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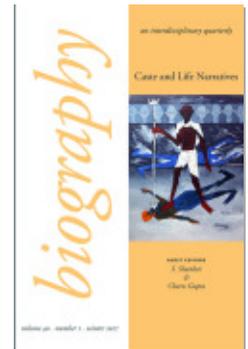
"My Birth is My Fatal Accident": introduction to caste and life narratives

S. Shankar, Charu Gupta

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# **"MY BIRTH IS MY FATAL ACCIDENT"**

## **INTRODUCTION TO CASTE AND LIFE NARRATIVES**

S. SHANKAR AND CHARU GUPTA

This special issue of *Biography* foregrounds “caste” and “life narratives” as reciprocally generative sites of serious study. We begin with the notion that the conjunction of a social phenomenon called “caste” with a genre of representation called “life narratives” deserves special scholarly attention. We are not the first to bring caste and life narratives together in this manner. As the essays collected here as well as the Selected Bibliography attest, this issue builds on previously existing work. We acknowledge such work while proposing that the essays here are unprecedented in the range of languages, archives, cultural traditions, and subgenres engaged, as well as in the kinds of theoretical discussions launched. Through these essays we hope to accomplish a twofold task: bringing discussions of caste to the scholarly study of life narratives and, reciprocally, foregrounding a nuanced and critical awareness of life narratives in explorations of caste.

In our own work, both of us have grappled with caste in the context of India in different ways. Shankar is a novelist and a literary and cultural critic, who in his 2012 book *Flesh and Fish Blood: Postcolonialism, Translation, and the Vernacular* explores the rich potential of vernacular literary expressions for representations of caste, with a particular focus on Tamil literature, including Dalit Tamil literature. He underlines how vernacular materials were often politically progressive. Part of his argument critiques postcolonial theory as presently configured. He also engages with caste in detail in his forthcoming novel, *Ghost in the Tamarind*. Charu is a feminist historian who in her 2016 book *The Gender of Caste: Representing Dalits in Print* brings together two complex markers of difference and inequality by rethinking the history of caste from a gendered perspective and by exploring its inextricable connections with popular culture, with a particular focus on Hindi print material of colonial North India. She argues that caste and gender are not only constitutive of the social;

caste is central to how gender is reproduced. Our scholarly interests have cohered around how to historicize issues of embodiment and personhood from diverse regional and temporal frames. In different ways, both of us have a deep interest in how one might find caste in life narratives and how caste narratives may resist easy incorporation into dominant domains of academia or the “universal.”

Life narratives have long been a constitutive archive and a performative mode for the oppressed. For example, Houston A. Baker remarks, “The locus classicus of Afro-American literary discourse is the slave narrative” (31). The slave narrative bears witness to the life of the slave. For similar reasons to do with witnessing, the experiences of some castes (some “caste-lives,” in one potent formulation) have proven of especial interest to scholars. Generally, these have been Dalit (“untouchable”) or Dalitbahujan (“lower caste”) lives. In India, life narratives have been central to the recent boom in Dalit writings in the vernacular, particularly in Marathi, Hindi, and Tamil, which provide Dalits a means for declaring their own subjective agency. Various forms of life narratives—autobiography, *testimonio*, diary, confessional poetry, biopics—have been critical in testifying to the breadth and ferocity of caste oppression *and* for articulating a language of caste dissent and protest. While life narratives on and of caste raise questions of political inequality, they also underline the complex and subtle manner in which everyday lives and their retellings are sites for the social reproduction of a hegemonic caste order, as well as an enabling ground for the development of practices of resistance.

This special issue, then, acknowledges the unique status of Dalit and Dalitbahujan perspectives (of anti-caste radicals like Phule, Periyar, and Ambedkar, for example) in shaping a field of study such as “Caste and Life Narratives”; at the same time, the issue takes to heart that caste is not the lived reality of Dalits and Dalitbahujans alone and, accordingly, proceeds from the notion that the critical study of caste cannot be their burden alone. An “upper caste” Bania (such as M. K. Gandhi, touched on in Laura Brueck’s essay in this issue) has as much a “caste life” as a Dalit. While not all “upper caste” life narratives acknowledge caste as directly as Dalit life narratives do, they nevertheless remain marked, even in their silence, by caste. Indeed, it has been argued (by M. S. S. Pandian, for example, in *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin: Genealogies of the Tamil Political Present*) that such silence is itself a mark of caste privilege—after all, is not the ability to ignore caste in itself a mark of privilege?

