Gandhi is said to have rebuked C.F. Andrews for insisting that nonviolence was the central theme of the major Hindu religious texts: “I see no sign of it in the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, not even in my favourite Tulsidas.”1 A tradition of nonviolence was not a resource at hand to be drawn upon but had to be constructed, even invented, in order to engage with the everyday presence of violence within Indian society. Seen through the narrow lens of a critique of nationalism alone, this gandhian enterprise appears to conform to what Ranajit Guha has termed the twin imperatives of mobilising and disciplining the masses, particularly in the wake of violence by the masses such as at Chauri Chaura. However, Gandhi seems to have recognised that there was something more fundamental at stake: violence was constitutive of Indian society, particularly in the maintenance of a hierarchical Hindu order. Incidents of religious or caste violence were not exceptions, nor were they precipitated only by colonial strategies of rule. Moreover, the fundamental Hindu
belief that some are more equal than others has leaked into the other major religions in the subcontinent—Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism or Islam—which, however, at the level of theology and aspiration, remain egalitarian.

Arguably, caste violence—the daily humiliation and killing of dalits—is the central faultline of contemporary Indian society. It is with a sense of perplexity, then, that one looks at the negligible scholarship on caste violence in India. On the other hand, the violence occasioned by ‘communalism’ continues to be a matter of serious and sustained reflection within the academic community. For instance, the communal violence following the destruction of Babri Masjid in 1992 and the state-sponsored killing of Muslims in Gujarat a decade later have generated fine and impassioned scholarship. However, the interwoven histories of violence against dalits and adivasis in both these conjunctures (it could be argued that this was both a prior and a parallel process) are remarked upon but not integrated into analyses. In a curious way, caste violence becomes the object of reportage and communal violence the object of theorising. One has to turn to the daily newspapers and reports of civil and human rights organisations for investigations on what Human Rights Watch has termed the ‘broken people’. Their assessment of the situation on the ground is clear and chilling.

Public outrage over large-scale incidents of violence or particularly egregious examples of discrimination fade quickly and the state is under little pressure to undertake more meaningful reforms. Laws granting Dalits special consideration for government jobs and education reach only a small percentage of those they are meant to benefit. Laws designed to ensure that Dalits enjoy equal rights and protection have seldom been enforced. Instead, police refuse to register complaints about
violations of the law and rarely prosecute those responsible for abuses that range from murder to rape and exploitative labour practices and forced displacement from Dalit lands and homes.  

Public discussion, and ire, have tended to centre less on the contingent lives of dalits and more on the predominance of caste in public life: the issue of positive discrimination in education and employment. A modern discourse of equal citizenship is popularly seen as being sullied by the shrill persistence of ‘primordial’ identities. In this instance, the issue of caste evokes less the persistent power and privilege of the dominant castes, and more the idea of the undeserving getting rewards on the basis of alleged histories of subordination. Such a discourse is sustained by commonsense rhetoric based on the fact of the abolition of untouchability in the Constitution of India and the delusion that ‘public’ spaces, institutions and practices are ‘caste blind’, and caste matters only in benign ‘private’ arrangements such as marriage. The resolution of caste and inequality is posited in the gradualist mode of increasing incorporation of subordinated castes into the mainstream through democratic institutions and safeguards, and the question of the continuing radical exclusion of dalits from equal protection under law is rarely raised in the public sphere. Debates over the right to equal opportunity seem to bypass the more fundamental question of the right to equal security of life itself. The stark question is: does the dalit have the right to life in modern India?

Of the four essays that make up this book, the first essay argues that we need to take seriously the long history of internal violence within Hindu society, and think issues of communalism and caste violence in tandem. There is an intimate relation between the discourses of caste, secularism and communalism. That Hinduism—as religion, social system or way of life—is a...
hierarchical, inegalitarian structure is largely accepted, but what goes largely unacknowledged in academic discourse is both the casual brutality and the organised violence that it practices towards its subordinate sections. The inner violence within Hinduism explains to a considerable extent the violence directed outwards against Muslims once we concede that the former is historically prior. The question needs to be: how has the deployment of violence against an internal Other (defined primarily in terms of inherent inequality), the dalit, come to be transformed at certain conjunctures into one of aggression against an external Other (defined primarily in terms of inherent difference), the Muslim? Is communalism a deflection of the central issue of violence and inegalitarianism within Hindu society? Caste is not presented here as an unchanging essence of Indian society, the ultimate marker of difference from ‘western’ society putatively based on a notion of homo aequalis. Rather, I trace the changing configuration of caste in the period between 1850 and 1947 within the evolution of the public sphere, colonial governmentality, and debates on social reform.

