In Search of Other Worlds: The dalit in *De Facto* Statelessness in Avinash Dolas's "The Refugee"

By

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Introduction: A Confession

In this article, I discuss the position of the dalit citizen of India as one of *de facto* statelessness. To embark on my discussion, I delineate the dalit[1] body as primally marked by the absence of the materiality of intimate touch from the caste-Hindu. This absence of touch allows me to locate the dalit body within social distance, that is, in empty space as the site facilitating the pure existence of humiliation. The humiliation, I allude to stems from the habitation of the dalit body in a perpetual state of alterity, given the absence of the warm touch of the other encasing it. This framework of humiliation stains the body in corporal lowness— a lowness in which the ruins of the consciousness inhabiting the body are trapped. Such a state of entrapment may lead these ruins of consciousness to go to great lengths to do violence to their bondage in social distance, as I demonstrate through my reading of the suicide letter written by dalit doctoral student and activist Rohith Vemula (1988-2016). Seeming to drift as the dalit body does in the perennial liminality of social distance, Marathi dalit write rand activist Avinash Dolas portrays the figure of the dalit as akin to that of a refugee in the Indian nation-state. Through a reading of Dolas's short story "The Refugee," I aver the untenability of this portrayal. Indeed, the dalit can, I suggest, perhaps be said to occupy a position which is closer to that of an internally displaced person— a person disowned by Brahminical touch and recognised in her internal displacement as a figure that the United Nations would term an 'invisible citizen' of India. This state of invisible citizenship, I argue, situates the dalit in *de facto* statelessness within an international juridical regime of human rights. Though the dalit's claim to these human rights will not ensure that her body is liberated from the

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Refugee Watch, 57, June 2021

humiliation of social distance, her voicing of such a claim will set a tussle against caste privilege in motion. This tussle, as I show in broad strokes, bears the possibility of ending with the dalit being able to articulate her human rights as political rights.

I am aware that my arguments are defined by the lack of a solid grounding in dalit experience, thus perhaps structuring my sweeping enunciations about the dalit body within a lens of erring. It is my habitation of this framework of erring that prevents me from attempting to dive into the terrain of, for instance, class— an aspect that is inextricably intertwined with the functioning of caste.[2] Nor do I pretend to much other than ignorance about the ways in which caste and untouchability function across locations and groups in India. It is from within this flawed foundation of erring that I speak about the dalit body through the lens of the only— and often largely inaccurate— determinant of dalit identity that has been historically handed down to me as a savarna scholar.[3] The determinant I allude to is, of course, that of the absence of intimate touch from the caste-Hindu. However, perhaps I should not stop myself from the act of erring as I blindly grope my way through an outside, especially if my effort be to make the dalit feel touched despite her segregation in social distance.

Social Distance and Encounters with Alterity

According to psychiatrist Damir Huremović, even before the onset of Novel Coronavirus Disease in 2019, the term 'social distancing' had begun to be used to indicate physical distancing as a means to break a chain of infection through the separation of infected populations from unaffected individuals.[4] This separation, stated Huremović, was effected through a combination of methods such as isolation as a means to separate populations infected with communicable diseases, shelter-in-place as a variant of quarantine, and the maintenance of a sanitary cordon for the restriction of movement of people within a larger, defined geographic area.[5]Perhaps the dearth of touch marking all of these methods can be historically traced to the beginnings of the concept of social distance— a concept that was fleshed out in the Bogardus Social Distance Scale.

American sociologist Emory Bogardus (1882-1973) developed his Social Distance Scale in 1924 to ethically interrogate the United States of America's white supremacist prejudice against Asian immigrants in general and Japanese-Americans in the state of California in particular.[6] This prejudice that Bogardus intended to question, was manifested through the segregation of Japanese-Americans in the early twentieth century. The act of segregation, Bogardus implied, was articulated by the physical distance that a more powerful body empirically maintained from the body of his perceived other, thus depriving this other of familiar touch. Through this absence of touch, the other was made to bodily inhabit empty space as the site of the pure existence of humiliation, as jurist, politician, and social activist Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956) had put it in the context of the dalit body.[7] It was the

infiniteness of space, then, that could be said to have paradoxically defined the internment camps within which a multitude of Japanese-Americans found themselves confined during the Second World War.[8] After all, the practice of internment connoted the lack of an empathetic mutuality of touch between white American and Japanese-American skin. This lack rendered Japanese-American bodies unable to geographically locate themselves in a community unbounded by alterity connoting an encounter delineated by the want of affectionate material touch from the power-wielding other.[9] Such alterity constituted the lived experience not only of Japanese-Americans, but also of African-Americans in the American south, haunted as both groups were by segregation.[10] The realisation of this fact led Bogardus to subsequently think of extending his Scale to study social distance as a marker of white American prejudice against mullatoes.[11]

I emphasise the matter of fleshly touch as a marker of intimacy by drawing upon the work of Robert Park (1864-1944), an American urban sociologist and a precursor to Bogardus in the study of social distance. Park had argued that Bogardus Scale could help "reduce to something like measurable terms the grades and degrees of understanding and intimacy which characterize personal and social relations" in the United States.[12] Evidently, then, a poignancy marks Bogardus Scale, given its connotation of the lack of the reciprocity of "understanding and intimacy" between two groups. Social distance, I would accordingly claim, implies the forced insertion of space between two fleshly bodies, with the more powerful of the two bodies denying the subjugated body intimate and fraternal touch on self-proclaimed grounds of ethnic or caste superiority. Unsurprisingly, social distancing as a medical practice is marked by the spatial separation and quarantining of individuals, that is, by the situation of these individuals in a state bereft of touch.

