



Aesthetics of Dalit Theatre

Perspectives on Caste,
Class and Gender

Shubhendu Shekhar Naskar

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“*Aesthetics of Dalit Theatre: Perspectives on Caste, Class, and Gender* by Dr Shubhendu Shekhar Naskar is set to be a seminal work in the realm of Dalit literature and the Dalit movement. The book primarily discusses the issues of Dalit theatre, a crucial yet less discussed wing of the Dalit movement in India. Through its critical engagement with the study of Dalit theatre in the national context and how it contributed to the Dalit cause, the book aims to address the void prevalent in the literature on the Dalit movement. In addition to critically interpreting Dalit plays, Dr Naskar’s work also delves deep into the performance and production histories of Dalit theatre to emphasize its unique features along with regional diversities.”

—Sharankumar Limbale, *Eminent Dalit author, poet, and literary critic*

“Dr Naskar’s book opens a new dimension for Dalit studies as the first book-length treatment of Dalit theatre. It examines work from different states in different languages which engages with major socio-political issues related to caste, and explores how theatre presents these. It thus locates key factors within both Dalit studies and theatre practice, offering new angles from which to approach both fields. These concerns are further explored through a set of interviews with playwrights, anchoring the study firmly in an understanding of how and why their work is crafted.”

—Professor Ralph Yarrow, *Emeritus Professor, School of Literature, Drama and Creative Writing, University of East Anglia, UK*

“As a literary genre, Dalit play has made a late entry into the world of Dalit literature. Dalit plays are mostly written in Indian languages. Many of them are not available in English translation. In this sense, Shubhendu Shekhar Naskar’s *Aesthetics of Dalit Theatre: Perspectives on Caste, Class, and Gender* is a pioneering work in the field of Dalit theatre. His critical engagement with several Dalit plays will surely pave a new way to understand Dalit aesthetics from an entirely new perspective and inspire future researchers to work in the field widely.”

—Professor Raj Kumar, *Professor, Department of English, University of Delhi, India*

Shubhendu Shekhar Naskar

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*To My Daadu
Shri Sabadeb Naskar
who dreamt of a casteless, classless, and gender-equal society,
and fought for it*

FOREWORD

Dalit theatre is an emerging domain of research in the Indian academia. It is an influential medium of visual narrative and a powerful instrument for representing the plight of the downtrodden. It also draws attention to several layers of oppression experienced by the outcastes. Dalit theatre has engaged in debates relating to the intersections of caste and gender. The question of sexuality is also recognized as a significant component of critical intellectual inquiry. Contemporary Indian Dalit theatre explores the debates on caste, class, gender and sexuality, parameters that are vital to the construction of an alternative academic discourse in different geopolitical terrains of the Indian subcontinent. It attempts to reframe or alter the dominant, exploitative and non-Dalit caste understandings of Dalit articulations.

Critical engagements with caste, class and gender are visible in the context of Marathi Dalit performance traditions, especially in the Mahar identity movement of the nineteenth century. The traditional folk plays or performances like *Jalsa*, *Tamasha*, *Lavani* and *Powada* represent the authentic experiences of Dalit women of the Mahar community with reference to the social evils of caste, class and gender oppression. For example, *Lavani* is identified as the most significant determinant of the popular culture of Maharashtra. It mediated a form of performance that re-constructed a life-world intimately connected to caste, class, gender and sexuality of Dalit women. In Sharmila Rege's opinion, both *Lavani* and *Powada* contain a rich gender discourse. Folk theatres flourished because of the sexual content that the Dalit women dancers had to present in front

of the leering upper-caste men. The sexuality of Dalit women came to be known as degraded labour in the system of slavery. The complex permutations of caste, gender and sexuality problematize the identity of the Dalit women performers. Thus, one can trace the saga of pain and suffering and humiliation as represented in contemporary Dalit theatre to the popular patriarchal folk performance traditions of Maharashtra.

This monograph by Shubhendu Shekhar Naskar entitled *Aesthetics of Dalit Theatre: Perspectives on Caste, Class, and Gender* is a major breakthrough in the emerging area of Dalit theatre. In fact, it turns out to be the first book-length study of Dalit plays in the pan-Indian context. The playwrights represent different linguistic ecosystems of the Indian sub-continent: Marathi, Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Odia. Many interesting intra-regional and inter-regional politics of inclusion and exclusion would inevitably question the notion of convergence usually expected in the domain of the Dalit Movement.

