedkarites and their allies have achieved is therefore to bring Ambedkar’s Anticaste perspective in the British public debate.

- 65 The participation of British and non-Dalit academics like Meena Dhanda, David Mosse, Eleanor Nesbitt and Annapurna Waughray as experts in the debate on Caste, reveals the process of mainstreaming Ambedkar, whose ideological influence was once limited to Dalit immigrant circles. Dalit organic intellectuals like Sat Pal Muman and Chanan Chahal also expanded their audience from vernacular Punjabi circles to the main public sphere, thus conveying the contestation against Caste to the larger public with their own voices. As against the Dalit social and religious assertion within the authorized communitarian spaces of multicultural society, this form of assertion becomes “political” in the sense of Jacques Rancière’s definition that maintains that “a political word is a word which poses a capacity to decide on the common ... a capacity to judge and decide common affairs” (Rancière 2009:200, translated from French). Against the restrictive idea of “political participation,” what matters from the point of view of political emancipation is the ability to make one’s political voice heard and taken into consideration even while speaking from the margins. In this sense, the UK Ambedkarites have lived up to the expectations of Ambedkar. Whether British society takes these marginal voices into account or not, this achievement seems important from the qualitative point of view of immigrant politics on which Sayad insisted.

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NOTES

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2. Since the Ad Dharm movement of the 1920s, which claimed an autochthonous Dalit identity and rejected upper-caste domination as a result of Aryan invasions, Punjab, and the Doaba region more specially, emerged as one of the important historical strongholds of Dalit assertion in North India (Juergensmeyer 1982). Under Ambedkar's leadership that took over the regional Dalit movements of North India in the 1940s, the slogan of caste abolition gave a universal scope and revolutionary dimension to the movement. The Ambedkarite intellectual D.C. Ahir noted that "(t)he Ad Dharm movement began to decline after 1935" and "was absorbed (sic) by the all India movement launched by Dr. Ambedkar. As he combined in himself the role of a social reformer, a political leader and a spiritual guide, the impact of his charismatic personality was so strong and so widespread that all regional movements in the country were relegated to the background" (Ahir 1992:5).
3. Although his official last name is Bains, Bishan Dass prefers to be called by his first two names (Email communication Bishan Dass, June 2021).
4. Sayad, who himself migrated from Algeria to France to work as a sociologist in Bourdieu's center, engaged both with democratic socialism in Algeria and with immigrant organizations in France "to provide them with instruments for their emancipation" (Pérez 2020:1010).
5. Although the term Multiculturalism was first used in Canada in 1971, "some of its basic ideas were set out in 1966 in a speech about 'race relations' policy in the UK by Roy Jenkins, then Home Secretary in the Labour government." (Farrar 2012:6) In the 1980s, it became an "aspirational concept" (Farrar 2012:7) benefitting from a large consensus from the Left to the Conservatives.
6. Known as "little India," Southall, situated in the western part of Greater London a few kilometers from Heathrow airport, has the highest concentration of Indian and Pakistani (in both cases, Punjabi) immigrants in the UK (almost half the total population of Southall).
7. According to the Oxford Lexico online dictionary, congregationalism refers to "a system of organization among Christian churches whereby individual local churches are largely self-governing" (<https://www.lexico.com/definition/congregationalism>). Leaving to the side the reference to Christianity, Baumann uses this as a generic term to designate the influence of autonomous religious structures in British South Asian localities.
8. With few exceptions, a large majority of Dalits in the UK are Punjabis (i.e. Ravidasis / Chamars and Valmikis / Chooras in religious/caste terms). Although in smaller numbers, the UK is also home to Dalit Christians from South India as well as Mochis from Gujarat. However, these communities have not been recognized as part of the scheduled castes category (the official designation for « untouchables ») in India.

9. Juergensmeyer thus found out that a Dalit officer from the Ravidasi community, who was posted in the migration department of the Punjab administration in 1952, decided on his own to reserve 10 % of the migration forms for Dalits, although officially positive discrimination did not apply in this domain. He distributed 500 forms to Dalits every year between 1952 and 1968, when Great Britain adopted the first restrictions to immigration (Juergensmeyer 1982). This figure of 10 % gives a rough idea of the proportion of Dalits among Punjabi emigrants, which nevertheless remains weak compared to the high concentration of Dalits in Punjab's population (32 %, by far the highest in India).

10. Bishan Dass narrates his shock at the intensity of everyday racism which, from pubs with signs saying "Blacks and Asians are not allowed" (Bains 2016:41), to "white skinhead gangs roaming town centers at night, looking for prey, attacking any blacks that they came across" (Bains 2016:42).