German sociologist Georg Simmel (1858-1918), Park's guru, had added that the absence of tactile closeness reduced the ethnically stigmatized body in the United States to a "potential wanderer."[13] Simmel's point, I think, makes light of a larger problem within the juridical framework of the United Nations, according to which nomads and wanderers find "all places they visit [to be] part of their usual environment…their country of residence."[14] From this perspective, I suggest that the absence of the convivial mutuality of touch finds more resonances in the figure of the refugee—a figure who, lacking sociably intimate touch, never feels at home in the world, shorn as she is of "any place of usual residence to which to refer."[15] Groping for fleshly contact as a means to phenomenological grasp a geographic area she occupies, the refugee, in bodily terms, can be said to drift in empty space. Perhaps, then, the figure of the refugee is inseparable from social distance as contextually descriptive of the picture of the tangibility of segregation that Bogardus paints.[16] The lack of the intimate touch of the empirical other, I thus conjecture, marks the bodies of citizens who are deprived of their political rights—an act of deprivation that renders these bodies unable to determine the worlds they liminally inhabit, owing to their pure experience of alterity.[17]

Though Bogardus and Park had applied the concept of social distance only to Asian-American and African-American bodies, I propose that the dalit body crystallises the concept by embodying social encounters with alterity through the very fact of its physical existence in the circuit of caste. I trace my proposition to the fact that the dalit body was theoretically codified solely in terms of untouchability as far back as 1768 in British East India Company officer Alexander Dow's *The History of Hindostan.*[18] Perhaps, then, the dalit body, in theory, floats in spatial distance in the absence of the touch of the other, marked by a phenomenology of alterity in caste-Hindu society.[19] Through a convergence of these factors, the concept of social distance, in conjunction with the figure of the refugee, can conceivably help us grasp the position of the dalit as a citizen of the Indian nation-state. After all, if the body of the dalit bears overlaps with the figure of the refugee in their commonality of inhabiting geographies of social distance, these overlaps may allow us to fall back on the refugee to tease out a dalit's political rights. To unravel these rights, then, we first need to conceptualise the dalit body (and, if we dare, a dalit consciousness) in the absence of touch.

An Assay at Touching the Dalit Body

The dalit's occupation of space marked by the dearth of the touch of a caste-Hindu 'friend' theoretically produces a condition for the caste-Hindu to maintain perennial dominance over the dalit body. This is because the dalit's capacity to inhabit the space of her body becomes crippled: owing to the absence of the touch of a 'friend,' a dalit is left un-homely in her body, oscillating between entrapment within and alienation from the body. This oscillation defers the possibility of the dalit body being definable as anything but 'bare' and, by that rationale, located beyond categorisation as 'human' in some platitudinous Enlightenment-inflected sense.[20]

The closing of spatial distance, human geographer Paul Rodaway suggests, is a prerequisite for a body to be able to locate itself in its world, touch as an active sense being integrally involved in a body's perception of space and its consequent relationship to place.[21] Needless to say, by this logic, the skin is the fundamental means by which a body acquires its sense of the world— or, to be more precise, of the world it finds itself limited to inhabiting.[22] This is significant because, according to Aniket Jaaware, touching an object would be tantamount to laying claim over it,[23]making possession of the sensuous geography of one's world indivisible from one's ability to exercise autonomy over one's body. To put it differently, one's haptic autonomy allows one to be at home in one's world. However, a dalit's ability to be at home in her body is compromised in more ways than one.

As the labouring body on the back of which the privileged edifices of caste-Hindu economy, society, leisure, and power are built, the dalit body is subjected to the prejudiced operation of segregation. The rationale behind this operation of prejudice through separation in terms of space—if prejudice can or, indeed, need be rationalised—is that in terms of touch, the dalit body is

framed within waste. It is therefore primarily perceived from a caste-Hindu position as an object that would evoke what Martha Nussbaum calls "projective disgust"[24] implying disgust displaced by the privileged upon marginalised peoples or groups[25] because the latter are apparently, in their very existence, 'impure' "like vomit or feces."[26] Privileged communities accordingly punish marginalize depopulations by cordoning them off on the grounds that in their 'impurity,' these populations exemplify the "basely animal," as opposed to the "truly human."[27] 'Primary disgust, however, is constituted by objects that a privileged body itself excretes— objects in a state of decay that make a "truly human" body confront the fact of its own putrefaction and the eventuality of its corporeal death.[28] By the logic of these two kinds of disgust, dalit bodies are rendered objects of projective disgust and cordoned off in spaces sans the 'human' touch of caste-Hindus— that is, in a state of social distance— because they work on waste as the stuff evocative of primary disgust.[29]

The dalit body's being trapped in a *cordon sanitaire* by the operation of projective disgust need not, however, be quite literal: cleaning the excreta of the "truly human" body in caste-Hindu households, dalit janitors may find themselves segregated in and through plain sight by being overlooked into invisibility.[30] Rendered un-homely in the world through this state of social distance in the economy of caste, a dalit would ostensibly feel unsettled by her fleshly isolation in the humiliation of alterity.[31] Unlike the primary disgust that a privileged body would face, the disgust exuded by a dalit body upon itself, encased in waste, could estrange the consciousness residing in it. After all, the gruesome forms that the dalit body's location in waste historically assumed, would probably have forced the body into perennially confronting the instant of its death and the concomitant fact of its expendability. For instance, dalits in the south of Bihar, threshing crops during the first harvest since the early-twentieth century, had to bodily absorb the deadly microbial matter released by the crops during this threshing, if only for the benefit of caste-Hindu landowners' bodies and lives.[32] *Doms* have generationally cremated corpses and also dissected decaying cadavers in early-twentieth century medical colleges in Bengal, thus having had to expose their bodies to the decaying material that the objects of their work released.[33] At a time when vaccination against cowpox involved the arm-to-arm method of transferring bodily fluids contaminated by disease, most of the vaccinifers available were only dalit children.[34]

