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Undignified names: caste, politics, and everyday life in North India

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the experiences of the marginalised castes in North India, this article examines the use of given names in intercommunity micro interactions and how it shapes the practices of everyday humiliation. With ethnographic data from Dalit activist discourses as well as everyday life in an urbanising village in Rajasthan, this article analyses how the upper castes tend to deform the given names of the members of the Dalit community to produce undignified names, and how the community claims their right to be addressed with appropriate names. I engage with the complexity of the formation and use of undignified names by analysing their function in shaping the local political field to regulate participation in the public sphere and how they are linked to valuable names in the production of social distinctions and their economic benefits. Taking names as an important symbolic object, this article foregrounds the politics of humiliations in everyday intercaste *vyavahar* to understand the micro dynamics of caste reproduction and how it is negotiated and contested.

KEYWORDS

Names; caste; Dalits; symbolic power; humiliation; India

1. Introduction

On a humid September day, I was participating in a rights-awareness meeting in a town in Alwar district in Rajasthan. It was a part of a campaign led by six representatives from an NGO based in Jaipur. The NGO works on human rights issues facing marginalised communities in the state. The meeting was convened in a Dalit neighbourhood (Jatav *mohalla*) of the town where around sixty community members participated.

The meeting was a spirited event. It started with brief presentations by the visiting team. The presentations covered subjects including Dalit rights, livelihood issues, government welfare schemes, legal provisions against caste violence, and the need for more awareness about these issues. In the open discussion afterwards, the community members shared their stories of land grabs by the 'upper' caste families, their personal experiences of caste violence, their struggle to access legal help, and their aspirations for justice.

A key issue that generated a lively discussion was the undignified names that the upper castes use in addressing Dalits. Krishanlal, a social activist and one of the senior NGO workers, emphasised the importance of names in his presentation. His emphasis was on the right to be addressed with proper personal names. He spoke with reason and clarity. He also made his points through an affective register, noting the need to claim one's proper name in everyday interactions. He asked the participants

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to think deeply about their names and make it part of their struggle. The following excerpt from Krishanlal's speech indicates the importance of names in understanding intercaste relations:

They call our names in very undignified ways. In government records too, our names are written very inappropriately. Someone has a beautiful name like Revad Singh. His name is deformed to Revada. We need to challenge these practices. We need to correct our names in official documents also. They need to reflect our names in a dignified way. This is our fight for *samman*. We live with meagre material resources, but we need equal respect. We need equal *samman*. In English *samman* is called dignity. And this is our fight for dignity.

Both in his speech and in the later discussions, Krishanlal emphasised the importance of names as an object of dignity. He provides the diminutive name Revada (from Revad Singh) as an example to explicate his critique of the social deforming of Dalits' given names. To foreground the reproduction of undignified representation in government discourses, he links the use of undignified names in everyday oral discourses to written documents. Krishanlal's concluding appeal to the community members, therefore, was to reflect on one's personal name.

His emphasis on names generated intricate reactions from the community members. Some members noted, 'I had never thought about my name like this before,' while others found amusement in discussing diminutive variants of each other's proper names. Krishanlal's appeal had clearly resonated with them. This appeal develops its political and analytical efficacies through Krishanlal's linking structural inequality to the micro-practices of intercommunity interactions. The poor material conditions, labour and livelihood matters, caste atrocities, sexual violence, and difficulties in accessing the state as the core issues are co-related to the everyday indignities through undignified names. The normalisation of upper castes' use of undignified names when addressing Dalits tends also to normalise their structural positions.

Respect, honour, and dignity are key symbolic objects in normalising social relations marked by different dimensions of power (Bourdieu 1991, 1977). Symbolic struggles against the caste order need to be examined at different scales and modes, as well as their interactions (Ambedkar 1944; Gold 2017; Jaoul 2006). Krishanlal's emphasis on resisting undignified names foregrounds the importance of the symbolic struggles of the Dalits at the scale of micro interactions. This article examines the social life of given names and how they are constituted by and constitutive of hierarchical intercaste relations in everyday practices. I study how names and transactions of disrespect through them have important implications for Dalits' participation in local political and economic spheres. I suggest that focusing on the social life of names helps us to understand how symbolic domination and its contestations in inter-community interactions are part of marginalised castes' ground realities and their fight towards everyday dignity.

Caste indignities are both an expression of hierarchical relations in Indian society as well as constitutive of the order that shapes these relations. The debates around the significance of ritual hierarchy and the importance of castes as competing identities have shaped the understanding of reproduction, change, flexibility, and persistence in the caste order in India (Barnett, Fruzzetti, and Ostor 1976; Dumont 1980; Fuller 1996; Gupta 2004; Jodhka 2016; Raheja 1988; Vaid 2014). The question of how caste as a ritual hierarchy struggles to maintain its legitimacies in the public sphere in contemporary India highlights the need for examining everyday intercommunity interactions. The key analytical challenge here is to clarify how caste-differences-as-social-locations become structural positions shaping the dominant order, and how interactions between identities are reproduced, shaping hierarchical relations in everyday life. Using Bourdieu for examining contemporary caste inequalities, David Mosse identifies the challenge when he notes that

with the disappearance of overt practices of caste rank, attention is drawn to subtle attitudinal, communicative, performative, and experiential aspects of caste prejudice and humiliation. These are strategies or tactics produced through interactions (as practical logic rather than social rule) and shaped by the enduring socially deposited attitudes, dispositions, or "*habitus*". (Mosse 2020, 1245)

Mosse's adaptation of Bourdieu's framework provides directions for understanding caste power in everyday practices.

Understanding caste order as an analysis of power thus entails focusing on structural positionings as well as experiences of the margins and how they negotiate 'categorical oppression' (Raj 2020). Protests against caste-based humiliation have generated critical interest in how everyday social relations become the context of humiliations as well as how marginalised castes negotiate the moral and affective injuries of these practices (Geetha 2011; Guru 2011). A study of civility in public life shows how the persistent struggles for justice, equality, and emancipation by marginalised castes are constitutive processes of democratic societies (Waghmore 2013; Waghmore and Gorringer 2019).