In this context, a useful distinction can and should be made between Dalit Studies and what we might term Critical Caste Studies. The former is the study of Dalit archives and lives, the latter the critical and interrogative study of any aspect of culture marked by caste. An analogy might be drawn

here with the study of race in the United States. African American Studies is not the same as Critical Race Theory, though the former might offer an indispensable animating force to the latter. In a thoroughly racialized society like the United States, the critical study of race cannot be the burden of African Americans alone, and so it is with caste. Critical Caste Studies is vitally animated by Dalit Studies but is not coterminous with it. Additionally, a Critical Caste Studies acknowledges the existence of caste structures across the world (in Japan, for example, as indicated in June Gordon's essay) without in any way minimizing the virulence of caste within South Asia. Human Rights Watch offers this broad definition of caste in a global context:

Caste is descent-based and hereditary in nature. It is a characteristic determined by one's birth into a particular caste, irrespective of the faith practiced by the individual. Caste denotes a system of rigid social stratification into ranked groups defined by descent and occupation. Under various caste systems throughout the world, caste divisions also dominate in housing, marriage, and general social interaction—divisions that are reinforced through the practice and threat of social ostracism, economic boycotts, and even physical violence.

A Critical Caste Studies might take as its purview this view of caste even as it learns from the exciting work within Dalit Studies.

In the context of India (with which caste is most often associated and with which all the essays in this collection save one are concerned), "caste" is the ubiquitous term for a form of social organization based on a mishmash of associated ideas of hierarchy, (notional) profession, ritual ideas of purity, endogamy, and (Hindu) scriptural stricture. Put in other words, "caste" is a protean category of social difference and a system of inequality based on hierarchy and heredity, ideologies of contamination, and stigmatization and exclusion (Bannerjee-Dube; Dirks 3–18; Bayly 1–96, 144–86; Shankar, *Flesh* 29–36). Caste is at one and the same time economic (in that it has consequences for how wealth is distributed), political (how power is distributed), and social (how status is assessed). It would be a mistake to think that the ways in which these three dimensions of caste map onto one another are predictable and uniform—a Brahmin priest in a village might, for example, be higher in social status than an economically more affluent landlord (as indeed made evident in the anticaste crusader Periyar's life, explored in Swarnavel Eswaran's essay). At the same time caste is not without its specificities, such that generations of scholars have found a relatively coherent object of study in it. This is why in some respects it seems, as V. Geetha and S. V. Rajadurai have suggested, that caste might be more usefully termed the "varna-jati complex" (xiii). The terms "varna-jati complex" and "caste" describe the same social phenomenon from

different vantage points—the former from that of the vernacular and the latter from that of the transnational (Shankar, *Flesh* 34). *Varna* and *jati* are two terms commonly found in Indian languages denoting caste. *Varna* is a more abstract and scriptural term indicating the four broad groups into which castes are supposed to be divided (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra, with the *varna*-less “untouchables” or Dalits regarded as outcaste outsiders); while *jati* is a more locally situated and ethnographically relevant category, varying in its hundreds, if not thousands, across the length and breadth of not only India but the whole of South Asia. Ishita Banerjee-Dube underlines that the *varna*-model represents a “book view of caste,” while the *jati*-model signifies a “field-view” or the actual reality of caste (xvii).

As with caste, so too with life narrative, which is a similarly imprecise term for modes of depicting a life. In this collection we intend the term to cover a variety of modes of representing “actual lives” in whole or in fragments—in autobiographies, biographies, memoirs, ethnographic interviews, nonfictional references within fiction, biopics, legal testimonies, art work, memoirs, Facebook posts, blogs, confessional poetry, and, lastly and most tragically, a suicide note. In using this term, we sometimes stretch the meaning of the word “narrative.” We deploy life narratives in a generically fluid and wide variety of ways, as we wish to include not only biographies and autobiographies, but indeed to recognize the multiplicity of subgenres in which lives are narrated. It has seemed to us better to use the term “life narrative” rather than such alternative terms as “life writing” or “life representation” (not all texts are written, after all; and representation seems at once too theoretically loaded and vague a term). “Life narrative” has seemed the best of the terms on offer because more often than not, as an object of study, a life offers itself to us in some (fragmentary or otherwise) narrated form.