In more figurative roles, dalits, as participants in rituals in caste-Hindu Bengali households, symbolically absorbed the death-dealing 'touch' of goddesses of epidemics like smallpox and cholera, thus emblematically protecting the caste-Hindu inhabitants of the households from these epidemics.[35] In the process, the dispensability of their bodies was spelled out to them in terms of disease and death. In a similar capacity, dalits in northern India functioned as scapegoats in rites representing the expulsion of diseases from villages.[36] Existentially, though the enactment of the role of the scapegoat or that of the absorbent of epidemiological material would not make the dalit body wallow in death, it would— as with all the roles I have

outlined so far— ontologically wound any consciousness inhabiting the body. This consciousness would, after all, find itself in a cycle of continued negation and depletion because of the marking of its physical habitat in terms of lowness. The cycle of projective disgust atrophying the death-bearing dalit body would, indicates Ambedkar, eventually shatter this perpetually negated consciousness into ruins,[37] displacing the 'plague' of the body upon these ruins to mark them as epitomising a "moving moral plague."[38]

In an effort to escape death as their empirical fate, the ruins of the dalit's wounded consciousness, drifting in the quarantined space of their fleshly habitat, would attempt to escape this habitat and float into the space outside the body. Needless to say, they would be unable to execute any such escape. The oscillation of these ruins between the unwillingness to stay and the inability to leave their sensuous geography would continue *ad nauseam*, marking the body in terms of a gap between itself and the ruins of the consciousness trapped in it. Such a gap would make the body cavernously yawn into existential bareness— a bareness that would coincide with the body's inability to claim the category of 'human' for itself. After all, the caste-Hindu body would already have claimed possession of this category by displacing its own contagion and death upon the dalit as its empirical other.

Perhaps, though, the ruins can lay claim to being 'human' by having the untouchable dalit tongue testify to their ontologically-wounded state. This, though, is an act of testimony that is deferred into impossibility. After all, the ruins occupying the bare dalit body would themselves disavow the body in which the tongue resides. Furthermore, within an ontologically-inflected juridical framework of rights, Nussbaum would hesitate to prescribe such a project of testimony because though the law recognised that some dehumanised figures— like dalits— experienced emotions, only those emotions that the consecrated traditions of Western law validated as "human experiences," could help a body attain political recognition as "human."[39] This juridical aporia notwithstanding, Dipesh Chakrabarty would consider the dalit body's appropriation of 'human-ness' necessary because in its absence, a dalit tongue could perhaps speak only after the ruins of consciousness had successfully executed their escape from the body. To clarify this point, Chakrabarty draws attention to the testimony of Rohith Vemula, speaking after Vemula had committed suicide.

The Importance of Being 'Human'

On January 17, 2016, the 28year-old Vemula, then a doctoral student at the University of Hyderabad, committed suicide to make a statement with his body against his penalization by the University authorities— an act of penalization that he was subjected to for his participation in dalit activism.[40] His suicide letter was, by my reading, in essence, his tongue articulating the lot of the ruins of the consciousness that had once inhabited his body. This is why his tongue could speak only after the ruins had vacated his body and floated off into the infinitudes of space— a fate Vemula preferred not merely

because of his love for the work of astronomer and astrophysicist Carl Sagan.[41]Vemula's suicide letter, in its cryptic non-linearity could, by his own abject confession, "fail to make sense."[42] That is why I here perhaps mis-read the letter by casting it in a mould of linearity. This is an act for which I can only excuse myself by confessing toa calculated erring as the foundation from which I receive Vemula's message, sent as the message was by the unrecuperable tongue of an evacuated body.

In the letter, Vemula wrote that the ruins occupying his bare body had been devalued through the devaluation of his claim to being a "man," the fundamental denominator of a dalit as a 'man' being, according to him, that he be "treated as a mind" rather than as a "thing." Having been reduced by the powers-that-be to a "thing"— a non-human "monster" that only counted as a vote or, worse, as a statistic— Vemula had found an increasingly "growing gap between [his] soul and [his] body."[43] This yawning gap was the bareness separating the ontologically-scarred ruins of his consciousness from the body they occupied in a sociality of "loneliness."[44] The perpetual increase of this existential bareness defined the ruins of his soul in terms of the desire to float away from the body they were trapped in, reduced as these ruins were to feeling "just empty" and "desperate to start a life."[45] By committing suicide, the ruins were attempting to flee the body, to "travel to the stars" in search of "other worlds."[46] After all, these worlds would perhaps bear the promise of the intimacy of touch, thus affirming Vemula's body as historically constituted not in terms of death-dealing material but as "a glorious thing made up of star dust."[47] Though the threshold density of the touch of stardust composing these worlds would not necessarily be the same as the density of the wounded ruins of the consciousness floating toward them, the two would perhaps intimately intertwine in oneness, leading these ruins to gain the fullness of life through a caressing reciprocity of touch. Vemula's start of life after death— a state he could best describe as "after-death"— would thus be a phase in which he could feel at home in a world other than the fleshly one he had inhabited in alterity.[48] Unsurprisingly, he ended his letter by succinctly describing his journey from the bareness of his body to the fullness of life in "after-death," as a journey "[f]rom shadows to the stars."[49]

Throughout his letter, Vemula underscores the need to recognisethe "mind" of a dalit as that of a "man"— a 'human.'[50] Such an act of recuperation can perhaps be legitimately effected for the benefit of a dalit in keeping with the Indian Constitution's juridical emphasis on collapsing the distance between caste-Hindu citizens and dalits through an admission of their "EQUALITY."[51] However, making 'human' equality across castes and classes workable in keeping with the letter of the law would require that we in turn recognise Western juridical and political yardsticks as necessary. After all, though these yardsticks categorise a 'thing' as a non-human figure,[52] they simultaneously bear the possibility of granting recognition toa figure as a "man"—a 'human' in possession of political rights.[53]Indeed, if 'human,' as a juridical category, functions as a marker of political rights, it is interesting to note that Vemula had been reduced to a "thing" precisely by being allowed a

carnivalesque moment in which he could eloquently express a political right he possessed— a right that a caste-Hindu would possess in equal measure.