The use of language in humiliation by the dominant groups becomes instrumental, in particular, when the marginalised castes start claiming institutional spaces and public domains as matters of rights and self-respect (Guru 2011). Language is constitutive of the symbolic power in society (Bourdieu 1991), and an ethnography of language is key to examining the complex politics of the margins and reproduction of power differentials (Faudree 2013). Understanding names in the social, historical, and linguistic context of their uses and circulations brings critical insights into their multifunctionality. Maurice Bloch (2006) critiques the old signifier-signified model and notes that 'the usage of names cannot be separated from pragmatics and that names are therefore used to "do" an almost unlimited number of things' (98). Names no longer remain arbitrary labels; rather, they have strong descriptive content to them (Basso 1996). If in some cultural contexts the preference is for a single name (Lindstrom 1985), in other cultural contexts, the plurality of names works as a plurality of cultural selves (Kroskrity 1993). Meanings of names are social practices shaped by how names are tied to group memberships as well as experiences within the community (Rymes 1996). The semantics, visual forms, sounds, and sound emotions of names are key considerations in different naming practices (Burt 2009; Gao 2011; Smith 2007; Watanabe 2005; Whissell 2001). Active consideration for different dimensions of a name and maintaining social control over them make naming an important object in everyday power dynamics. Examination of undignified names shows how caste power shapes naming as a social practice making it an important object of symbolic struggles.

The analysis in this article benefits from Mosse's adaptation of Bourdieu for understanding caste in contemporary India. I follow him in two ways: firstly, by engaging in an analysis that shifts from treating caste as purely ritual hierarchy to one that recognises how the caste order shapes distributions of different forms of capitals and conversions between them (see also Deshpande 2013). Secondly, I put emphasis on the micro practices through which caste society realises its material and symbolic reproduction. Focusing on names as symbolic objects and practices of indignities through them, this article examines marginalised castes' material, political, and symbolic struggles in their everyday life. An ethnographic focus on names reveals some of the micro processes of how caste can shape access to symbolic resources (dignity), political resources (access to public sphere), and material resources (conditions of livelihoods and bodily security against caste violence). To understand the efforts to politicise inter-caste interactions, one needs to examine the distribution of these resources and their conversions in diverse empirical situations and micro-contexts.

This article has six sections. In the next section, I discuss the methods and context of my study with a short historical account of caste relations in Rajasthan. In the third section, I present examples of undignified names and analyse the linkages between specific names, their undignified renaming, and how control over meanings, sounds, and visual forms of names render them important objects to practice symbolic power. In the fourth section, I examine political functions served by undignified names. I show how caste indignities tend to limit the equal political participation of the marginalised in the public spaces where they must perform additional affective labour to counter these indignities in the political field. I discuss how names as a symbolic resource can transform into a resource in the political field. In the fifth section, I present a case of the use of alternative names by one of my interlocutors and how it shows the benefits and risks of valuable names. Through this representative case, I show how names can influence local economic opportunities by shaping the possibilities as well as

conditions of livelihoods. Finally, in the concluding section, I suggest the increasing importance of everyday symbolic struggles in caste shaped inter-community micro interactions.

2. Methods and context

The data for this anthropological study has been collected using ethnographic approaches and sensibilities. I have been conducting fieldwork in Rajasthan since 2009. The empirical materials for this article were collected during different phases of my fieldwork in the Alwar and Jaipur districts between 2011 and 2017. My last follow-up trip to Rajasthan was in 2021. My focus on understanding naming practices emerged inductively from my initial interactions with Dalit NGO workers and activists during awareness-campaign meetings and workshops in the state. In these gatherings, I met Dalit community members and documented their narratives and experiences. Therefore, my Dalit interlocutors include activists, NGO workers, and other community members. They form my key research group. I have used data from cultural experts from this group to understand caste practices in their patterns as well as in their contingencies. Krishanlal, for instance, is one of my expert interlocutors who is highly knowledgeable about caste practices and their micro-mechanisms. Furthermore, my participant observation data includes my documentation of routine and everyday inter-caste interactions between members of the Dalit community and the upper castes. In my broader research project, I have conducted a place-based ethnography on a Dalit caste engaged in a 'polluting' livelihood (butcher work) in Sartapur, an urbanising village in Rajasthan. To maintain the anonymity of my interlocutors, I have employed pseudonyms in this article.

I had prior familiarity with my field region in Rajasthan when I started working there. My mother comes from the region. My kin network in the state shaped my access to my interlocutors as well as my selection of locations for the fieldwork. My familiarity and relationships with the region were key for the kind of access that my research needed. My male subject position, on the other hand, limited my access. Though many of my key interlocutors are women, the access to them was still limited as compared to my access to men during my fieldwork. The differentiated access is also a reflection of how gender structures and subjectivities shape community members' access to public spaces and participation in political sphere.

Linguistically, being a native speaker helped me understand and capture the complexity of inter-group interactions and communication. The data for this article was collected from contexts such as NGO workshop meetings, NGO public meetings, expert semi-structured interviews, community unstructured interviews, snap conversations, everyday participant observations, chance observations, amongst others. Correspondingly, there is a lot of linguistic variation in the data. Based on the context, the languages vary between local Rajasthani, Hindi, and occasionally English. Furthermore, the language register varied between the standard language in the more formal contexts, to the colloquial language in other oral discourses. For conducting translations of the empirical materials, I focus on meanings emerging from the contexts that I documented in my fieldwork, rather than strictly literal meanings. My linguistic competencies helped me capture key indexical semiotics of caste utterances in everyday communication.

2.1. Rajasthan and caste practices

It was in the initial years following India's independence that Rajasthan took its present form as a state. Twenty-one former princely states merged to form Rajasthan as a political unit. Previously, under Akbar's rule, the region was outlined as Ajmer *subha* at the end of the sixteenth century. Later in the nineteenth century, it was revived as Rajputana Province under the British rule (Lodrick 1994, 6–12). Except for the Ajmer district, no part of the state was under the direct British rule (Shrader 1968). As Rajput rulers headed most of the princely states, Rajasthan has been strongly associated with Rajput ethos and dominance.