The national character of the monograph is quite apparent from the selection of the playwrights: Boyi Bhimanna, Datta Bhagat, Texas Gaekwad, Harshabardhan Choudhury, Raju Das, Manju Bala, K.A. Gunasekaran, Achintya Biswas, M. Jeeva, M.M. Vinodini, Samudra Biswas and others. The ramifications of caste, class, gender and sexuality in the changing contexts of regional representations are taken into consideration while attempting to apply a close textual reading method. Datta Bhagat's plays *Routes and Escape Routes* and *Whirlpool*, M. M. Vinodini's play *Thirst*, and K.A. Gunasekaran's play *Touch* are some of the examples of primary texts to undertake a comparative study of the social parameters in the context of regional diversities.

The perennial debate over the relative importance of caste and class in the Indian situation has given rise to divergent responses from the followers of Marx and the followers of Ambedkar. Some of the plays selected for this monograph also attempt to highlight the intersection of caste and class. Two very significant Dalit plays, *Encircling Pressure* and *Portrait of Ambedkar*, by one of the pioneering Bengali Dalit playwrights, Achintya Biswas, have perfectly captured the internal conflicts and anxieties of the so-called Bengali progressive society in order to problematize the connection between caste and class.

The issue of gender is a major concern of Indian Dalit theatre. Dr Naskar's book highlights the dynamics of the double marginalization of Dalit women in terms of their representation in select plays. It documents the politics of projecting women as inferior in all religious discourse and

the nefarious ploy of the patriarchal regime to reduce them to the status of mere commodities. In order to question all forms of oppression of Dalit women, M.M. Vinodini's play *Thirst* and Raju Das' play *Chuni Kotal Speaking* are closely analysed by the author. Another important addition is Datta Bhagat's *Routes and Escape Routes* which portrays a different form of gender oppression.

This monograph attempts to construct a new aesthetic of Indian Dalit plays, along with its history of production and performance. Despite having a rich diversity of regional representation, it aspires to catalogue certain salient features that could contribute to the formation of a new aesthetic of the subaltern theatrical traditions with specific ideological allegiances.

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Indranil Acharya

PREFACE

My primary area of research is Caste Studies or Dalit Studies, which I began during my MPhil research under the supervision of Professor Subir Dhar, Professor of English, Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata. My MPhil dissertation was entitled “Depiction of Dalit Experience by Non-Dalit and Dalit Authors: A Comparative Study of Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* and Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan*”, and it primarily examined the aesthetics of Dalit literature and demonstrated the ways in which Dalit writers describe their lives in contrast to those of non-Dalit writers. The dissertation emphasised the argument given by the Dalit authors on how core Dalit identity is important to produce Dalit literature. The writers of Dalit literature who are by birth Dalit argue that it is quite impossible for upper-caste writers to properly delineate the condition of the Dalits as Dalit literature is experience-based. Non-Dalit writers’ presentations of Dalit lives are governed by their sympathetic attitude towards the Dalits. Yet, they are also influenced by the general notion of the people regarding the Dalits. The secrets that reside in the inner hearts of the Dalit communities, secrets which the Dalit people only know, are not shared or expressed in non-Dalit writers’ works.

The prime motivation to undertake research in the domain of Dalit theatre was embedded in an overwhelming question of one of the legendary Indian thespians, the late Girish Karnad, when he visited Vidyasagar University in 2010. He asked: “Is there any Dalit play in Bangla? Is it available in English translation?” When I heard this anecdote from my mentor Professor Indranil Acharya, I developed a keen interest in Bengali

Dalit drama. Later I realised that the study should also touch upon the pan-Indian context of Dalit drama. Frankly speaking, this was the starting point of my research.

However, the thought of working on Dalit plays has also been conditioned due to my family tradition and my personal inclination towards this art form. My father used to perform in a theatre group that has a great legacy and I too joined the group in my adolescent days and the relationship still continues. Even since joining Vidyasagar University, I have performed and directed many plays organised by the varsity Drama Club or the Teachers' Organisation of the university. I have also directed some plays performed by the students of our department. Moreover, hailing from a marginalised community, I felt greatly connected to the day-to-day life experiences of the Dalits. Hence, my passion for theatre and Dalit lives, my proclivity towards Dalit literature, the scarcity of Dalit plays in English translation, and finally the subsequent lack of research work on the genre of Dalit plays are all factors that together propelled me to undertake this research.

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I begin this section by conveying my heartfelt gratitude to my PhD supervisor and mentor, Professor Indranil Acharya, whose wisdom, knowledge, and commitment to the highest standards inspired and motivated me, and it is his constant supervision, support, and inspiring suggestions that have illumined my darkness and contributed to the making of this monograph. I really consider myself a fortunate fellow to be in the company of such an erudite yet humble and loving personality whose guidance has truly turned me into a different person.