As a dalit, Vemula located himself in a chain of equivalence— the equivalence between "a vote…a number…a thing."[54] Before discarding this chain as reductive, we should admit that within the parameters of the Western nation-state, the chain comprises three *almost* equivalent objects. After all, while the wounding reduction of a consciousness to a statistic or a thing might be in keeping with the neoliberal nation-state's administration of 'things,' the casting of a vote sees Vemula counteracting this act of administration by exercising political sovereignty over the Indian nation-state. In this sense, before setting out to start a life in a state of 'after-death,' Vemula leaves his mark as a "man" within the Western nation-state's paradigm of "Man" as a citizen in possession of political rights.[55] This allows us to make another observation about the dalit body.

I have conjectured at the start of my article that the dalit bears convergences with the figure of the refugee. After all, just as Vemula exercises popular sovereignty in an always already transitory manner— touching the ballot only to be reduced to a 'thing'— a refugee is a figure in incessant transit—a figure who starts her journey into liminality as a citizen with political rights, only to find herself reduced to a statistical category within a statist administration of 'things.'[56] However, the *bareness* of the dalit body, with contagion and death-dealing waste displaced upon it, marks the body in terms of dispensability, with its life unacknowledged within the economy of caste. This unsanctified dispensability, Giorgio Agamben would perhaps suggest, is not the same as the life of the refugee as *barelife*— a life that is politically deemed sanctified and needing to be killed despite the acknowledgment of this sanctity.[57] This would explain Vemula's possession of at least one political right, unlike the refugee who is stripped of all political rights to be killed.[58] Evidently, the resonances between the dalit and the refugee should not be overstated, though both are definable in terms of social distance and the search of tactile geographies of homeliness— geographies that would allow them to feel at home in the world. Is there, then, a counterpart to the figure of the refugee that we can examine— a figure that bears overlaps with the dalit and that can help bespeak a dalit's political rights in India? For the answer, I turn to Marathi dalit writer and activist Avinash Dolas's short story "The Refugee" (trans. 1992), set against the backdrop of the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971.

"Desperate to Start a Life"

If social distance would leave the dalit body longing for the intimacy of touch, it would also have the body wandering in search of sociality sans alterity, as I have stated before. Challenging his fleshly habitation in alterity, Vemula demonstrated that when a dalit was liberated from her sensuous segregation as a thing, she could hunt for other worlds— worlds that bore possibilities beyond alterity. Caste being the inside that located the dalit body in the

humiliation of alterity, the liberation of the dalit from the circuitous logic of caste could free her to search for such other worlds. Santu, the 21 year-old Mahar protagonist of Dolas's "The Refugee," experienced this liberation from caste as he found himself evicted from a caste-Hindu dominated village, the outskirts of which he lived in. In perpetual exile from the un-homeliness of the village, once expelled, he found himself freed from living in a state of social distance determined by caste, thus gaining the opportunity to "start a life."

Living with his family in a Mahar settlement segregated from the village, Santu is disgruntled with his lot as a Mahar. The course of events that sets him off in search of other worlds begins when a Mahar woman from the settlement draws water from a well solely used by caste-Hindus. As retribution, the caste-Hindu inhabitants of the village beat the woman for having polluted the well with the 'impurity' of her body. To make matters worse, they stop giving the Mahars work, even depriving the Mahars of water and food.[59] Revolted by the violent response to the 'pollution' of the well, Santu resists the retribution heaped upon the Mahars. In response to his resistance, the caste-Hindus demand that Santu confess he has done wrong, seek forgiveness from them, and prostrate his body before them. If he refuses to do so, they vow to burn the settlement that Santu and the other Mahars of the village live in. Faced with this demand, Santu, instead of reducing his body to abjection, argues and "protest[s] for [his] rights" until his mother, to prevent further retribution upon the Mahars, pleads with him to leave the Mahar settlement— and, metonymically, the village— forever.[60] After all, according to his mother, a Mahar self-evidently has no rights. Predictably, Santu is unable to demand his rights in juridical terms through the mediation of 'human' as an indicator of equity: the plenitude marking 'human' as a category has been appropriated by the Mahars' caste-privileged aggressors.

Expelled from the charmed circle of caste and, by extension, from what seems to him to be his last opportunity of seeking intimate sociality despite alterity, the yawning of social distance before and behind Santu stretches to breaking point as the realisation dawns on him that "[h]e [i]s an outsider."[61] Finding himself apparently devoid of the last promises of the convivial touch of his empirical other, Santu feels diminished to a 'thing' drifting in emptiness. Looking ahead of him, he thinks of the stretch of ground separating him from the village of his origin as perceptible only in terms of space: "It was as if nothing had happened. There was no village, and there were no people, no animals."[62] Alienated in un-homeliness from his body which is now purely situated in humiliation, he fails to cognise his tears as affective markers of "human experience," saying to himself, "One shouldn't call them tears. This is just water. It…knows no other way but to leak out of the eyes like this."[63]

As Santu arrives at a nearby railway station to board a train and fumble for other worlds, the social distance that ties him to his village snaps, allowing him to emerge from "[t]he tenuous folds of casteism [that had] hem[med] in *his mind*."[64] This emergence of the ontologically-wounded ruins of his consciousness from the emptiness of space into a "mind," manifests

itself as Santu grasps the sights and sounds of the railway station by disavowing caste-Hindu scriptural wisdom:

> [W]herever you went, you'd find only human beings. Shameless, thieving, servile, wretched dogs who sit chewing the crumbs thrown to them, and *getting beaten like mad dogs*…Some bark at the morsels thrown to them—*just like me*!*Thinking in this manner, he had called himself a dog.*[65]