Historical accounts of medieval Rajasthan indicate the importance of caste relations in shaping the social life of communities (Sharma 1968). Upholding the *varna* system and maintaining discipline among different groups were the key duties of the rulers in establishing the normative social order (77). In practical terms, the divisions into sub-castes and *jatis* made the social organisation a complex reality. The 'untouchables' were loosely referred to as Chandals and included communities like Kasai, Chamar, Balai, Bora, Regar, Bhangi, Bhambhi, amongst others. Though such historical accounts of the region do report the deplorable conditions of the caste margins (107), they do not provide sufficient reflections on the modalities of people's negotiation of these conditions.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the region shows initial signs of new aspirations amongst the marginalised communities. The census data from the first two decades show participation, albeit limited and stratified, of the lower castes in educational opportunities and gazetted government services (Jain 1996, 365–370). While accessing new opportunities engender new modes of exclusion and discrimination, their participation demonstrates their strong aspiration for better economic and political future. Though Rajasthan does not have a history of strong Dalit movements like in Maharashtra, there have been instances of diverse assertions by the caste margins in the state (Shyamlal 2006). The Meghwals started a reform movement under the name Rajasthan Meghwals Mahasabha Pushkar in 1920 at Ajmer. In the 1940s, the Chamar community in Rajputana started a movement to strengthen community cohesiveness around Bairwa identity. The assertion also took the form of Arya Samaj Reform amongst the Bhangi community in Jodhpur city in 1920s. The Raigars in Rajasthan also started a self-reform movement in the 1940s. A close study of the Raigar movement, for instance, demonstrates how the assertive capacities and efforts of the Dalits remained intertwined with the social and political production of violence against them (Shyamlal 2006).

The recent scholarship on religious practices and social life in Rajasthan has highlighted the intricacies of caste dynamics in the state. For instance, the desire and struggles to build a temple of a Hindu god by members of a Dalit community in Bhilwara show how caste relations are central in shaping spatial politics and place-making in the state (Gold 2017). Similarly, foregrounding the intersecting dynamics of gender and caste subjectivities, DeNapoli's (2014) study of the Hindu vernacular asceticism by female sadhus in Udaipur indicates how the practices of renunciation express caste ambivalence. The narratives of sadhus from different caste locations reveal how heroic values associated with high castes reproduce ideologies of caste essentialism and caste superiority. The contestations over symbolic objects of the Hindu order demonstrate how contemporary reproductions of caste order engender inherent tensions. Such contestations over religious symbols often engender complex exclusions and caste violence for the Dalits. These experiences many times end up shaping their desires and efforts to convert to other religions (Godha 2022; Mimroth 2004).

A core aspiration of the marginalised groups has been accessing better education and decent employment for their younger generation. The affirmative action becomes an important site for hope and claim-making in Rajasthan. Megan Moodie's (2015) work with the Dhanka community in Jaipur has very importantly highlighted how affirmative action creates some possibility of upward educational and economic mobility for the historically marginalised groups. Yet, on the other hand, increasing privatisation and shrinking government jobs are increasingly creating despair and distress amongst them. Furthermore, it is important to understand the limits of mobility that the caste margins face. For instance, even when some Dalit families are able to earn significant economic and political capitals in their local context, it does not necessarily translate into the status that the upper castes hold (Singh 2016). These different modalities of the caste structures, subjectivities, and changes and their limits shape the complexity of the caste relations and practices in contemporary Rajasthan.

My fieldwork in the Jaipur subdivision has therefore been replete with cases, narratives, and observations of different scales of caste reproduction and how they shape the experience of Dalit communities. On the one hand, I found in them strong and sustained aspirations and efforts to negotiate their material marginality through better education and work, moving out of caste-based

occupations, increasing their political participation at the local levels, and by making stronger claims on the state. On the other hand, I found that the old and new challenges they continuously face limit their aspirations and efforts. Therefore, one of the common elements of accounts from my Dalit interlocutors was the stories of violence they or their communities faced at the hands of non-Dalit communities. The cases included issues related to land grabs by the upper castes, everyday harassment and sexual assault on Dalit women, violence during elections, difficulties in accessing public spaces, mob-violence, amongst others (see also Shah et al. 2006). This atmosphere of caste domination also explains why Rajasthan has been amongst the leading states in the number of caste violence cases in the National Crimes Records statistics. Equally importantly, during my fieldwork were the accounts of everyday caste discrimination as well as subtle and explicit exclusion. In short, there was an intertwining of the aspirations of affirmative belongings in local political and economic spheres, with the practices of discrimination, exclusion, and violence as ground realities for the Dalits. These interconnections and their specific local expressions render caste relations a complex formation and sociality in the state. Everyday inter-caste interactions and the reproduction and contestation of caste values and habitus are central in understanding these complex formations through everyday sociality. The practice of humiliation in these interactions shape the economic, political, and social micro processes, making them the frontiers of old and new anti-caste struggles. To study the efforts to politicise undignified names thus offers an opportunity to document and understand the contemporary dynamics of everyday caste realities and experience in Rajasthan.

3. What's in a name?

Naming systems in India are diverse and complex. A systematic study of the naming customs in the country remains a difficult exercise. Emeneau (1978), in his attempt towards an onomastics of South Asia, examines theophoric names, apotropaic names, the shortening of names, and the addition of honorific kinship terms to names as the key features of the naming systems in the region. These naming customs, when situated in their sociopolitical contexts, perform key power functions that shape identity formations (Jayaraman 2005). Similarly, Mehrotra (2019), in his sociolinguistic analysis of Hindi personal names and nicknames, examines how caste order is an important factor in understanding the complex relation between language and society. Naming or renaming spaces and landscapes can be a critical part of the performance of nationalities and state sovereignties (Hansen 2001). The recent focus on naming practices in South Asia have contributed important anthropological insights into self-making and everyday violence by examining names as socially embedded semiotic processes (Das and Copeman 2015). Undignified names thus offer an analysis of socio-semiotic functions of naming practices in the reproduction and negotiation of everyday caste power.