11. Ravidasis are followers of Ravidas, a 15th century Untouchable saint who lived in Benares and whose teachings were incorporated into Sikhism. While in the rest of North India, Ravidasis consider themselves as Hindus, in Punjab they are closer to Sikhism and their Temples' architecture and liturgy are similar to Sikh Gurdwaras' (Juergensmeyer 1982). This observation also holds true for the Valmiki sect. Eleanor Nesbitt thus shows that the Valmiki temple in Coventry displays a strong Sikh influence by displaying the Guru Granth Sahib (the Sikh holy book), while in other Valmiki temples, like Southall, the liturgy is closer to Hinduism. She also shows that these differences reflect local variations in Punjab where, according to the localities, the Valmiki cult has been more or less influenced by Sikh or Hindu symbols and patterns of worship (Nesbitt 2010). In Coventry, a Valmiki girl-child thus described her religion by saying: "I say to myself I'm a Sikh, but like really I'm a Hindu. I'm a Hindu Punjabi. I do many things that Sikhs do. We go to a *mandir*, but I call it a *gurdwara*" (Nesbitt 1990:9).

12. The Republican Party of India was founded by Ambedkar in 1956 in view of the 1957 general elections, and was officially launched after he passed away, in October 1957 (Duncan 1979).

13. The speeches were meticulously reconstituted thanks to newspaper cuttings as well as from Ambedkar's personal notes, provided by Ambedkar's former personal secretary, Nanak Chand Rattu (Interview with L.R. Balley, Jalandhar, July 11, 2006). At a time when the Government of Maharashtra's edited volumes of Ambedkar's writings and speeches were still not available (the first volume was published in 1979), this major work filled an important gap.

14. In July 2007, Chahal invited me to his home for a few days, in a coastal town in Wales where he owned a grocery store. We spent the evenings in a pub, where he talked to me with pain about the continuing conflicts with his parents. They were religious-minded Ravidasis and bitterly disapproved his breaking away from this sectarian tradition of their caste. All his life they disapproved of his excessive investment of his time and money in the movement to the detriment of his private business. Under their pressure, in the 1980s he moved from Bedford, known as an Ambedkarite stronghold in the UK, to Wales, in order to distance himself from the Dalit community and the movement and focus more on his business and family. However, this had little effect considering his political passion for Ambedkarism.

15. Ambedkar created a modern version of Buddhism (Navayana, or the new vehicle), as an enlightened, non-violent and democratic path towards human emancipation. He thought of it as a religious substitute to Marxism in order to strike at the roots of the religiously ordained Hindu caste system (Ambedkar [1956] 1987; Jaoul 2018a).

16. Shyam Khobragade arrived in the UK in 1964, where he became an engineer and settled permanently (email communication Sat Pal Muman, June 2021). His brother B.D. Khobragade, also known as Rajabhau, became the first General secretary of the RPI, after having been one of the 16 Dalit students who were selected by Ambedkar and sent to England for higher education in 1950 (Kamble 2018).

17. As he left the factory to take his first white collar job as assistant officer in the Leicester council for community relations, 70 km away from his home, his caste identity became an obstacle to finding another, closer, accommodation. After visiting a place to stay, he decided he would rather walk away and commute daily rather than confront the Indian landlady when she asked him about his caste (Dass 2016). His experience strikingly reflects the experience of Dalit government employees in India facing difficulties in finding housing when posted away from home. Ambedkar himself narrated his bitter experience while returning to India in 1918 after studying an extra year in London and being appointed as an administrative officer in Baroda (Gujarat), where he could not find accommodation due to untouchability (Ambedkar 1993).

18. The ABC UK invited Kanshi Ram to the UK where he attended meetings and conferences in various towns from April 12 to 30, 1985. In reaction, the pro-RPI group including Chanan Chahal invited L.R. Balley during the same period with the aim of counteracting Kanshi Ram's influence, thus leading to tensions (Email communication Sat Pal Muman, March 2021).

19. As a result of a tight vote, Chahal, who was Balley's vehement supporter, was elected president while Gurdial Chand Banger, who had been the General Secretary of the Ambedkar International Mission, London, until 1981, and thereafter became the President of the ABC UK, was elected General Secretary (Email communication with Sat Pal Muman, March 2021).