The last two essays move from the materiality of caste relations to the question of social imaginaries and deal with the question of intellectual activity by subordinated castes and dalits. This is an exigent issue that has been either ignored or insufficiently theorised in Indian academic writing. I explore this issue by looking at novels written by subordinated castes in Malayalam in the late nineteenth century and delineate the alternative social vision implicit in them. Even within well intentioned efforts like that of the Subaltern Studies, subalterns act, and in that lies their heroism, their entry into the realm of history. Intellection is seen as something that the elites do habitually, either in the creation of ideological apparatuses to rehabilitate structures of coercion or in the recovery of selves
damaged in an engagement with modernity. Subalterns situate themselves within insurgency, elites within discourses (derivative or otherwise). Possible instances of subaltern creative enterprise are treated with proper suspicion: do they contain within themselves the Trojan horses of elite thought? This problem, whether expressed as ‘false consciousness’ or ‘replication’ of elite structures of thought within the subaltern consciousness, has crippled attempts at understanding what Borges termed the “normal respiration of intelligence”. So how do we theoretically grasp the intellectual activity of the subordinated castes, and in what lies its autonomy, if at all?

Within the anthropological discourse on South Asia, mimesis has been the dominant mode of understanding subaltern intellectual creativity. This, of course, has the possible outcome of doing away altogether with the problem to be studied. Imitation being the sincerest expressive form of submission, the culture of the subordinated castes is then understood as a mere replication of the structures of dominant caste thought. For instance, Moffatt’s model of mimetic perfection derives from and is an extension of Dumont’s influential idealist rendition of caste. Dumont’s structuralist reading privileges an ossified grammar of caste ideology over its individual, contextual enunciations. Caste comes to be played out within the rules of a language embodying the dichotomous worldview of purity and pollution. The trope of mimesis is replayed in arguments about ‘Sanskritisation’, a category that has become corpulent over time consuming all articulations of social mobility. It is a model of a deferred ideal of perfect mimesis, wherein subordinated castes, given time, shall become behaviourally more and more like those above them in the hierarchy. Here, too, the creativity of the subordinated castes lies in replication, not in innovation. Of course, one trajectory of academic reaction
Introduction

to this can be seen in the denial of mimesis, and the construction of arguments that speak of different worlds. Subordinated castes are seen as possessing an independent, autonomous culture that rejects any semblance to the structures of brahmin thought. This can be expressed in marxist terms as an antagonistic ‘class’ culture premised on production relations; in sudra polemic as the inhabiting of a different domain of sensibility altogether; and all too rarely in the realm of South Asian anthropology as canny, resistant subaltern individuality.\textsuperscript{8} Seemingly, dominant castes are from Mars, subordinated castes are from Venus.

Given the deeply imbricated nature of the existence of castes, one needs a more nuanced account of creativity and historical change, which does not resolve itself only into questions of mimesis or its denial. One way out of this is to reconsider the act of mimesis as that which generates an anxiety about the presumed stability of identities, “at once resemblance and menace” in the words of Homi Bhabha. Mimesis resolves itself into its components of act (allowing for intention and agency) and perception. As with the extension into the concept of hybridity, the idea of repetition and/as difference which happens within the space of a dominant discourse itself is suggestive.\textsuperscript{9} The idea of the frame of the repetition makes possible an understanding of repetition as difference. One consequence is that the recovery of the radical moment in mimesis need no longer be located solely in the effects it generates in the Other—is the Master rendered anxious, unstable? It can look at repetition as part of the recovery of the Self by the actors themselves, as also opening up the intertextualised nature of existence to an enquiry concerned with the production of difference rather than sameness. Why do intellectuals belonging to subordinated castes in nineteenth and early twentieth century India—Narayana Guru in Kerala, the Ad Dharm movement in Punjab,
Jigyasu the chamar thinker in the United Provinces—take to a ‘repetition’ of the Vedanta? Are we to understand this as a moment in the Srinivasian trajectory of unrealised mimesis alone? Can we recover the different framing of nondualism in the context of movements by subordinated castes in which the duality perceived is less that of human and godhead and more a violent division of brahmin (human) and subordinated caste (nonhuman)?