Vo humara naam bigadkar bolte hain (The upper castes deform our names) was an important statement I encountered in my interactions with Dalit activists in Jaipur at the beginning of my fieldwork. I met key activists-cum-community members in training workshops on legal awareness and rights advocacy organised by the NGO in the state capital. The participants included members from different districts. They had many years of work as well as lived experiences of different social issues, both in rural and urban areas. In my interactions with them, I learnt about the intricate dynamics of everyday caste discrimination in the state. Amidst these discussions, one of the key issues that emerged was the upper castes' misconduct that the Dalit community members faced in their daily interactions (*unka hamaare sath vyavahar kaisa hota hain*).

My interlocutors' emphasis on the conduct (*vyavahar*) of upper castes is important as a response to dominant discourses, both at the local and the state levels, that either overstate the changes in the caste order or outright deny caste discrimination and domination as current realities (*ab caste-vaste nahi hain!*). A true change in caste-structured sociality will be reflected in communicative practices. Assessing conditions of respect, friendship, neighbourly care, or the sense of equality in interpersonal conducts is important for examining power relations in society. My interlocutors' foregrounding of the importance of *vyavahar* is a call to examine how caste power infuses the communicative

context of intercaste interactions. Everyday conduct is structurally relevant and linguistically central for caste-based discriminations. Deployment of undignified names becomes a method of this misconduct.

To understand the reproduction of caste practices through daily intercaste interactions, I asked Krishanalal if he would share his understanding and experiences regarding the issue. He answered in the affirmative. He also advised me that before documenting his account, I should join them in their rights-awareness campaign meetings. 'Travel with our team and learn what the community members have to say about the caste realities on the ground,' he suggested. I expressed my gratitude to Krishanalal for this opportunity. I joined the team in their campaign in the Alwar district. The vignette with which I start this article is from the very first meetings in Alwar. As a part of this campaign in the district, I participated in a dozen meetings in different villages and small towns. Meeting local Dalit activists and community members during the campaign helped me to understand how intensely the caste order shapes the everyday life of marginalised castes groups and their struggle for equality and justice. The upper castes' everyday conduct and use of undignified names was an important issue discussed in these meetings.

At a later stage of my fieldwork, I returned to Jaipur to interview Krishanalal on the social use of undignified names. Being a Dalit activist and senior NGO worker, Krishanalal had great knowledge of these matters both from a social as well as a legal perspective. Based on my conversations with him and other activists and community members, I learnt the dynamics of names as symbolic goods and the power function of undignified names.

Krishanalal illustrated his points through concrete examples. So, to understand the process, he suggested a list of names. Proper personal names are changed into undignified names through different alterations. For masculine names, the listed examples included: Revad Singh to Revada, Tabu Singh to Tabuda, Ghaansi Ram to Ghaseeta, Bhanwar Singh to Bhoriya; Kajod Singh to Kajuda; Mangal Singh to Mangda; Deshraj to Desiya; Ghanshyam to Ghaniya or Ghurra; Rajkumar to Rajuda; Sukhram to Sookhiya; Chet Singh to Chithada; and Babu Lal to Babuda. Examples of some feminine names included, Ramvati Devi to Ramuti; Sunita Devi to Sunitadi; Vishvati to Visso or Bisso and Dhan Bai to Dhanni or Dhanki.

The formation of undignified names involves linguistic crafts. The morphological structure of names is altered to different extents. There are patterned changes to realise new forms. One of the ways is to suffix '-da' at the end of a truncated masculine name or '-di' for a feminine name. For instance, Babu Lal becomes Babuda; Tabu Singh becomes Tabuda; Lalita Devi becomes Lalitdi; or Sunita Devi becomes Sunitdi. Another suffix used to deform names is 'iya.' For instance, Deshraj becomes Desiya or Mahesh becomes Mahesiya. These modes of altering are more common. The shortening of a name and addition of a suffix to it has been observed in many parts of South Asia. Emeneau's (1978) study of South Asian names reports this practice in examples from different languages and areas in the region. He also analyses a more drastic shortening of the name that is formed with the hypocoristic suffix '-u' (for instance, Ramu from Ram Kumar). Such shortening of names leads to the formation of diminutives. Many names in the examples provided by Krishanalal exemplify a similar hypocoristic process with suffixes – da, – di, and – iya.

The examples of undignified names include cases that go beyond the regular mode of deforming a name. These names express alterations with decreasing morphological resemblance to the original names. For instance, Arjun becomes Ajju; Ghanshyam becomes Ghurra; and Bhanwar becomes Bhoron. These names undergo more extensive deformation, Krishanalal went on to emphasise.

This indignity through names is practiced not only by forcing a change in their forms but also in their meanings. These practices include altering the name in such a way as to shift its meaning towards a negative lexicon in the local idiom. Krishanalal explains this with a few examples. The name Mangal has a connotation of auspiciousness. When changed to Mangada, it instead has a connotation of begging. Ghansi Ram suggests greenery, derived from the green of the grass. Through diminution, it becomes Ghasita, meaning being dragged on the ground. Similarly, Sukhi Devi, a name connoting a happy and content life, is changed to Sookhiya, which suggests dryness and

barrenness. The practices also include deforming a name in such a way that the changed name does not have any meaning in the local lexicon. For instance, the name Kuldeep means 'light of the clan.' It is changed to Kuliya, which does not have any meaning. Similarly, the deformed name Ajju, from Arjun, has no meaning either. Krishanlal would note that these are names without meaning (*aise naam jiska kuch matlab hi nahi hota*) to emphasise the social production of meaningless names.

There are different terminologies used to describe the process of undignified names. For instance, a more common term for this process is *naam bigadna*, that is, to deform, ruin, or spoil a name. Another term used for the undignified names is, *ochchha naam*, a name that is short of proper. In the more power-reflexive discourses amongst activists, it is described negatively as *naam jo ki samman-soochak nahi hain*, a name that does not signify dignity and respect.