Drawing on the discursive material he has inherited from caste, Santu realises he has accidentally alluded to the woman beaten in his village as a "mad dog" and has compared himself to a "dog" who barks.[66] He instantly disowns these thoughts— and the received wisdom of caste— to board a train on a journey to Bombay. His embarking on this journey annihilates his habitation of pure space by allowing him the opportunity to "start a life" beyond the sanitary cordon of a Mahar settlement, thus undoing his ties to caste.[67]A journey beyond such a cordon in a village can, after all, according to Ambedkar, allow the dalit as a "mind" to challenge preconceptions about her body being marked unto death by waste, bareness, and dispensability.[68]

While on the train, Santu meets Surji, a refugee who has escaped being massacred in erstwhile East Pakistan during the Bangladesh Liberation War. Surji, like Santu, is heading for Bombay where he has relatives with whom he will put up.[69] In conversation with Surji who has also had to break ties with his place of origin, Santu is left in a tangle of thoughts:

> A man leaves Bangla Desh [sic] to see his relations in Bombay. *The government of India gives shelter to thousands and millions of the homeless* [stateless persons from Bangladesh] *And here am I, a citizen of this country*! On one side there was Bangla Desh in turmoil and on the other, the community of the Mahars, in agony. One homeless Bangla Deshi [sic] was going back to his relations after twenty years. And *one Mahar*, *even after twenty years, was homeless in his own country*."[70]

Leaving the inequity of social distance behind him, Santu may have begun to feel at home in his body. He is, though, yet to feel at home in the Indian nation-state. In essence, he is, after all, an internally displaced person [IDP]—a person who, in keeping with the definition of an IDP by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, has had to leave his(un-homely) "home" because of "conflict or persecution."[71] His expulsion from the village leaves him disillusioned because like all IDPs, he has to "rely on [his] own government for protection from persecution"— a government that seems palpably "unwilling to provide such protection."[72] Indeed, Santuis well aware of the fact that the Indian state, through its indifference toward the Mahar settlement in his village— or to the lot of dalits as such— helps caste-Hindus 'keep dalits in their place,'[73] so to speak. In this sense, the state shapes the Indian nation as what I would term a 'caste-nation'[74]— a formation that estranges a dalit like Santu into the inability to articulate his political rights as a "man," a 'human.' This state of affairs leaves Santu romanticizing Surji's

refugee status as one marked by the privilege of receiving rights from the Indian state. Indeed, Santu ends up believing that among the two of them, *he* is the refugee, given his homelessness in the country of his citizenship.

Santu's belief that the Indian state is unconditionally sheltering millions of refugees from Bangladesh is, of course, misplaced: India was not within the international juridical regime for the protection of refugees in 1971, not having been a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Given the state's consequent abjuration of accountability to the United Nations, erstwhile Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi (1917-1984) could call for the repatriation of refugees from Bangladesh since at least June of 1971, the responsibility of the Indian state toward the refugees being rooted in humanitarian and not political grounds.[75] Though Indira promised that the refugees would be repatriated only if "conditions for their safe return were created" and if they could return in 'safety and dignity,'[76] which when embedded in a humanitarian framework, became malleable as juridical concepts. This malleability allowed Indira to withhold rations and the promise of future transport for refugees. In essence, then, Indira did not leave the refugees with much choice apart from that of self-enforced repatriation.[77] Surji, returning to his relatives in India after twenty years, may have been subjected to such self-enforced repatriation— a story that remains untold in Dolas's narrative.

Protecting/'Patriating' the *De Facto* Stateless Dalit

To merely view Santu's political status as that of an IDP might prove reductive. Santu does, after all, possess an excess over Surji because his journey will not end in self-enforced exile from the Indian nation-state. However, if Santu, alienated and expelled from the 'caste-nation' as a political formation, has to articulate his rights as a 'human,' he has first to be 'patriated,' that is, to be owned by the caste-nation in filiation shorn of alterity. Without this possibility of patriation, Santu, as an IDP, will be reduced to what the United Nations terms an "invisible citizen."[78] It is in such a state of invisibility that Vemula, casting his vote, left a transitory mark upon the ballot— a mark that, in its ephemeral visibility, facilitated his political reduction to a 'thing,' forcing him to seek liberation from the alterity of the caste-nation through suicide. How, then, might a dalit be juridically recuperated from her state of invisibility so that she can verbalise her rights as a "mind"— a mind that the caste-nation would distinguish as 'human' and that the Indian state would find itself under obligation to protect?

The first step toward the telos of recognising a dalit as 'human,' I would suggest, is to comprehend that her position as an IDP might be considered akin to that of a stateless person. After all, if Santu finds his body marked and disowned by the caste-nation, he is, within a rough-and-ready equation of 'nation' and 'nationality,' "*not considered as a national by any State*," according to the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons.[79] However, the Indian state, as I have mentioned, has not been a signatory to the Convention. Furthermore, Santu has, in theory, not been

deprived of his Indian nationality, and is therefore still within the purview of Indian law. In this sense, he is a *de facto* stateless person— a person who, according to Charlotte-Anne Malischewski, might face a plight similar to that of the *de jure* stateless person, but for whose precise status the Convention has no legal definition.[80] Indeed, the only figure in whose case the bonds of nationality are legally recognised as having been loosened beyond remedy is the refugee.[81]

