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Fire on the Ganges: Caste, Gender, and Sacred Labour among the Dom Community of Banaras

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Abstract

The present paper articulates the voice against the injustices and discrimination that the Dom community faces, focusing on Radhika Iyengar's *Fire on the Ganges: Life Among the Dead in Banaras* as a recent ethnographic text that documents their lives and labour. The Doms, a sub-caste within the Dalit community, perform the indispensable task of cremating the dead at Manikarnika Ghat, a labour that is central to the Hindu pursuit of moksha yet marked as polluting and degraded within the caste order. We discuss how the domination of caste, class, and patriarchy converges to perpetuate structural violence that impacts on Dom men and women through rigorous reading of Iyengar's narrative and protagonists like Dolly Chaudhary or Aakash Chaudhury. The interpretation places Iyengar's work within the framework of contemporary Dalit literary and cultural criticism, as well as new studies which frame that Dalit

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writing is an act of voice, dissent, and embodied testimony against Brahmin hegemony. Via an analysis of mythic narratives of the origin of Manikarnika, the sacrificial economy of moksha, the gendered precarity and vulnerability in which Dom women are steeped and sustained, and the occupational risks entailed in this work by Dom cremators, this article posits that *Fire on the Ganges* lays bare a paradox between social arrangements founded on recycling Dalit labour into spiritual uplift and denying to them questions power, human dignity. The article argues that Iyengar's ethnographic account expands the project of Dalit literature by focusing on the lived experiences of the Dom community and by demanding a reconfiguration of caste, labour, and recognition in today's India.

Keywords: Dalit literature, Dom community, Manikarnika Ghat, Caste hierarchy, Moksha, Patriarchy, Dalit women, Structural violence, Ethnography

Introduction: Caste, Dalits, and the Dom Community

The paper intersects the domain of that how Dalit literature has proved as a very distinct and powerful trend in Indian writing which represents oppressed and downtrodden classes, particularly lower strata of castes. Echoing K. Ilaiah's assertion that India is best understood as "a country of castes," the script illustrates the Dom community as a metaphor for how Dalits are marginalized in social, cultural, political, and economic life (*Ilaiah*). Within this context, *Fire on the Ganges* becomes an important intervention that turns critical attention to those who dwell and work among the burning ghats of Banaras yet remain socially invisible (*Iyengar*). The Doms' work of cremation at Manikarnika Ghat positions them at the heart of a sacred geography, yet their social location remains that of stigma and exclusion. Iyengar's book is used in this paper as a primary text to understand the Dom community's lived experiences, aspirations, and struggles, and to question why a community that facilitates moksha for others is denied dignity and structural rewards within the same social order (*Iyengar*).

Myth, Moksha, and the Sacred Economy of Manikarnika

The uploaded paper recounts the mythic origin of the Doms at Manikarnika: the story of Goddess Sati's lost earring, the man who kept it, and the curse that condemned him and his descendants to the lowest layers of the Varna system until appeased by Lord Shiva's boon of the holy fire. The legend is the cause of the ghat to be known as Manikarnika Ghat and the reason that fire never goes out there is because it emanated from Lord Shiva himself. This myth provides a theological justification for both the Doms' ritual centrality and their subordination to the lowest caste status, exemplifying how myths sanctify social structures (*Iyengar*). The paper goes on to discuss how Banaras and Manikarnika Ghat are an inter-ethnic, pan-Indian site of devotional aspiration where many Hindus (Buddhism and Jainism) hope to die and/or cremate their loved ones or hope that steeping in one's ashes will release moksha inside them—all iconoclastic ideals adding a kind of "numinous" notion rumbling around the new Purusartha:

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Dharma, Artha, Kama, Moksha. But the very community that provides this spiritual aspiration is marginalized and untouchable, highlighting a paradox at the core of caste-dharma (*Iyengar*).