20. Paradoxically, although he encouraged others to highlight their names and achievements to build this social capital, he himself asked not to be named in my study, which I understood as a way to show his humility as a Buddhist who did not wish to capitalize on his activism. The professional elitism that informed his initiative seems to have been difficult to match up with the social reality of Ambedkarite activism: those who made it into the shortlist of the 118 internationally distinguished Ambedkarites—including fifteen British Dalits—can be characterized not so much by their professional achievements, as by their political commitment to build the movement, both in India and abroad. Although by valorizing upward mobility, the model of activism promoted by the ACCC became gentrified, the Dalit activists themselves therefore did not seem to fit so well into this model. This contradiction reflects the Indian Ambedkarite movement's own tensions that spring from the attempts to co-opt a Dalit elite that is not as responsive to this call for Dalit solidarity as the activists would like them to be.

21. <https://idsn.org/>

22. Having already joined the DSN, he came into contact with the Ambedkar Committee for Justice and Peace, founded by Yogesh Varhade, a Canadian Ambedkarite. Their group of 13 Dalits, who came from the UK (5), Canada (4), the USA (1) and India (3), thus attended the WCAR, self-financed with their « own hard earned money » (Email communication with Balram Sampla, June 2021). In Durban, they joined hands with the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), initiated by Human Rights Watch, financed by the Ford Foundation, and mandated by Indian Dalit organizations (Clifford 2007; Jaoul 2018b).

23. The regional Ambedkarite organizations themselves have been dominated by individual Dalit *jatis* whose material and symbolic interests they championed. In North India, the BSP also experimented by linking together both *jati* identities and the Anticaste ideology.

24. The term priest is sometimes used among UK Punjabis to refer to *Granthis* (ritual specialists who read the Granth, i.e. the Sikh holy book after which they are named) and *Gianis* (laymen possessing religious knowledge).

25. "Twice migrants" were initially indentured laborers who settled in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda to work on railway construction sites. Later on, they formed an intermediate class in between White and Black people in the British colonial setup. They eventually fled these countries where they felt unsafe (in Uganda they were even given expulsion notice) after their independence in the early 1970s (Bhachu 1985).

26. The possible role of those who arrived later in large numbers also needs to be taken into consideration. According to British censuses, the British Indian population more or less doubled

every 20 years, from 375 000 in 1971 to 1 452 000 in 2011, i.e. 2,3 % of the total British population. Among them, in 2001, 45,9 % were born in the UK, 34,6% in India and 16% in Africa. During my visits to Ravidasi Temples and Ambedkarite Buddh Vihars, I came across single men staying there upon arrival, before finding a job and a place to live. For the latter, the first step towards integration in British society thus relied on caste networks and collective resources of fellow British Indians. Although I have not come across any study on how these newcomers impacted the social life of Indian communities, my hypothesis is that they did not have as much of an impact as the previous waves of immigrants. First of all, these laborers did not possess capital, unlike East African middle class immigrants whose financial capacity to invest socially in religious buildings had a strong impact on local communities. Furthermore, unlike in the 1970s, when local communities were still being structured, the newcomers arrived in already well-consolidated communities supported by the multicultural setup.

27. Chahal explained his departure from the Ravidasi fold in 1980 in his book “Why I’m Not a Hindu” (1980, translated from Punjabi). His title interestingly associates Ravidasis with Hinduism, rather than Sikhism, as in his allusion to a “Ravidas Gurdwara” in the previous paragraph, thus echoing Ambedkar’s insistence on caste as a Hindu phenomenon. Chahal also told me that his book was a success among pro-Khalistan Sikhs, who welcomed his critique of Hinduism as fitting their own attempt to dissociate Sikhism from Hinduism.

28. Ambedkar’s project of “converting” (or rather initiating, as the word *dikhsa* conveys) Dalits *en masse* to his modern project of Navayana (“new vehicle”) Buddhism materialized in December 1956 at the very end of his life. Conceived as a necessary substitute to popular Hindu religious life that matched the ideals of the Anticaste revolution, his turn to Buddhism was both principled and pragmatic. The movement succeeded collectively with the Mahars in Maharashtra and the Jatavs (a local Chamar subcaste) in Western Uttar Pradesh. In the rest of India (as well as in the UK), even when mass *diksha* ceremonies did take place, those who effectively changed their religious identity to Buddhism were convinced Ambedkarites who espoused this choice individually out of ideological persuasion. Navayana’s paradox is therefore that it is supported by political activists with secular mindsets, who are little interested in “religious” aspects like rituals, etc. (Beltz 2005).