What characterises the social imaginary of the Malayalam novels written by the subordinated castes is their situatedness within the structures of a caste society as much as their projections of what I term a ‘place elsewhere’. Tropes of escape, travel, and the freedom granted by anonymity abound in these novels as the authors envisage territories in excess of the space of a social law that subordinates them. In all these novels it is the egalitarian appeal of Christianity, mediated by missionary activity, that shapes the relation of the subordinated castes with modernity and with colonialism. At the same time, they draw upon dominant texts in order to play ironically on their import, as also texts from places elsewhere, such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, in order to generate affinities with other landscapes of subordination and freedom. Understanding these moments of appropriation and recasting posed a problem when I first encountered citation in *Saraswativijayam*, a Malayalam novel written in 1893 by Potheri Kunhambu (1857–1919), a tiyya intellectual. The plot is startling. A brahmin landlord, driven by the arrogance of power, causes the death of an untouchable. In fleeing from colonial law the brahmin embarks on a journey to Kashi and into the darkness of his soul. Even as he arrives at a realisation of his inhumanity through reflection, the law catches up with him. In court, beleaguered and indicted by enemies, the whole case is turned upside down by the fortuitous
appearance of a missionary who reveals that the ‘dead’ untouchable is the judge in the case. Left for dead, years earlier, he had gone to the nearest mission and embarked on his own tryst with his intellect becoming a graduate and a judge in the process. The brahmin is freed and emerges a new compassionate man. The novel is concerned with showing the brahmin and the untouchable as a dyad, intimately linked by violence and passivity, and initially by knowledge and ignorance. Subsequently, knowledge frees the brahmin from power, as it frees the untouchable from dependence.

Apart from the subordinated-caste writer writing himself into modernity in a novel promiscuous in its variety of styles, characters, locales and texts, there is the other question of citation, repetition and quotation from the dominant canon. The novel is replete with references to Manusmriti and other canonical texts, but for the present I would like to take up the device of beginning and ending chapters with quotations from the high tradition. This may remind one of George Orwell’s mordant remark that the kidnapping of a lower class writer happens the moment he puts pen to paper. But given the always already intertextualised nature of caste culture, what does this signify? For instance, the chapter in which the brahmin orders the killing of the untouchable, begins with a quotation from the Ramayana which says that the subjects of kings who oppress the weak are condemned to poverty and epidemics. Similarly when the brahmin is considering the option of fleeing from the law, a quotation is reproduced from the Mahabharata which enjoins Duryodhana to give up half his kingdom if he wishes to avoid bloodshed. To use Henry Louis Gates’s phrase, Kunhambu is ‘signifyin(g)’ on the canon: an older rhetoric is recycled in a new context; the words of the expropriator are expropriated.

What Kunhambu does here is to repeat with a difference;
he takes the word and makes it his own. He alludes to the dominant canon and revises it to propel it into a new context. As a reflection of and tribute to the intertextualised nature of existence, he breaks traditional frames, putting high and low texts together, the profane sanctifying and reinventing the sacred. He improvises an identity for himself, from within the tradition but aspiring outside of it, refusing a pure, unmediated subaltern identity. So along with the multiple dialogic of differences based on a complex subjectivity, he also aspires for an ideal dialectic with those aspects of the self shared with others. The brahmin and the untouchable are part of a dyad, with a fraught yet shared destiny. Significantly, all the novels discussed here begin with a death. In *Ghatakavadham*, Koshy the landowner kills a pulaya boy in a fit of rage after his labourers refuse to work on the Sabbath. In *Saraswativijayam*, a pulaya labourer is kicked and left for dead for the simple crime of singing before a brahmin. In *Sukumari*, there is a profusion of deaths in the novel, occasioned by want and illness, rather than violence. The only people left standing at the end are the protagonists. There is the simple empirical fact of death—sudden and violent, or a wasting one—which is integral to the life and experience of subordinated castes. This takes us back to the question that I raised earlier: does the dalit in India have the right to life?

The second essay looks at the elision of issues of caste and caste violence even within radical ideologies and by radical thinkers. I explore this through a close reading of a seminal text, *Keralam Malayalikalude Mathrubhumi* [Kerala, the Motherland of the Malayalis] written in 1948 by E.M.S. Namboodiripad, arguably the most important intellectual that the communist movement in India has produced.

The question that I pose in this essay is: what did EMS do with marxism? He re-conceptualises caste as having played a
historical role in organising production in such a way that it promoted the development of both individual skills. The brahmins at the apex of the caste hierarchy were freed from labour and could then devote themselves to intellectual and cultural activity and produce the region’s distinct culture and identity. Following from this, amidst the general condemnation of the brahmin in south India as a result of the emergence of a nonbrahmin politics, marxism allowed the reinstatement of a role for the brahmins by putting them at the heart of crucial changes in the organisation of the family, a theme with major resonances for a society such as Kerala engaged in an attack on the legacy of matriliny. Contradictions remained: the use of brahmin myths along with a scientific approach to history; and the putting of the working classes at the heart of the theoretical exercise, but in practice exalting the high culture produced by the brahmins. The issue of the use of violence in the maintenance of caste hierarchy does not appear as an issue in the text. Yet again, this remains the central occluded fact of Indian society: so present, yet so invisible.