Having stumbled on the first step toward our telos, the second step, I would propose, is to acknowledge the fact that the Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons draws on the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights as its bedrock—"human beings shall enjoy fundamental rights and freedoms without discrimination."[82] India, it should be noted, was not only a signatory to this Declaration,[83] but also contributed to its drafting.[84] By acceding to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Indian state was and, presumably, still is under oath to fulfil the extension of "fundamental rights and freedoms without discrimination"[85] to all of its citizens, its self-location outside the Convention relating to stateless persons regardless. The 'human' rights in question would, by that logic, apply as much to the members of the caste-nation as to those on its peripheries, such as the dalit in her *de facto* statelessness. This applicability would grant a Santu, the status of 'human' by situating the Indian state within an international juridical regime of 'human' rights. Taking this point a step forward, I would assert that within the international regime promulgated by the Universal Declaration as a conduit, the Indian state would— once again, if only in theory— have no option but to assent to Santu's unspoken call for unmarked patriation within the caste-nation. After all, according to Article 15 of the Universal Declaration, "[e]veryone has the right to nationality," and "[n]o one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality."[86] In this way, the human right of demanding patriation through the mediation of nationality as a filial bond, translates within the letter of the law into a political right that a *de facto* stateless person can voice. This filial bond would insist that the Indian state assume the responsibility of protecting the political rights of dalit and caste-Hindu citizens alike.

The problem inherent to the solution I have posited is that according to the 1955 Citizenship Act of India, an Indian citizen can lose Indian nationality through the most nebulous of causes— ensconced in the most enigmatic of legal terms— such as 'deprivation'.[87] Furthermore, the Indian state alone can address a problem that requires the bridging of the gap between Indian nationality and its loss,[88] making the expulsion of a dalit from the caste-nation imminent in spite of a perhaps transient moment of patriation. This would entrench a Santu within the fallacious belief that his mother tries to instil in him— that a dalit cannot claim the right to sociality without alterity from the caste-Hindu. That a dalit should face such a predicament is hardly surprising, given the fact that untouchability, though outlawed by the Constitution of India, is still in practice under the aegis of the caste-nation.[89]

In the face of the conundrum I have outlined, I can only conceptualise a deferred end to the teleology for the recognition of a dalit as 'human,' that is, as a figure who can claim the right to situation outside alterity in the caste-nation. The foundation of the caste-nation is the fact that India is a Hindu-majoritarian state, with caste and untouchability functioning as the polarities that constitute the 'Hinduness' of the state. If the Hindu religion survives, caste and untouchability also survive, and if both are eradicated, the Hindu religion— and, by implication, any claim that India might have to being a Hindu-majoritarian state— dies.[90] With this death, the caste-nation and the dalit as closed and separate categories fade out. Until then, the call for the unconditional patriation of dalits within the caste-nation will continue, as perhaps will, in juridical terms, a duel to prove whether the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has humanitarian or political roots. The intention underpinning this duel will be the caste-nation's attempt to prove that 'humanitarian,' as a concept, is hollow and, by insinuation, separable from 'human' as some uncontestable category, if only to deprive the dalit the opportunity of being recognised as 'human' in political terms. Until this last duel is resolved in favour of dalits, the dalit body floats in the alterity of *de facto* statelessness, segregated in social distance, seeking liberation from this distance in search of other worlds than the caste-nation. Waiting for the resolution of this duel, the only positionality we can assume is that of the futility of hope.

Notes

[1]Following in the footsteps of Aniket Jaaware, I do not capitalise the 'd' of 'dalit,' if only to indicate that a dalit, in terms of a body marked by birth, would not necessarily be able to lay claim to a proper name. See Aniket Jaaware, *Practicing Caste: On Touching and Not Touching* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019).

[2]B. R. Ambedkar, *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development* (Jullunder City: The Awami Press, 1916), 19.

[3]For a discussion of the inaccuracy framing this determinant, see Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, *Why I Am Not a Hindu* (California: SAGE Publications Inc., 2019), xi.

[4]Damir Huremović, "Social Distancing, Quarantine, and Isolation," in *Psychiatry of Pandemics: A Mental Health Response to Infectious Outbreak*, ed. Damir Huremović (Switzerland: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2019), 85.

[5]Ibid., 89-90.

[6]Colin Wark and John H. Galliher. "Emory Bogardus and the Origins of the Social Distance Scale," *The American Sociologist* 38 (December 2007): 390.

[7]Gopal Guru, "Experience, Space, and Justice," in *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory*, eds. Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), 99.

[8]David K. Abe and Allison Imamura, "The Destruction of Shinto Shrines in Hawaii and the West Coast During World War II: The Lingering Effects of Pearl Harbor and Japanese-American Internment," *Asian Anthropology* 18, no. 4 (June 2019): 266-281.

[9]Aniket Jaaware, *Practicing Caste: On Touching and Not Touching* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 182.

[10]Wark and Galliher, "Emory Bogardus," 386.

[11]Ibid., 389.