The Paradox of Sacred Labour and Social Exclusion

The paper sharply raises a central question: if Doms perform the “highest role” in helping humans attain salvation, why do they not receive social reward, respect, or economic security commensurate with that role? Iyengar’s narrative depicts a cremation worker who spends eight to ten hours daily at the ghat yet receives a thankless attitude from both society and the families of the dead, remaining invisible and untouchable immediately after enabling the deceased’s supposed liberation (*Iyengar*). This paradox resonates with recent scholarship on Dalit labour that reads ritual centrality and social exclusion as two sides of the same Brahminical order, where Dalit bodies are indispensable yet permanently marked as polluting (*Arya and Deka*). Studies of the Dom community have similarly noted that their occupation at the burning ghats brings constant exposure to death, fire, and waste, while their social interactions with upper castes remain limited to the transactional moment of cremation (“*Life at the Burning Ghats*”).

Gender, Patriarchy, and Dom Women: Dolly Chaudhary

One of the most significant contributions of the uploaded paper is its focus on the gendered dimension of Dom marginalization through the character of Dolly Chaudhary. After the mysterious death of her husband, a corpse burner from Chand Ghat, Dolly becomes a young widow with five children and quickly experiences expulsion from her in-laws’ home and reluctant acceptance in her parental house, where economic scarcity frames her as an additional burden (*Iyengar*). The paper underlines that women occupy the “lowest rank” even within the lowest community, as Dom women are not allowed to go outside without a male family member and must cover their faces with a chadar when they do, effectively erasing their public identity. This aligns with contemporary Dalit feminist research which shows that Dalit women experience multiple, intersecting oppressions—of caste, class, and gender—and often bear the brunt of both patriarchy within their communities and caste-based violence from outside (*Arya and Deka*). Dolly’s small room divided by a saree into living space and shop, where she sells namkeens, cigarettes, and bidis, becomes a potent symbol of how social norms partition her life and contain her mobility (*Dhankar and Sharma*).

Space, Ghettoization, and Chand Ghat

In its discussion of the first chapter, “The Neighbourhood,” the uploaded paper describes Chand Ghat as an isolated Dom locality adjacent to Manikarnika Ghat, a ghetto-like space that remains unnoticed until a corpse burner is required. The narrow lanes, unplastered small houses, muddy streets due to poor drainage, and knotted electrical wires that even monkeys use form a vivid spatial portrait of infrastructural neglect and social segregation. This spatial marginalization mirrors broader patterns identified in sociological studies of Dalit and Dom settlements, where segregation is both physical and symbolic, marking certain neighborhoods as zones of pollution and poverty (“*Life at the Burning Ghats*”). The paper also notes that all main and minor characters, including Dolly, reside in Chand Ghat, underscoring how community identity is tied to a stigmatized geography. Recent Dalit literary criticism has

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argued that such localities are not merely backdrops but active participants in narrative, encoding histories of exclusion and collective resilience (*Singh and Kumar*).

Labour, Health, and the Corporeal Cost of Cremation: Aakash Chaudhury

The second chapter, “Charcoal, Smoke and Tangerine,” as summarized in the paper, turns to Aakash Chaudhury, a thirty-year-old Dom worker at Manikarnika Ghat, who has handled bodies in all possible mutilated forms. The chapter reveals the physical and psychological strain of cremation labour, where workers stand long hours in extreme weather, remain till the last embers die, and inhale the smell of burning flesh and smoke. To cope, Aakash and other Dom men consume gutkha and alcohol in large quantities, a strategy that contributes to their short life spans, with many Dom men dying in their sixties; Aakash’s own father died of liver cirrhosis at sixty-five (*Iyengar*). Studies on cremation workers and marginalized labourers in India corroborate such findings, reporting high incidences of respiratory illness, dehydration, and substance dependence among workers at burning ghats, compounded by the absence of occupational safety and social protection (“*Life at the Burning Ghats*”). The early initiation of Dom boys, some as young as thirteen or fourteen, into this work and into alcohol use illustrates how the structures of caste and poverty pre-empt any alternative life trajectory (*Arya and Deka*).