The use of diminutive names for the Dalits highlights the importance of understanding these naming practices through a plurality of baptismal events. The original name bestowal, in which, for instance, the family chooses the name of a person, is one of multiple baptismal events. The other event occurs when the person's name is altered to create an undignified name. These different naming instances are marked by different power relations and sources of legitimacies. The baptismal event in which an upper caste deforms the name of a marginalised caste gets its power and 'legitimacy' through the social status derived from one's caste position. Social production of caste humiliation in everyday intercommunity interactions is a power function performed by undignified names. Therefore, reclaiming proper names by the members of Dalit communities foregrounds the symbolic struggles at the level of structure, meaning, sound, and the aesthetics of their names.

Diminutive names are a strong instrument of humiliation but there are other common uses of these names as well. For instance, family relations and friendships are other sociolinguistic contexts where they are used. In these cases, however, their use is generally accepted as they performatively constitute interpersonal relationships through more agreeable meanings and feelings. For instance, the hierarchy of age in family and kin relations has a social legitimacy whereby the seniors use diminutive names for the juniors without generally being considered disrespectful or hurtful. When the seniors use these names, they felicitously perform their seniority to normalise the hierarchy with each diminutive utterance used for addressing a junior. The use of a diminutive in such cases functions to establish and normalise age hierarchy through everyday linguistic utterances. The use of diminutive forms as 'nicknames' also performs relations of fondness and affection towards the junior addressee. Many of my interviewees pointed out how their seniors use diminutive names for them with a feeling of care and affection (*haan mune pyar se ainyan bulavain hain*).

Based on differences in social contexts, diminutive names serve different purposes. They are used to reproduce caste hierarchical relations, as well as age hierarchies. On the other hand, they are also used for facilitating relations of care, affection, and friendship. Social contexts and corresponding power relations become central to understanding the functions and meanings of diminutive names. It is also critical to analyse how these uses are inter-related. The age hierarchy enjoys some social legitimacy, and thus diminutive names for juniors are generally accepted. By contrast, caste hierarchy has no legal legitimacy, and the use of the diminutive for Dalits is contested. Therefore, when the upper castes use diminutives for Dalits, they are attempting to 'infantilise' them. A child's 'inferiority' is normalised through the use of diminutives. Similarly, attempts are made to dominantly normalise the Dalit position as inferior through employing diminutive names. Caste hierarchy and age hierarchy thus become interlinked through the uses of diminutive names.

Names as socially-embedded semiotic processes and the production of everyday caste indignity through them highlight the importance of names as key symbolic objects in shaping the micro reproduction of the caste order. The name's structures, meanings, sounds, visuals, and aesthetics become symbolic resources whose possession and dispossession are shaped by caste power. What we observe in the use of honorific or diminutive forms is that names become an important cultural commodity and a critical site for maintaining 'distinctions' (Bourdieu 1984). When the names of members of marginalised castes undergo deformation, a distinction is created through

the bestowing of undignified names upon them. The diminutive form and the conditions of disrespect and consequent humiliation thus become negative points of reference, based on which upper castes constitute their positive distinctions and earn profits from them by creating and sustaining advantageous positions in the political and economic fields (1984, 250).

The circulation of undignified names in everyday discourses and practices tends to normalise the caste order and legitimise power relations. One of the functions of the symbolic power is to naturalise the structured social positions (Bourdieu 1991). Thus, when the upper caste employs the undignified names for Dalits and it goes uncontested, then it ends up naturalising the caste hierarchy. However, when a Dalit is able to contest such practices and start making claims for different parts of their names, they wage important struggles in the symbolic field. Krishanlal's aspirations therefore was that more and more Dalits recognise the importance of dignity through names and wage the everyday symbolic struggles to disturb the normalised and normalising power of the upper caste's speech.

4. The political life of undignified names

As discussed earlier, intercaste *vyavahar* was an important issue that emerged in my interviews with Dalit activists. Many of my interlocutors also emphasised how the upper castes conduct their politics through *vyavahar*, where they deliberately and actively employ certain ways of speaking to reproduce their dominance. For instance, one of the activists in Alwar reported an important challenge in Dalits' political struggles: 'They speak to us in demeaning ways because they want to break our morale [*manobal*] in our struggles.' The use of diminutive names is an important practice in shaping the politics of intercaste *vyavahar*.

There are two settings in which the use of undignified names produces intense humiliation. The emphasis on these settings emerged from interviews with my interlocutors. I again use Krishanlal's account here to illustrate the first of these situations and its sociopolitical importance. He described the setting as follows:

Imagine if I am sitting on the *panchayat chaupal* [village council's space] and someone addresses me with an undignified name. It feels so humiliating. It is not that only one person hears it. This happens in front of so many people. This is very disrespectful. And we need to fight to change these forms of addressing us Dalits.

The use of a diminutive name in this setting generates a strong critique from Krishanlal. Firstly, because the name is used in a public space in front of many other people. This is different from, for instance, the use of an undignified name by an upper caste man to address a Dalit agricultural labourer in his farm in a one-on-one interaction. A practice of public humiliation leads to strong affective injuries and consequent resolve to contest this practice.

Secondly, the *Gram Panchayat* assemblies hold a critical importance for assessing the deliberative nature of Indian democracy (Philip 2017; Rao and Sanyal 2010). A village's communicative space is often imagined as sites of equality in terms of access to it both as a physical space and as a socio-political space where citizens can make democratic claims with freedom. The use of diminutive names to practice humiliation in such spaces tends to restrict the political participation of the marginalised communities. How caste practices disempower Dalits' political possibilities is key to understanding how social power limits the decentralised public sphere in its deliberative potential (Heller 2011). Such political disempowerment through undignified names in the village's public sphere is what intensifies the humiliation reported by my interlocutors.

The second setting that emerged where a diminutive name produces intense hurt and humiliation is when the upper castes employ it to address a member of the Dalit community in front of the latter's family members, especially the younger generation. A senior male interlocutor reported this setting as the following:

It is hurtful when the upper castes deform our names. But what is more hurtful is when they do it in front of my children. I am old and I have been through this insult my whole life and have learned to negotiate it. But what

really hurts me is when they speak to me with these names in front of my children. You know how bad the young ones feel when their parents are addressed like this? This is really hurtful for them. I feel very bad that my children are hurt.