These essays were written between 1997 and 2005 in different cities, institutions and political contexts but are unified by the attempt to think through the question of caste in India athwart the existing academic literature. Most of the research and thinking for these essays was done at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, where I was a Fellow between 1994 and 1998. I joined the Nehru Museum as a Fellow in 1994 intending to work on state formation in the eighteenth century in south India. In the political context of the 1990s and the emergence of a strident Hindu nationalism this project increasingly appeared to me to be too remote and academic. Professor Ravinder Kumar was generous in his understanding of my personal dilemma and encouraged my increasing
engagement with the question of caste in modern India. I benefited immensely from his scholarship, friendship, and gentle remonstrations against extreme positions; this collection of essays is indebted to the liberal spirit that he embodied.

The draft of the lead essay on caste and communalism was conceived and written on a month-long fellowship at the Zentrum fur Modener Orient in Berlin in June 2003. The final version was written while I was a Fellow on the Agrarian Studies Program at Yale between September 2003 and May 2004 and presented at a conference on ‘Threats to Secularism’ organised by Professor T.N. Srinivasan in March 2004. I would like to record my gratitude to Dr Margret Frenz and Professor Ulrike Freitag, and Professor James Scott respectively for the institutional and intellectual support that they provided. In particular, I would like to thank my fellow Fellows at the Agrarian Studies seminar—Peter Lindner, Hugh Raffles and Susan O’Donovan—for an unforgettable and intense year of camaraderie and intellection. And, of course, Jim as well, for his intellectual generosity, friendship and readiness for a nice knockdown argument on an astonishingly wide range of matters.

For permission to reproduce “Caste and Colonial Modernity: Reading Sarasvativijayam (1893)” which first appeared in Studies in History, July–December 1997, I would like to thank Sage Publications. “Being a Brahmin the Marxist way: E.M.S. Namboodiripad and the Pasts of Kerala” was first presented at a conference held at the School of Oriental and African Studies in April 1997 and subsequently published in a volume edited by Daud Ali, Invoking the Past: The Uses of History in South Asia (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999). “A Place Elsewhere: Lower Caste Malayalam Novels of the Nineteenth Century”, was first presented at a conference on new literary histories held at the University of California, Berkeley, in
October 1999 and published under the same title in a volume edited by Stuart Blackburn and Vasudha Dalmia, *India’s Literary History: Essays on the Nineteenth Century* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004). I would like to thank Oxford University Press and Permanent Black respectively for permission to republish these essays. Special thanks to M. F. Husain (and Raeesa Husain) for allowing the use of *Between the Spider and the Lamp* (1956) on the cover of this book. This painting encapsulates the nature of India’s modernity in a more insightful and provocative way than reams of academic prose have done.

Friends in different cities of India and from different continents have contributed immensely to the development of the ideas in this book and it would require another book to thank every one of them. I thank Anand of Navayana for offering to publish this collection and for his detailed reading of the text and arguments. His persistent questions have hopefully ironed out many of my initial, lazy formulations of many of the concepts discussed here. For detailed comments on these essays while they were being thought through and written over a decade: Udaya Kumar, G. Arunima, Ajay Skaria, Sumathi Ramaswamy, Aditya Nigam, Nivedita Menon, James Scott, Rosemary George, Pratap Mehta, Thomas Trautmann, Shahid Amin, Neeladri Bhattacharya, Ajay Gandhi, Gyanendra Pandey, Harald Fischer-Tine, G. Balachandran and Stuart Blackburn. My M.A. History class of 2002 at Delhi University was central to the evolution of the argument regarding communalism and caste over a semester of discussion and disagreement. My parents and immediate family have been the first auditors of my ideas and readers of these essays with varying degrees of appreciation and perplexity as also the persistent victims of my absentmindedness. This book is dedicated to Lara, my muse, who read every word with critical affection, and to our daughter Naima, who I hope will write better books.
NOTES


3 *Broken People: Caste Violence against India’s “Untouchables”* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999) 3. The report was researched and written by Smita Narula, researcher for the Asia division of Human Rights Watch.

4 See for instance the skepticism regarding the use of folklore for historical writing in Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).


Introduction

9 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).