Survival Ethics, Theft, and Moral Economies

The uploaded paper recounts in detail how Dom children, trained from a young age, swiftly steal shrouds from corpses to resell them, risking violent beatings and abuse if caught by grieving relatives. While acknowledging the illegality of this act, Aakash frames it as a matter of survival for a community barred from most forms of employment and stigmatized by caste; morality here is defined by the imperative of sustaining life rather than by legal codes set by dominant groups (*Iyengar*). This recalls scholarship on subaltern moral economies, which suggests that marginalized groups often construct ethical frameworks centered on subsistence and collective survival in conditions where formal structures criminalize their coping strategies (“*Intersecting Dalit and Cultural Studies*”). Iyengar’s representation of such acts as embedded in structural deprivation rather than individualized criminality parallels Dalit narratives that foreground how hunger, exclusion, and denial of land or work push communities into stigmatized economies (*Singh and Kumar*). The paper insightfully reads these episodes as part of a larger critique of how caste society produces conditions in which survival itself appears as deviance (*Dhankar and Sharma*).

The Monolith of Caste and the Politics of Naming

In its discussion of the third chapter, “The Monolith of Caste,” the paper explores Iyengar’s reflections on how caste discrimination persists powerfully in education and everyday life despite the influence of B. R. Ambedkar and the historic interventions such as the Annihilation of Caste and the 1936 Bombay Presidency Mahar Conference. Iyengar notes that even self-described liberal headmasters ask her caste during fieldwork and press for her full name when she demurs, revealing how surnames continue to function as caste markers and enable subtle but effective forms of exclusion. This aligns with recent work in Dalit and cultural

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studies that examines how caste identities are reproduced through naming practices, school interactions, and institutional gatekeeping, even when overt caste slurs are absent. The uploaded paper connects Iyengar's observations to Ambedkar's account of how Dalits were mocked for wearing good clothes or speaking English, showing the continuity of caste humiliation from the colonial to the contemporary period.

Character, Agency, and Modernity: Dolly, Aakash, and Lakshya

In its final analytic section, the paper foregrounds the psychoanalytic and sociological depth of Iyengar's character portraits, arguing that each figure sustains a personal "battlefield" in addition to the collective struggle against caste. Dolly's enforced marriage and dependent widowhood expose the cruel face of patriarchy; Aakash's insistence that a man cannot be socially accepted if he is "empty-pocketed" highlights the class pressures within and beyond caste. Both are shown as resisting and enduring, not simply as passive victims. The paper also introduces Lakshya Chaudhary, a twenty-five-year-old Dom man whose fair skin confers on him a sense of superiority within a predominantly dark-skinned community, thereby revealing the presence of colorism even among the marginalized. This detail resonates with wider critical work on how caste, race, and skin tone intertwine in South Asian and global contexts to create layered hierarchies, even inside oppressed groups.

Conclusion

Drawing from the uploaded paper and placing it in conversation with recent Dalit and Dom-focused scholarship, this reworked version shows *Fire on the Ganges* as a powerful contemporary contribution to Dalit literature and ethnography. Iyengar's narrative centers the Dom community's indispensable yet stigmatized labour, the gendered precarity of Dom women, the health and psychological costs borne by cremation workers, and the persistence of caste discrimination in educational and everyday settings. By reading Dolly, Aakash, and Lakshya as complex subjects negotiating caste, class, gender, and modernity, the paper underscores that Dom lives cannot be reduced to victimhood alone; they are marked equally by agency, desire, and critique of the system that exploits them. In bringing together myth, sacred geography, labour, and structural violence, this version of your article strengthens its argument that any serious understanding of Banaras, moksha, or Indian modernity is incomplete without acknowledging the Dom community's central yet marginalized role.

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