Compared to the public-sphere character of the first setting, in the second setting, humiliation is intensified in relation to being witnessed by family members in the private sphere. Some of my interlocutors also pointed out that their children are accessing education and aspiring to participate in the nation with stronger hopes of equality and respect in society. So, when their parents are addressed through disrespectful names, the children feel this disrespect more strongly. The use of undignified names thus becomes a political strategy to counter the affirmative political aspirations amongst the Dalit children and youth and their claim-making on the state. For instance, Meena, one of my Dalit interlocutors narrated her school and college experiences in the state and how she faced different forms of caste disrespect and discrimination. One of the instances she reported was how Dalit students were often taunted by fellow upper-caste classmates using undignified names for their parents.

The above two settings were reported as the main scenarios that shape strong intensities of the felt affective injuries. But the practices of humiliation can also be part of any everyday intercaste interaction. To illustrate this point, I analyse an ordinary incident in Sartapur that shows how diminutive names are used in everyday political practices. Before examining the case, it will be helpful to have a short background sketch of Sartapur.

Sartapur is an urbanising village in the Jaipur sub-division. It is located near a national highway that is a part of the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor. In 2011 Sartapur's population was around eleven thousand, with SC and ST constituting twenty-five percent and five percent of the total population respectively. The numerically populous caste groups included Chamar, Dhanka, Balmiki, Khatik, Mali, Jogi, Nai, Kumhar, Khaati, Sunar, Jat, Baniya, Rajput, and Brahmin. The most marginalised castes were segregated in certain specific parts of the village.¹ The residents were primarily engaged in non-agricultural activities. For instance, of the total workers, only about four percent were engaged in cultivation. And another three percent worked as agricultural labour. For the SC and STs, the percentage of the workers engaged in agricultural work remained similarly low. Only about two percent of them were engaged in cultivation. Furthermore, about six percent of them were engaged in agricultural labour. Industrialisation and migration in the region were changing the local economy where the Sartapur bazaar became important for expanding retail commerce and generating informal work opportunities. The importance of the bazaar in Sartapur made the politics of space an important part of local politics. The Dalit communities in Sartapur did not possess significant land. Many of them continued to practice their conventional caste occupations but many of them were also employed in the precarious work in the informal market of the bazaar and the industrial region. Few of them were also able to secure government jobs such as schoolteachers, in the army, and in the police. Overall, they remained marginalised in the local context but retained strong aspirations for better socio-economic future.

The Brahmin community in Sartapur has historically dominated the local politics. For instance, since my first fieldtrip, there have been three elected Village Council heads. Twice the head has been from a dominant Brahmin family in the village. Close and careful cultivation and management of relationships with different communities, their demographic strengths, the nature of local community leaderships, and the connection of the leaders with politicians beyond the village, play a critical role in shaping the local politics. The Brahmin family have maintained their political dominance in the village by carefully managing relationships with individuals, groups and communities that are aligned with them as well as strategically targeting the others that are not aligned with them. Aligning or targeting the respected leaders as well as aspirant youth from different Dalit communities is a part of the management of political relations in the village. Similar practices are followed by political leaders from Rajput, Baniya, and Sunar communities as well, in their efforts to challenge the political dominance of the Brahmin family and community in the village. The practice of humiliation is a key

modality of controlling Dalit leadership in these political contestations. Everyday inter-caste interactions and the politics of *vyavahar* become important to understand these local practices.

The incident occurred when I was walking with Ghanshyam, a senior man from a Dalit community in the village. I provide here a short account of what transpired during that walk.

'O Ghaniya it aa!' (O Ghaniya, come here!) I heard this call the second time. The first time, I had not noticed it. The second time, I paid more attention to it, because by that time Ghanshyam had become a little disconcerted and disoriented. He had heard the first call as well and he knew that it was addressed to him. He did not want to respond to it. But when the second 'Ghaniya' call was made, he turned around a bit to look at the group of three men who were calling him. Ghanshyam sensed the moment. He looked at them, shook his head in disagreement, and turned back and asked me not to listen to them. He asked me to walk fast. Ghanshyam ignored another call. Realising that he was not heeding their calls, one of the men made a final call addressing him with his correct name *'Accho. Ghanshyam. Ab to aaja.'* (Ok. Ghanshyam. Now come here.). The last form of address implied that since he had now been addressed by his proper name, he should thus heed the call. Ghanshyam continued walking away. I kept walking with him. Soon, we were out of that neighbourhood.

On my later inquiries, I learnt that the three men who were calling Ghanshyam were from the Rajput upper caste. All three of them were younger than Ghanshyam. Also, at the time when we encountered them on our walk, we were passing through an upper caste *mohalla*.

This brief social interaction, *vyavahar*, was disrespectful and insulting. The three younger men called a senior man with a form of address considered impolite for a person of his age. Addressing Ghanshyam without a kinship form of address and employing his deformed first name ('Ghaniya') was an easy but powerful way to insult him. Repurposing a name as an insult is an effective linguistic strategy to reproduce dominance performatively through the constitutive power of an utterance.

To understand this mode of insult, a useful juxtaposition would be how Ghanshyam is generally addressed by his juniors in his own neighbourhood, amongst people of similar caste status. Ghanshyam was one of the important people in managing social affairs in his *mohalla*. He was respected by the people of his own caste as well as other Dalit community members residing in his part of the village. He often played a delicate mediating role in resolving local disputes and arguments amongst individuals and families. This role of defusing conflicts by conducting talks between different parties in mutually agreeable ways was a key process through which he became a respected personality.

Ghanshyam was also a key figure in the local politics of the village. He was formally associated with the Indian National Congress party and had been its village-level worker for a long time. His good standing with different Dalit communities in the village was recognised and valued by the party. The local unit of the party thus valued his suggestions in choosing local party officials as well as in assessing the potential of candidates for local elections. The youth that were interested in the village's political affairs and wanted to become active members of the party valued his guidance in the process. Because of his relationships with politicians as well as officials in lower bureaucracy, local residents approached him to seek assistance in different personal, community, and legal matters. Ghanshyam's respectability and recognition were the slow and aggregated outcome of his support of local residents in different situations and often in dire need. This recognition was an important political capital for Ghanshyam in the village's political affairs.