29. Sagli Ram Bauddh named them as Balram Sampla, Rattan Lal Sampla, Prabhu Dayal Kaul, Kushi Ram Pardeshi, Kushi Ram Jhammat, Harbanslal Kaul, who according to him also initiated the BR Ambedkar Memorial Committee in Wolverhampton.

30. <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/companies/29/74/Future-of-Multi-Ethnic-Britain-The.html>

31. <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/companies/29/74/Future-of-Multi-Ethnic-Britain-The.html>

32. <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/companies/29/74/Future-of-Multi-Ethnic-Britain-The.html>

33. <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/companies/29/74/Future-of-Multi-Ethnic-Britain-The.html>

34. Interviewed by Radio 4, a local official of the Labour Party thus explained that this was an internal matter of the Indian community which was no business of the party’s. In order to deal with the situation, the Labour Party fielded him in a non-Indian constituency the next year and Ram Lakha became the mayor of Coventry in 2005 for one year.

35. In India, Ambedkarite organizations mobilized against this term which they found paternalistic and insulting (Joshi 1986) and it fell out of use in the early 1990s (although it is difficult to precisely date this change of vocabulary, whose temporality also differs from region to region).

36. Far from being anecdotal, these socially conservative Gandhian views were actively defended by Lord Bikhu Parekh, a Professor of political philosophy and a prominent public intellectual of

the Labour Party, who headed the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain (1998–2000) and served on the Commission for Racial Equality. Although avoiding to name caste in his book on multiculturalism, Parekh defends a notion of cultural rights that implicitly defends its value. He thus writes that “every society developed a distinct national “genius” or spirit which, though derivative in nature, exercised an independent influence on and integrated social institutions and practises into a coherent whole. ... Even if a practice was immoral or unacceptable, the reformer should approach it with “trembling hand”” (Parekh 2000:57). In 2013, when called at the House of Lords to give his testimony, he stood against the caste legislation (Dhanda 2015).

37. In July 2018, the government neglected its duty on the grounds that this “risked promoting, creating or entrenching ideas of caste or heightening caste consciousness,” as argued by the Hindu and Sikh organizations (Mosse 2020:22). For more details, see Meena Dhanda’s interview in this special issue.

38. There are three Hindu umbrella organizations: the National Council of Hindu Temples established in 1978 and representing approximately 200 temples; the Hindu Council of UK established in 1994 that boasts a more tolerant image, but nevertheless became more aggressive, as its General Secretary Anil Bhanot’s statements against the legal recognition of caste in the UK show (Hindu Council UK 2008); the Hindu Forum of Britain (HFB), “an increasingly active force in the faith relations industry” (Zavos 2009:896) that rose to prominence after being launched in 2004 in the wake of a racist attack against a Hindu UK Temple. The HFB openly espouses radical Hindutva discourse (Zavos 2010).

39. In 2011, Hindus represented 44 % of the Indian population in England and Wales, while Sikhs made up 22.1 %, Muslims 13.9 %, Christians 9.6 % and Buddhists 0.26 %. In the absence of a caste-based census, it is not possible to give the number of Dalits, whose estimates vary considerably.

40. Chanan Chahal was particularly proud of the support of the film maker Kenneth Griffith, whose documentary film on Ambedkar, *The Untouchable* was released by the BBC 2 in October 1996.

ABSTRACTS

Based on the accounts of Dalit immigrants from Punjab who settled in the UK in the 1960s, this essay sheds light on the UK Ambedkarite movement’s political trajectory. How did the Anticaste philosophy of political emancipation retain its significance in the context of migration? Beyond the diasporic model of engagement that views the immigrants’ political interests as necessarily oriented towards the homeland, Ambedkarism negotiated and transgressed the boundaries of UK multiculturalism, as a differential, ethnic and religious-based model of political incorporation of South Asian immigrants. After initially supporting the RPI agitations in Punjab, Ambedkarites started gaining autonomy by working towards the official recognition of Ambedkar in the UK. More recently, while some of them worked towards a Buddhist revival in Punjab, others launched a campaign against caste discrimination in British Indian localities. Thanks to the latter, UK Ambedkarism emerged as a critical voice in the public debate on Multiculturalism, distinguishing itself from Dalit sectarian movements whose religious assertion in the multicultural context proved unable to check the rise of casteism in these localities. I therefore argue that although speaking from the margins, Ambedkarism managed to make a place for itself in the British public debate as a distinctive and significant political voice.

INDEX

Keywords: Ambedkarism, Buddhism, caste, Dalits, diaspora, emancipation, immigrant politics, multiculturalism, Punjab, UK

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