Life narratives are distinguished by their peculiar claims of authenticity established through a division between the fictional and the nonfictional. These claims of authenticity are, of course, unstable and continually negotiated, as Philippe Lejeune argues through the related notions of an autobiographical pact, the referential pact, and the readerly contract. Taken together, these ideas suggest both the insistence of life narrative genres (to expand the point beyond Lejeune’s focus on autobiography) on a referential reality that exists separate from the text and the difficulty of articulating the difference between such a reality and that of, say, a novel. Recognizing a similar difficulty, Leigh Gilmore and G. Thomas Couser explore the ways in which life narrative genres may be said to be in a referential relationship to actual bodies, disabled, gendered, or otherwise. In the context of caste, these referential considerations, and the question of who “the contract” or “the pact” is with,

are posed with a specificity to which it is essential to attend. With whom does Gandhi contract in writing his (nationalist) autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*? And who does Bama have in mind in her Dalit autobiography *Karukku* (discussed in Parthasarathi Muthukkaruppan's essay)? Both Gandhi and Bama are Indian writers, albeit separated by language, period, gender, and caste. How, then, does Gandhi's contractual relationship with his reader relate to Bama's with hers? Such questions, which are not amenable to easy answers, are at the heart of this collection.

The life narrative genres engaged in this collection vary, often reflecting the disciplinary positioning of the contributing author. When we were making our selections for this issue, we were keen that the essays address how caste identities are imprinted and challenged in different genres of life narratives. We also hoped to start crossdisciplinary conversations on the subject between the humanities and the social sciences. We believe that juxtaposing essays from different disciplinary contexts can in itself help us in foregrounding differences of methodologies and epistemologies and in contextualizing some of the trends we witness in our fields of study. We were further interested in foregrounding diverse languages, regions, modes, and time periods, including the colonial and postcolonial. Finally, we were keen to extend our analysis to include communities other than Hindu (to see how caste is represented in Christian life narratives, for example); the Indian diaspora, an often neglected area of study; and regions where similar structures of inequality can be discerned and where race, for example, may be juxtaposed to caste.

The twelve essays that we have chosen—and that then underwent intense discussion amounting to a kind of peer review, including at a three-day workshop convened in Honolulu—thus represent a range of disciplines and methodological perspectives. The disciplines represented include art criticism, education, film studies, history, law, literary criticism, management studies, and sociology. In making our selections, we sought a diversity of languages, regions, genres and themes, and identities and personae:

#### LANGUAGES

- Hindi: Laura Brueck, Tapan Basu, Charu Gupta
- Japanese: June Gordon
- Malayalam: Bindu Menon
- Marathi: Shailaja Paik
- Tamil: Swarnavel Eswaran, Parthasarathi Muthukkaruppan

#### REGIONS WITHIN INDIA AND OUTSIDE

- Japan: June Gordon
- Kerala: Bindu Menon
- Maharashtra: Shailaja Paik

- North India: Laura Brueck
- Punjab: Charu Gupta
- Tamil Nadu: Parthasarathi Muthukkaruppan, Swarnavel Eswaran

#### *GENRES AND THEMES*

- autobiography: Tapan Basu, Charu Gupta
- Brahmanical formulations: Mukul Sharma
- cinema: Bindu Menon, Swarnavel Eswaran
- education: June Gordon
- environmental studies: Mukul Sharma
- gender: Bindu Menon, Charu Gupta, Shailaja Paik
- law: Sumit Baudh
- literature: Laura Brueck, Parthasarathi Muthukaruppan, Tapan Basu
- performance, theater, and narration in folk forms: Shailaja Paik
- queer sexualities: Sumit Baudh
- reformist writings: Charu Gupta
- visual arts: Y. S. Alone

#### *IDENTITIES AND PERSONAE*

- Dalit Tamasha performer Mangalatai Bansode: Shailaja Paik
- Burakumin of Japan: June Gordon
- Dalit Hindi writers like Ajay Navaria as well as Namishray and Bechain: Laura Brueck, Tapan Basu (respectively)
- Dalit Tamil writers and literary critics: Parthasarathi Muthukaruppan
- diasporic Dalit activists and movements: Shweta Adur and Anjana Narayanan
- an international NGO and its Brahmin founder Bindeswar Pathak: Mukul Sharma
- the anticaste icon Periyar: Swarnavel Eswaran
- Dalit actress P. K. Rosy: Bindu Menon
- anticaste Shudra reformer Santram BA: Charu Gupta

The selections have in common a committed exploration of the embodied nature of caste and how social practices of violence, intimacy, touch, and stigmatization organize caste's peculiar and pervasive imprint on our lives. Taken together, the essays—which go beyond the conventional life narrative forms of autobiography and biography to include oral histories, biopics, ethnographic interviews, legal testimonies, and visual arts—provide us with discrete points of connection, dialogue, and debate.