This respect for Ghanshyam was indicated by the way he was commonly addressed by people with similar castes status in his neighbourhood. The juniors would address him with the kinship term *chacha* (uncle) or with honorific *ji* added to it, *chachaji*. Some people would also use his name combined with a kinship reference, for instance, Ghanshyam *chacha* or Ghanshyam *chachaji*. People of his age group would address him with his full name or with *ji* appended to the name, Ghanshyam or Ghanshyam Ji. These forms of address and use of appropriate names are important linguistic practices of expressing respect. But these forms also then become vulnerable to sociopolitical power struggles.

Ghanshyam's reputation amongst the Dalit communities becomes politically important, especially during the elections. Therefore, to contain, appropriate, or counter Ghanshyam's influence becomes a necessity for the village's upper-caste political leaders who have historically

dominated the village politics. To belittle, demean, and humiliate established and emerging Dalit leaders becomes an important strategy for countering their influence and curtail their political potential. Therefore, the use of undignified names by the upper caste men was an attempt to negate his political capital and respect in local affairs. The diminutive name thus becomes an important sociolinguistic strategy in this everyday politics of humiliation.

The uses of undignified names in the different political contexts discussed above show how names as a resource produced and controlled in the symbolic field translates into a resource in the political field. Undignified names as a routine practice or as an intended speech to produce targeted indignities structure the political field to limit Dalits' deeper participation. The symbolic disadvantages that Dalits suffer have important implications in the local inter-community politics. As Ghanshyam's incident demonstrates, the marginalised groups need to perform additional affective labour to counter indignities in political spaces. As undignified names indexed caste relations, mere utterance of a name can inaugurate hierarchies in political communication and pre-shape the values of statements of the Dalit leaders or undermine the claims of Dalit citizens. As my Dalit interlocutors would often note, *wo humhe or hamaari batoan ko neecha dabane ke liye aisa vyavahar kartein hain* (Their misconduct is targeted to lower us and our words). The linguistic marginalisation produced through undignified names is also compared to the spatial marginality of the seating order in the village's *chaupal*. One is not allowed a dignified name, just as one often has to struggle to sit at dignified seats in different political assemblies, or the way one is not allowed to walk with dignity in different neighbourhoods during election campaigning.

The potential for undignified names to become political capital for the dominant groups depends also on the ability and nature of Dalit contestation of the symbolic power of such names. Krishanlal's emphasis on claiming dignified names in the rights-awareness meeting was therefore a call to fight against this politics of everyday humiliations. The politicisation of *vyavahar* in the awareness campaign in Rajasthan was their effort to show how caste order functions through the interaction of the symbolic and political fields. It was a key analytical moment in these awareness meetings when Krishanlal emphasised that the struggle over proper names as symbolic goods was as important as the struggle for government jobs, land rights, and justice against caste atrocities.

In this section, my focus has been on foregrounding how the politics of humiliation structures conditions of political participation. The effects of the politics of humiliation for producing concrete outcomes varies in how it shapes the engagement of individuals and groups from the marginalised castes. For instance, resisting this politics becomes a part of the broader Dalit movement at different scales of symbolic struggles (Jain 2017; Jaoul 2006). Krishanlal's political subjectivity for instance shows how the politics of humiliation becomes an object of politics in a community's resistance. In other cases, the affective labour required to counter humiliation can become so intricate and daunting that it alienates many Dalits from the political sphere. And yet in other cases, it can engender temporal tensions in the self-making of the marginalised castes (Ciotti 2010).

5. The risks of valuable names

In this section, I examine the importance of names in the economic sphere through a case of use of an alias by Karan, one of my interlocutors in Sartapur. Karan is from a Dalit community in Sartapur; his struggles to find dignified work reveal the symbolic values of certain names and how they translate into economic values.

'Let me tell you *my* story!' Karan noted when I told him of my discussion on undignified names with the activists in Jaipur. I wanted to understand his view on the subject and thus I listened to the story he wanted to share with me. Karan's case involved the use of 'Prithviraj Singh' as another name to negotiate caste discrimination in his work life. This name is understood to be associated with the upper castes. Karan had mentioned his use of this name to me earlier when I was interviewing him to learn about his livelihood struggles in the village. However, it was during my discussion about diminutive names that he shared the full account of the use of this other name.

The social production of indignities through naming is therefore also linked to the production of valuable names. Karan's account reveals that.

It was in the mid-2000s when Karan started to feel the pressure of becoming a main earning member of his joint family. Like many other youths in the country, he looked towards the postliberalised economy in the country to find some dignified work. Celebratory discourses often emphasise how this new economy creates new belonging for the youth. Guided by his motivation to work hard as well as his belief in the opportunities in the new economy, Karan ventured out in search of dignified work.

In their everlasting quest to increase profits, corporations continually explore new spaces to identify new markets. The rural market in India has been recognised as 'wealth' that needs unlocking (Kapur, Dawar, and Ahuja 2014). Entering rural households to increase their consumer base has been a key strategy for corporations of different scales. Itinerant and door-to-door selling in the villages is one of the modes whereby different companies enter the rural market to turn it into a space of profit. To become a door-to-door salesperson was the opportunity through which Karan's aspiration found a footing in the new economy. A company in Rajasthan was hiring locals to sell household consumer products to the rural demography. Karan came to know about this opportunity through a friend who also helped him meet the hiring agent. The work was not easy, but Karan had a good sense of rural consumption practices and local marketing idioms. Soon he was hired by the agent as a rural salesperson. For his new assignment, Karan had to move from Alwar district to Ajmer, another district in the region.

'I was happy to get this work and it started well,' Karan began his new work with great excitement. However, his enthusiasm soon started to wither: 'After a few days of work on the ground, it became difficult.' In his view, the skills that mattered most in this line of work were a solid knowledge of the product and the communication skills to interact with potential customers. He was confident about his ability to convince the buyer with all the product information. But what he found disconcerting was that his caste identity was becoming a serious issue while selling products to the upper-caste households.