[12]Robert E. Park, "The Concept of Social Distance," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 8(1923): 339.
[13]Wark and Galliher, "Emory Bogardus,"390.
[14]C. Michael Hall, Dieter K. Muller and Jarrko Saarinen, *Nordic Tourism: Issues and Cases* (Bristol: Channel View Publications, 2009), 10.
[15]Ibid.
[16]Given the long history of segregation from the intimacy of touch that comes with the territory of social distance, I find it no surprise that well into the World Health Organization's third press briefing on Novel Coronavirus Disease, Dr. Maria Van Kerkhove, American infectious disease epidemiologist and a participant in the briefing, added a caveat to erstwhile working definitions of social distancing. In the first of the two of these briefings concerning Novel Coronavirus Disease (Virtual Press Conference, 11 March 2020), Dr. Michael Ryan, Executive Director of the World Health Organization's Health Emergencies Programme, had used 'social distancing' to self-evidently imply 'physical distancing,' while in the second briefing (Virtual Press Conference, 18 March 2020), he had used the two terms interchangeably. Perhaps to imply that the historical problem of social distance was ingrained in the medical practice of social distancing, Van Kerkhove qualified Ryan's idiom by saying, "[Y]ou may have heard us use the phrase physical distancing instead of social distancing and one of the things to highlight in what Mike [Michael Ryan] was saying about keeping the physical distance from people so that we can prevent the virus from transferring to one another; that's absolutely essential. But it doesn't mean that socially we have to disconnect." The third press briefing in which Van Kerkhove makes the point I have alluded to, see World Health Organization. COVID-19, 20 March 2020.
[17]Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,2000), 15-28.
[18]According to Dow's text, anybody excluded from the "four principal [castes]," of the Hindus, were "for ever [sic] shut out from the society of every body [sic] in the nation," becoming members of the "Harri" [sic] caste in the process. Nicholas Dirks conjectures that this "Harri" caste that Dow writes about, is manned by figures Dow refers to as "untouchables." See Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). Ambedkar had paved the way for the outlawing of untouchability in a formally decolonised India in the first draft of the Indian Constitution, with those subjected to untouchability being subsequently, at least in the letter of the law, identified as 'Ex-Untouchables.' However, Barbara R. Joshi rightly argues that the term 'Ex-Untouchable' romanticises untouchability as an issue blighting the past in India, leading her to persist in using the term 'untouchable' in the context of the Indian present "not to demean but to prevent euphemisms from obscuring what is often a persistent reality." See Barbara R. Joshi, ""Ex-Untouchable": Problems, Progress, and Policies in Social Change," *Pacific Affairs* 53, no. 2 (1980): 193.
[19]Gopal Guru, "Experience, Space, and Justice,"2012.
[20]Martin L. Davies ed., "Introduction: The Enlightenment: Something to Think About" to *Thinking about the Enlightenment: Modernity and Its Ramifications* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 2.
[21]Paul Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies: Body, Sense and Place* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 42.
[22]Ibid., 44.
[23]Jaaware, *Practicing Caste,* 33.

[24]Martha C. Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 129.
[25] Ibid.
[26]Ibid., 107.
[27]Ibid.
[28] Ibid., 171.
[29]I am aware that my effort at rationalising untouchability is problematic because a dalit need not be marked by untouchability through some phenomenology of waste. Ambedkar has pointed out that a village would indeed effect the territorial segregation of dalit bodies by having them interned behind "a *cordon sanitaire*…a barbed wire…a sort of cage," in ghettoes lying on the outskirts of "[e]very Hindu village." However, he has also indicated that such segregation as a marker of the 'impure' was unnecessary. After all, the very fact of caste-Hinduness binding the village was enough to mark the dalit body as 'untouchable,' with the absence of the familiar touch of the caste-Hindu ensuring that "[t]he Untouchable has no escape from Untouchability." In both articulations, though, Ambedkar insists that the habitation of dalit bodies lies in social distance. See Jesús Francisco Cháirez-Garza, "Touching Space: Ambedkar on the Spatial Features of Untouchability," *Contemporary South Asia* 22, no. 1 (2014): 37-50, 42-43.
[30]Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Dalit Body: A Reading for the Anthropocene," in *The Empire of Disgust: Prejudice, Discrimination, and Policy in India and the US*, eds. Zoya Hasan, Aziz Z. Huq, Martha C. Nussbaum, and Vidhu Verma (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018), 9-10.
[31]Gopal Guru, "Experience, Space, and Justice," 99.
[32]Gyan Prakash, *Bonded Histories: Genealogies of Labour Servitude in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 31.
[33]David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 1-3.
[34]Ibid., 141-142.
[35]Ibid., 124.
[36]Ibid., 176. ; The spatial distantiation of the dalit body through the act of expulsion is, in this case, unsurprisingly redolent of social distancing as a practice that involves the separation of infected populationsfrom uninfected individuals. Given the discursive trajectory from social distance to social distancing, it is no coincidence that the unwitting assumption of a death-dealing virus is, today, entrapping the dalit in the clarion call of her own body, while concomitantly segregating her body in pure space through distancing as if her body *is* the Novel Coronavirus. See the testimony of dalit scavenger Polamma in Priyali Sur, "Under India's Caste System, Dalits are Considered Untouchable. The Coronavirus is Intensifying that Slur," *CNN*, April 16, 2020. https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/15/asia/india-coronavirus-lower-castes-hnk-intl/index.html .
[37]I use the term 'ruin' here in the sense in which Walter Benjamin utilises it in his notes on the *Arcades* project. According to Benjamin's notes, a ruin is an object that the historical past has prevented from reaching fulfilment, making this object consequently emblematise decay. However, the object also bears the promise of being graspable as a seamless whole if one makes the ethical effort to read it not as an object of merely empirical but also transcendental proportions. This effort can unmark the ruin and take it toward fulfilment through the intervention of "humanity" as a lens mediating the act of reading it. See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard

Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999).
[38]Gopal Guru, "Experience, Space, and Justice," 90.
[39]Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity,* 50.
[40]Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Dalit Body: A Reading for the Anthropocene," in *The Empire of Disgust: Prejudice, Discrimination, and Policy in India and the US*, eds. Zoya Hasan, Aziz Z. Huq, Martha C. Nussbaum, and Vidhu Verma. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1.
[41]P. Pavan, "The Value of a Man Was Reduced to His Immediate Identity," *Bangalore Mirror*, January 18, 2016. https://bangaloremirror.indiatimes.com/news/india/killed-dalit-student-aspired-to-become-carl-sagan/articleshow/50628141.cms.
[42]Ibid.
[43]Ibid.
[44]Ibid.
[45]Ibid.
[46]Ibid.
[47]Ibid.
[48]Ibid.
[49]Ibid.
[50]Pavan, "The Value of a Man."; In an interview, Marathi dalit writer Sharankumar Limbale (1956-the present) has said that "economic issues are not of import to us [dalits] in isolation. Along with those, we have issues of our self-respect, our fundamental rights, our status. 'We are human beings': This language…is of even greater importance to us than economic issues…Before anything else, we are human beings—we will first talk about this. This is because we have not yet been recognised as human beings." See Sharankumar Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations*, trans. Alok Mukherjee (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2004), 140.
[51]The word 'equality' is in capitals in the draft form of the Constitution. See Joshi, ""Ex-Untouchable"," 193.
[52]Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity,* 50.
[53]Ibid.
[54]P. Pavan, "The Value of a Man."
[55]Agamben, *Means Without End,* 15-28.
[56]Ibid.,5.
[57]Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 8.
[58]Agamben, *Means Without End*, 15-17.
[59]Avinash Dolas, "The Refugee," in *Poisoned Bread*, chapter trans. Y. S. Yalamkar, ed. Arjun Dangle (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan Private Limited, 2009), 253.
[60]Ibid.
[61]Ibid., 248.
[62]Ibid., 249.
[63]Ibid., 248.
[64]Ibid., 249.
[65]Ibid., 250. Emphases added.
[66]The sudden switch from "human beings" to dogs can be understood if one views the dalit body through the lens of untouchability as handed down by Hindu scriptural texts: even the most empathetic classical Sanskrit texts contain references to dalits masked as narratives about dogs. Wendy Doniger ties this to the fact that Hindu

scriptural material often portrays dalits as eaters of the cooked bodies of dogs. This, according to Doniger, is in keeping with the Hindu religion as such in that within the parameters of the religion, "you are what you eat." See Wendy Doniger, *On Hinduism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 488.The scriptural portrayals Doniger refers to cannot be dissociated from death-dealing waste as a determinant of dalit bodies: dogs are not quite welcome in Varanasi— a city hallowed by the Hindu religion— because they are perceived as "dirty…wandering over the cremation *ghats*, feeding on whatever they might find there," that is, on decaying corpses. Also see Lawrence Cohen, *No Aging in India: Alzheimer's, The Bad Family, and Other Modern Things* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 263.

[67]Dolas, "The Refugee,"251-252.

[68]Jesús Francisco Cháirez-Garza, "Touching Space: Ambedkar on the Spatial Features of Untouchability," *Contemporary South Asia* 22, no. 1 (2014): 46.

[69]Dolas, "The Refugee," 252.

[70]Ibid., 252-253. Emphases added.

[71]UNHCR Teaching about Refugees, "Internally Displaced Person," streamed on October 23, 2017, *YouTube* video, 2:29, youtube.com/watch?v=DCzpVQkencw.

[72]UNHCR Teaching about Refugees, "Internally Displaced Person", *YouTube*, October 23, 2017.

[73]Gyanendra Pandey, *A History of Prejudice: Race, Caste, and Difference in India and the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 38.

[74]By using this term vis-à-vis caste-Hindus, I am not disavowing the fact that caste is practiced in India in religions other than the Hindu religion.

[75]Peter Grbac, "India and Its 1971 Refugee "Problem"", in *McGill Blogs, McGill Human Rights Interns*, July 28, 2014,
https://blogs.mcgill.ca/humanrightsinterns/2014/07/28/india-and-its-1971-refugee-problem/.

[76]Ibid.

[77]Paula Banerjee, Module F: Ethics of care, public health, and the migrants and refugees, in *Fifth Annual Research & Orientation Workshop in Global Protection of Migrants and Refugees* (online), Calcutta Research Group, November 18, 2020. Paula Banerjee pointed out that the South Asian countries had not been signatories to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. The reason, Banerjee stated, was that these countries had reservations about the non-refoulement clause constituting Article 33(1) of the Convention. According to the non-refoulement clause, "No Contracting State shall expel or return ("*refouler*") a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his [or her] life or freedom would be threatened on account of his [or her] race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion." Evidently, if the Indian state in 1971 be a case in point, the South Asian countries wanted to retain the leeway to repatriate refugees by force if necessary—a leeway that they would not have been permitted as signatories to the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. See UNHCR. Non-Refoulement Obligations Under International Law. *Advisory Opinion on the Extraterritorial Application of Non-Refoulement Obligations Under the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and Its 1967 Protocol.*

[78]United Nations, "Invisible Citizens—The Challenges Facing Internally Displaced People (Explainer)," streamed on November 28, 2018, YouTube video, 2:09,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hGg13b1Ssxc.

[79]For a detailed discussion on the definition of the term 'Stateless Person' according to the 1954 Convention relating to the status of the stateless person, see UNHCR,

introductory note to *Convention Relating to the Status of the Stateless Persons: Text of the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2014), 6. Emphasis added.
https://www.unhcr.org/ibelong/wp-content/uploads/1954-Convention-relating-to-the-Status-of-Stateless-Persons_ENG.pdf.

[80]Charlotte-Anne Malischewski, "Legal Brief on Statelessness: Law in the Indian Context," in *The Rohingya in South Asia: People Without a State*, eds. Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury and Ranabir Samaddar (New York: Routledge, 2018), 140.

[81]Ibid.

[82]UNHCR, *Convention Relating to the Status of the Stateless Persons,* 5.

[83]Satvinder Juss, *Human Rights in India* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

[84]Miloon Kothari, "Remembering India's Contribution to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights," *The Wire*, December 20, 2018,
https://thewire.in/rights/indias-important-contributions-to-the-universal-declaration-of-human-rights.

[85]UNHCR, *Convention Relating to the Status of the Stateless Persons,* 5.

[86]Michelle Foster and Helene Lambert, *International Refugee Law and the Protection of Stateless Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 57.

[87]Malischewski, "Legal Brief on Statelessness," 144.

[88]Ibid., 141.

[89]Joshi, ""Ex-Untouchable"," 193-222.

[90]Kancha Ilaiah, *The Weapon of the Other: Dalitbahujan Writings and the Remaking of Indian Nationalist Thought* (Delhi: Pearson, 2010), xxvi.