In bringing together these essays from different disciplines, we are interested in the broad issues associated with life narratives and how such narratives are important sites for the construction *and* dismantling of identities. At the same time, we wish to underline the distinctive ways lives are (re)told when seen through the lens of caste, and how caste politics in turn are intertwined with questions of embodiment and personhood. In other words, we

deploy life narratives as a method for materializing and interrogating caste lives and histories. We attempt to offer a bridge between life narratives and caste.

This special issue, then, stands at the intersection where caste meets life narrative; neither term by itself is a motivating element for this special issue—rather it is the conjunction of the two that gives the issue impetus. Western paradigms have often provided much of our theoretical capital for conceptualizing life narratives. Implicitly, as well as overtly, this special issue explores new paradigms by bringing “caste” and “life narrative” together. Here, the special issue might be seen as proceeding in the same vein as Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai’s trenchant critiques of the facile use of Western paradigms in theorizing “experience,” a category certainly crucial to life narratives. Both what constitutes a life and what constitutes a proper narrative of a life vary across cultures. What constitutes a life is not regarded in the same way in India as in the United States or in Japan, nor are the proper generic conventions through which a life is to be narrated. It is in the interest of capturing the specificity of life narratives in India (that is, their difference from similar narratives elsewhere) that David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn have identified

a formulation of self-in-society that is more complex and subtle than a mutually exclusive opposition between an all-subsuming collectivity on the one hand, and a rampant individuality on the other. . . . [N]early all of them [life narratives in India], in one way or another, demonstrate that Indians present individual lives within a network of other lives and that they define themselves in relation to larger frames of reference, especially those of family, kin, caste, religion, and gender. (19)

Bindu Menon’s exploration in her essay of the multiple renderings of Dalit actress K. Rosy’s life in print and cinema well illustrates the different ways in which the balance between individuality and society (thematically common enough to scholarly study of life narratives across the world) is weighted in India. Menon’s essay also points to further specifications arising out of caste—the narration of an “upper caste” Nair life cannot be the same as the narration of a Dalit one, for the latter is inevitably contestatory with regard to mainstream Indian society in a way the former need not be. The many gaps in the way Rosy’s life has been rendered, as searchingly revealed by Menon, provides evidence in this regard.

At a theoretical level, some of these questions and problems are not unique to Indian life narratives or to caste lives. The essays in this special issue are wide ranging in their theoretical references, attending to whatever scholarship seems relevant and useful; at the same time, they take their points of orientation from theories and archives largely unknown outside of Dalit Studies or

Critical Caste Studies (see, for example, Y. S. Alone's Ambedkarite Buddhist essay and Charu Gupta's recuperation of the lost voice of Santram BA). We suggest, therefore, that this collection might be regarded as a dialogue between life writing studies as constituted in the West and preoccupations coming out of caste life narratives. Our hope is to challenge canonical life writing studies from a postcolonial, Dalit, and Critical Caste Studies perspective, and at the same time, provoke new ways of entering into the burgeoning study of caste in India and elsewhere (as represented by June Gordon's essay on Japan and, in a different way, by Shweta Adur and Anjana Narayan's essay on Dalit activism in the South Asian diaspora in the US).

Taken together, the collection is interdisciplinary, interlinguistic, intercultural, international, and comparative. As should be easily evident, the comparative dimension is implicit throughout the collection. Though not represented here, a comparative study of caste can be extended to South Asian countries other than India such as Sri Lanka or Nepal; and, even beyond, for example to Africa or to Japan. Posing the comparative question along a different dimension, we might ask: how does caste compare to race or ethnicity as a system of social structuring? Dalits have often borrowed from the radical politics of African Americans—the most famous example being that of the Dalit Panthers. This form of comparison is also made evident in Adur and Narayan's essay. Less well known is the borrowing that has sometimes gone in the opposite direction. Scholars such as Gerald Berreman have argued that race in the US may sometimes be understood as a form of caste. Without denying either the particular salience or the ferocity of caste in India, the comparative study briefly sketched out here is meant to highlight the possibilities opened up for research into identity and difference when it comes to caste and similar social structures around the world.