'To sell a product, you have to go to people's homes,' Karan noted. And inquiries about his caste status became a key concern as he entered the upper caste neighbourhoods. Karan felt that his identity was shaping his customers' buying attitudes. Concerned about how this was impacting his sale targets, Karan would try to deflect any personal questions that might indicate his caste status. He would try 'to bring the conversation back to the product and its merits.' Karan's deflections worked at times but at other times he faced persistence from the customers. 'They really wanted to know my background and my caste.' Karan vividly remembered and narrated how, once, to get a glass of water from an upper-caste household, he first had to share his caste identity. Feeling the intensity of people's preoccupation with the rules of ritual purity and pollution, Karan noted how 'even drinking water on a hot day became a challenge.'

To negotiate these indignities in his everyday work, he looked for a solution in a different name. Karan decided to start using Prithviraj Singh as his name during his door-to-door selling. This name is often associated with the Rajput upper caste.² Karan's assessment of the efficacy of this strategy was good: 'People did not ask me that much about my caste or community then. Some even offered me a glass of water, even without my asking for it.' The upper-caste status indicated by the name seems to have mitigated the indignities which Karan was experiencing. An upper-caste name, as a linguistic object, is valuable for the privilege it holds. It is also valuable for shaping favourable conditions in the economic field, where it positively impacts the sales of a product.

Though effective against immediate everyday caste indignities, the use of this name for Karan was not sustainable. It was marked by grave risks. If someone assumed Karan to be of an upper caste but later came to know that he was a Dalit, it could lead to violence against Karan. Challenging purity and pollution considerations in upper-caste spaces generates threats of physical violence. Everyday inter-community affairs in Rajasthan are highly marked by caste violence and discrimination against its marginalised communities (Bhatia 2006; Fuchs 2020; Shah et al. 2006). Karan would note, 'there

was always this fear: what if they come to know about my caste?’ Under this threat of violence, Karan did not feel safe doing his work, especially when he was not in his home district.

Thus, his initial excitement about India’s new economy and his new job soon fell away, and Karan decided to leave the work. He returned to Sartapur to look for work in his village itself. ‘That is what happened with me,’ he said, concluding his account of the lived experience of the importance of names. Karan’s sharing of his personal account about valuable names in a discussion of undignified names is indicative of how the social production of caste indignities in everyday interactions is linked to the production of valuable cultural objects. Maintaining the rarity and possession of these cultural objects yields the profits of distinctions (Bourdieu 1984, 250).

A historical specificity of the caste order has been the complex interaction between the symbolic and material dimensions in shaping a graded division of labour. The naming of many castes and sub-castes from their occupational identities and histories demonstrate the work of symbolic power in community naming and its economic function. Though in the market economy, caste order is said to lose its power to shape economic practices, Mosse’s analysis has shown the critical role of caste in structuring privileges and disadvantages in the new economy. It is of critical importance to examine how caste advantage and disadvantage are reproduced in the local economic field through micro practices that shape the conversion of symbolic capital into economic capital in and through everyday interactions.

The case of Karan shows how given names become symbolic goods in such micro-economic contexts. Naming as a mechanism to produce distinctions as well as possessing, controlling, and using certain names can shape the economic opportunities for the marginalised groups. Work life becomes easier if one possesses and performs certain names that do not engender local caste suspicions or ritual anxieties. In short, symbolic goods and their everyday use shape the micro dynamics of economic and symbolic fields, and the contingencies of their conversions help us understand the work opportunities for the caste margins in the new economy. Names as symbolic goods generate economic value on one hand, and on the other hand they reproduce relations of status and indignities that limit the economic possibilities for the marginalised (see also Gellner 2021; Thorat and Newman 2010; Still 2014).

6. Conclusion

Examining the modernity of caste in the market economy, David Mosse has emphasised the analytical importance of documenting ‘the processes of caste that are firmly part of the modern and that reproduce discrimination while denying legitimacy to its public resistance’ (2020, 1263). Such analysis requires understanding how caste structures and locations become and distribute economic, symbolic, political, and social resources as different forms of ‘capitals.’ The scale of everyday micro interactions is key for documenting old and emergent caste practices. In Rajasthan, Dalit rights advocates and community activists are foregrounding the politics of vyavahar to understand the production and reproduction of caste difference and discrimination in everyday inter-caste interactions. The naturalisation of caste hierarchy through everyday humiliation is a part of this practices.

This article posits that the given name is an important symbolic object involved in the transaction and reproduction of caste indignities and insults in the everyday life of the caste margins. Distinctions produced through undignified names are linked to the social status of valuable names, which then also converts into economic profits. Symbolic power in naming shapes the political field by restricting deeper participation of the marginalised castes in the public sphere and extending more autonomy to the powerful communities. Therefore, the social life of undignified names could provide an important site for understanding these indignities in inter-caste vyavahar and how they relate to the everyday struggles of Dalit communities: the material struggles to earn a livelihood or bodily security from caste violence; symbolic struggles to have basic dignity in everyday life

and communication; and political struggles to participate freely in democratic processes and nurture aspiration to become local leaders.

These practices are challenged both in the modes of direct contestation by Dalit activists as well as through everyday struggles against caste order by ordinary Dalits. Claiming their original and proper names is a part of the symbolic struggles of the margins that attempt to disrupt the legitimacy of the caste order. Therefore, I suggest that there is an increasing reckoning of the politics of humiliation in everyday *vyavahar*. A focus on undignified names reveals the importance of Dalits' symbolic struggles at the scale of local and contingent inter-caste interactions. There is a greater need for ethnographic documentation of these struggles for analysing caste inequality and contestations in contemporary India.

Notes

1. For instance, about seventy percent of the SC/ST residents live in three wards of the village where their numbers are close to 56, 75, and 78 percentages of the ward populations.
2. The Rajput indexicality in this given name also depends on its local use and circulation. The caste surnames have not been included in this analysis. There are several names used as part of given names, including, Kumar, Lal, Ram, Singh, amongst others. Some of these names can be used to suggest caste-neutral names. Singh can be a surname or a part of given names. People also add specific *got* as a surname after Singh for instance (Amar Singh Rathore, Amar Singh Chauhan, etc.).

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