Through this issue of *Biography*, then, we wish to present new research material along with novel “readings” and interpretations of figures and texts that challenge standard categories and concepts for exploring caste-worlds. The effort here is to go beyond simple binarisms in understanding life narratives of caste and to refuse reduction of the concept of life narrative to the mundane, the private, or the benign. The study of life narratives here emphasizes that stories of lives marked by caste tell us much about the private and the public, the self and the nation, the individual and the community, the intimate and the social, and the personal and political spheres.

Thematically, a number of concerns might be seen to anchor the collection. Through life narratives, we not only wish to recast caste, not only write/right caste histories, but also create a counter-archive of caste that may help us in reconstituting our theoretical, cultural, and historiographical perspectives.

Recalcitrant histories of caste may be gleaned through life narratives. It is often argued that “upper caste” autobiographers celebrate their achievements with a sense of fulfillment and celebration, while Dalit narrations of the self are ambivalent and insecure, as they continue to search for an elusive freedom (R. Kumar 208, 260). Yet it is life narratives that have given Dalits a sense of agency and creative freedom. Thus, autobiographies and even imaginary biographies have been significant attempts by Dalits to produce their own histories, which have been silenced, erased, and marginalized in official archives and mainstream scholarship. Carlo Ginzburg shows us how an early manifesto on history “from below” appeared in the form of an “imaginary biography,” where the intention was to salvage through a symbolic character a multitude of lives crushed by poverty and oppression (111–14). Similarly, Dalits have not only produced autobiographies but have also written a large number of biographies of strong and brave Dalit women and men of the past. The revolt of 1857 against British rule of India particularly has invoked imaginative and mythical memorialization of biographies of Dalit women heroes and martyrs like Jhalkari Bai and Uda Devi. These biographies—studied for example in Badri Narayan’s book *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India: Culture, Identity and Politics* and Gupta’s essay “Dalit ‘Viranganas’ and Reinvention of 1857”—pick up selective fragments from archival, official, and academic historical records and blend them with oral traditions and local memories of the community, rivaling the biographical histories of a nationalist figure like Rani Lakshmi Bai. They enmesh history, memory, and life narratives with visuals, posters, *melas* (public festivals), and public meetings. A multitude of lives that have been destined to count for nothing find their symbolic redemption in the depiction of immortal characters. Further, Dalits and Dalitbahujans have written life narratives and hagiographies of their own gods and ancestors, for example, Raidas, Deena Bhadri, and Eklavya. Finally, there has been a valorization of radical caste reformers like Phule, Periyar, and Ambedkar through life narratives. To take another example, life narratives of Poyikayil Yohannan, a radical Dalit thinker in twentieth-century Kerala, have created mythical accounts around him, which ultimately lead to a project of salvation, as Sanal Mohan has shown in “‘Searching for Old Histories’: Social Movements and the Project of Writing History in Twentieth-Century Kerala.” Taken together, such imaginative constructions from the past of Dalit lives have provided Dalits with a history, identity, and agency. The creation of this counter-archive is a major project among Dalits that allows them to emerge as socially significant actors. It also breaks down and rejects categories of nonfiction and fiction, underlined in the invented term “autobiofictionalography” by Lynda Barry.

Tied to this creation of a counter-archive is the role of print, education, and the vernacular in the relationship between caste and life narratives. Print and visual engagements with lived experiences are often couched in the vernacular. In this issue of *Biography*, we are thus attempting to discover vernacular inscriptions of caste through life narratives. The meanings of the vernacular have crossed disciplines, subjects, and themes, and are relevant for this issue. Scholars of South Asia have particularly grappled with the vernacular, whereby distinctions between the vernacular as culturally specific, local, traditional, indigenous, popular, raw, low, and associated with the masses versus the official and the academic (often expressed in the English language) as universal, cultivated, modern, sophisticated, classical, high, and, for the few, have been reiterated and challenged. Shankar has argued that a vernacular sensibility suggests “an orientation toward rootedness and cultural autonomy and specific locality” and “a sense of local habitation based on genealogy . . . without becoming synonymous with it” (*Flesh* 22, 24). And Uday Kumar views the vernacular less as a linguistic indicator than as “a space of thinking, argumentation and truth production which differs from, even as it interacts with, more professional, technically self-conscious writing” (7). The potential of deploying the vernacular in the study of life narratives and caste cannot be overestimated. The language of caste lives often needs a corporeal presence and nearness of lived experience that the vernacular can offer (Chatterjee 18).

Connected to this are equally important questions about “distinguished” and “ordinary” lives; and about cataclysmic, big events and everyday life. For example, what is the role of caste in biographies of Indian nationalist leaders like Gandhi and Nehru? Is a life narrative significant only when it is about heroes and “important” people? In an autobiography of a Dalit, caste becomes a salient feature of self-representation, which sometimes makes the writing “marketable.” Caste provides the lens by which the reading audience views the author, and the author’s narrative subjectivity is predicated often upon a stereotypical Dalit identity (see Parthasarathi Muthukkaruppan’s essay in this regard). At the same time, life narratives apparently not attentive to caste can also carry within them caste markers and prejudices. Even when effaced and erased, how does caste reappear in life narratives of “upper caste” people? And how does caste work in everyday lived experiences of ordinary people, where it is not the grand narratives but daily lived moments that are recorded? How is the mundane, the ordinary, the anecdotal, the fragmentary, and the everyday placed in life narratives of the oppressed, and how does one narrate a life that has been dismissed and is not seen as “worthy” of commemoration or remembrance?

The essays in this special issue are interested collectively in how and why circuits of production and available repertoires of representations of individual lives informed by caste reveal and veil intersections with other social categories such as gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, religion, and nation. For example, are women's life narratives different from men's, and what happens when they intersect with narrativizations of caste? Similarly, how does the narrativization of caste identities impact queer identities (as seen in Sumit Baudh's essay)? How are the politics of telling and not telling interwoven with gender, sexuality, and caste in life narratives? Some of the essays in this collection are also particularly keen to bring to the fore political deployments of the body through markers like touch, stigma, and performance (see, for example, the essays by Charu Gupta, Shailaja Paik, and Mukul Sharma). Life narratives, after all, can be seen as putting one's body on the page, the screen, and the stage, and thus evoking an aesthetic intimacy.

In general, the essays and indeed this project as a whole can be seen as continuing to struggle with notions of representation and representativeness. Through individual lives and their telling in various forms and genres, the collection explores how and why representation of caste in particular ways becomes a critical ground for identity formation and social positioning, both for "upper caste" individuals and for Dalits and Dalitbahujans or, in the context of Japan, Burakumin. These forms of representation of caste through life narratives not only reflect the hidden fears and desires of the individual and of the collective unconscious, not only make private feelings and images public, but also shape, image, and texture our lives in particular ways. Life narratives often represent dominant paradigms of caste, what Jacques Rancière calls "embodied allegories of inequality" (12). Caste can also be (mis)represented in different ways in biopics such as *Periyar*, *The Dirty Picture*, and *Bandit Queen*.<sup>1</sup> Social media, websites, and blogs can enable and distort representation of lives marked by caste. At the same time, representations may challenge caste in profound ways. Dalit life narratives, for example, often frame events and represent caste in distinct ways, challenging ideas of the "unrepresentable" and investing in an ethics of testimony. Different practices of representing caste lives thus throw open for us possibilities of challenging dominant embodiments, where representation is not just about replication but also about innovation.

As both representation and representativeness, a life narrative might be thought of as that which mediates between the *varna-jati* complex as a social category on the one hand and the individual (real) experiences of a life on the other. In this sense, the recourse to life narratives in a critical mode may be understood in multiple ways: as an attention to the experiences narrated; as

an inquiry into genre; and as a mode of reading that attends particularly to protocols of the real and the authentic in a wide variety of texts that narrate lives. The collection does not attempt to adjudicate among these different and sometimes competing ways of deploying life narratives methodologically, preferring rather to let a profusion of approaches prevail.

Some of these approaches might be brought to bear in reading Rohith Vemula's death note as a devastating form of life narrative. Rohith Vemula was a politically active Dalit PhD scholar who committed suicide in January 2016 after being suspended from Hyderabad Central University. Much controversy has surrounded his life, his identity, and the reasons for his death.<sup>2</sup> Many lessons regarding caste lives can be drawn from this tragic episode. Vemula's note, with its unalloyed mix of idealism and despair, went viral on the Internet soon after his suicide and, in so doing, shook the national government for several weeks and brought unprecedented attention to the toxic mix of casteist prejudice and bureaucratic indifference that all too often greets vulnerable Dalit students like Vemula. Here is the note (reproduced verbatim, with repetitions, as reported in newspapers):

Good morning,

I would not be around when you read this letter. Don't get angry on me. I know some of you truly cared for me, loved me and treated me very well. I have no complaints on anyone. It was always with myself I had problems. I feel a growing gap between my soul and my body. And I have become a monster. I always wanted to be a writer. A writer of science, like Carl Sagan. At last, this is the only letter I am getting to write.

I always wanted to be a writer. A writer of science, like Carl Sagan.

I loved Science, Stars, Nature, but then I loved people without knowing that people have long since divorced from nature. Our feelings are second handed. Our love is constructed. Our beliefs colored. Our originality valid through artificial art. It has become truly difficult to love without getting hurt.

The value of a man was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility. To a vote. To a number. To a thing. Never was a man treated as a mind. As a glorious thing made up of star dust. In every field, in studies, in streets, in politics, and in dying and living.

I am writing this kind of letter for the first time. My first time of a final letter. Forgive me if I fail to make sense.

My birth is my fatal accident. I can never recover from my childhood loneliness. The unappreciated child from my past.

May be I was wrong, all the while, in understanding world. In understanding love, pain, life, death. There was no urgency. But I always was rushing. Desperate to start a life. All the while, some people, for them, life itself is curse. My birth is my fatal accident. I can never recover from my childhood loneliness. The unappreciated child from my past.

I am not hurt at this moment. I am not sad. I am just empty. Unconcerned about myself. That's pathetic. And that's why I am doing this.

People may dub me as a coward. And selfish, or stupid once I am gone. I am not bothered about what I am called. I don't believe in after-death stories, ghosts, or spirits. If there is anything at all I believe, I believe that I can travel to the stars. And know about the other worlds.

If you, who is reading this letter can do anything for me, I have to get 7 months of my fellowship, one lakh and seventy five thousand rupees. Please see to it that my family is paid that. I have to give some 40 thousand to Ramji. He never asked them back. But please pay that to him from that.

Let my funeral be silent and smooth. Behave like I just appeared and gone. Do not shed tears for me. Know that I am happy dead than being alive.

"From shadows to the stars."

Uma anna, sorry for using your room for this thing.

To ASA family, sorry for disappointing all of you. You loved me very much. I wish all the very best for the future.

For one last time,

Jai Bheem

I forgot to write the formalities. No one is responsible for my this act of killing myself.

No one has instigated me, whether by their acts or by their words to this act.

This is my decision and I am the only one responsible for this.

Do not trouble my friends and enemies on this after I am gone.

Is this not a representation of a life, that is, a life narrative, which also has a defining relationship with death? How does one "read" a life narrative such as this when the very act of reading might seem like a desecration of a life marked by vulnerability? At the same time—how does one *not* read such a life narrative? Wasn't Vemula precisely trying to get us to attend seriously to the issues that brought him to his difficult decision? Not reading seems equally a dishonoring of Vemula's life, activist spirit, and anguished cry from the heart. Vemula's death note marks an existential moment that acknowledges and yet refuses narrativization of caste. Not all life narratives engaging caste take as fraught a textual form as Vemula's final message, but his text serves as a good illustration of the real stakes and unique challenges posed to academic criticism and scholarship in reading such narratives.

In the crucial section XX of "Annihilation of Caste," Ambedkar makes a distinction between rules and principles in relationship to caste (also referred to in Y. S. Alone's essay), averring that the practice of caste depended on rule-based approaches that externally ordained behavior. In contrast, principles simply offered guidelines to behavior that could be tested. "Rules seek to tell an agent just what course of action to pursue," he notes. "Principles do not prescribe a specific course of action" (298). He is clear that the terrible

discriminations of caste are a result of the blind allegiances (superstitions) that rules fostered.

Life narratives about caste represent the myriad manifestations in the lives of individuals (agents in Ambedkar's language) of such blind allegiances to rules. They give flesh and blood to the point that Ambedkar makes more abstractly, more theoretically. They show how the rules of caste are experienced and acceded to not only by Dalits but all agents within the *varna-jati* complex, or within the hierarchical social order of Japan, and also how these rules are challenged, bent, resisted, and contested. As made evident by the essays in this collection, life narratives constitute a crucial archive for the study and critique of caste structures in all their diversity.

#### NOTES

1. See Shankar's essay "Thugs and Bandits" on *Bandit Queen* in this regard.
2. For a recent newspaper article that tried to clear some of the controversy, see Mondal.

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