I am deeply indebted to the entire Department of English, Vidyasagar University, especially my colleagues Professor Joyjit Ghosh, Dr Jolly Das, Dr Debdas Roy, and Dr Hemant Kumar Golapalli, along with my students, scholars, and office staff. I would also like to thank Professor Nandini Saha of Jadavpur University for her suggestions to develop this monograph. I am eternally obliged to my teacher Professor Subir Dhar of Rabindra Bharati University, my MPhil supervisor, who implanted within me the basics of research during my MPhil days.

My deepest gratitude goes to my parents, brother, relatives, in-laws, and friends for their unconditional love, care, and inspiration throughout my life and my studies. It is their constant support that has made me what I am today. I would also like to thank my students, especially Probhat and Animesh, for their assistance.

Finally, I would like to mention my better half Amrita who has been accompanying me in all the fair and foul weather since our marriage and has been a continuous source of encouragement and enthusiasm. I finish

this part by expressing my deepest love to my little daughter Rudradittyya, whom I have deprived of the time that she rightfully deserves, in order to develop this monograph. And it is her sweet ‘haamu’ that acts as a remedy to me in all my edgy days and nights. I would like to let you know, “Your ‘Daddy’ loves you the most”.

In the end, I dedicate this monograph to my ‘Daadu’ and all the people across the globe who have been kept marginalised due to their caste, class, gender, or other identities.

Date: 30 August 2024
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CONTENTS

1	Introduction	1
2	Documenting Research Trends	11
3	Indian Caste System and the Origin and Plight of the Dalits	27
4	History and Aesthetics of Dalit Literature	35
5	Caste-Class Antagonisms	43
6	Intersection of Gender	51
7	Origin and History of Dalit Theatre	67
8	Aesthetics of Dalit Theatre	93
9	Dalit Theatre: Production and Performance	107
10	Representation of Caste	119
11	Representation of Class	153

12 Representation of Gender	183
13 Conclusion	217
Appendix A	221
Appendix B	225
Appendix C	231
Appendix D	235
Suggested Reading	239
Index	247

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Shubhendu Shekhar Naskar is an assistant professor in the Department of English Literature, Language and Cultural Studies, Vidyasagar University, West Bengal, India. He has been engaged in extensive research work on Dalit and Tribal Studies and working on the documentation and translation of the oral and folk literature of Dalit and tribal communities in West Bengal, India. He is one of the associate editors of *Janajati Darpan*, the only international multilingual publication series on Indigenous Studies from West Bengal, India. He is a member of the Editorial Board of the *Journal of the Department of English*, Vidyasagar University, a Group A journal in the UGC CARE list. His articles have appeared in journals of repute like *Theatre International* and *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*. Naskar holds the position of series editor of the book series entitled *Theatre of the Marginalised: Dalit and Adivasi Performance Traditions in South Asia* with Peter Lang. He is also a recipient of the prestigious Charles Wallace Research Grant.



Introduction

I

India has a rich theatrical history that dates back approximately to the first century AD. However, there have been references that assert that some kind of theatrical activity with elements of music, dance, and acting had been in vogue in India for at least a thousand years before the Christian era. However, the exact date of its birth or the origin of the theatre cannot be traced. In his book *The Wonder That Was India* (1954), A. L. Basham, a prominent historian, writes, “The origin of Indian theatre is still obscure. It is certain, however, that even in the Vedic period, dramatic performances of some kind were given, and passing references in early resources point to the enaction at festivals of religious legends, perhaps only in dance and mime” (434–435).

However, according to Indic belief, Bharata Muni¹ or Sage Bharata was endowed with divine theatrical expertise. In turn, India’s legendary founder wrote the *Natya Shastra*, a canonical work on performing art also known as the fifth Veda, enabling more efficient dissemination of this knowledge through his one hundred sons and giving rise to Sanskrit drama. Keeping in mind the role of Bharata in Indian theatrical tradition, Hemendra Nath Das Gupta, in his book *The Indian Theatre* (2009), writes that “actors are all called Bharataputras or the sons of Bharata, and almost everything connected with drama, or the stage is named after him,

and the oldest and most authoritative treatise on Indian Dramaturgy is named after him as Bharata Natyashastra” (4).

India is home to hundreds of living theatrical traditions. These traditions include theatrical practices that were part of archaic ritualistic activities conducted on religious occasions and practised by small communities since time immemorial. From the tenth century onwards, the popular theatre or folk theatre re-emerged in a proper shape in all the regional languages like *Jatrapala* in Bengal, *Tamasha* in Maharashtra, and *Yakshagana* in Karnataka. It was characterised by innovation and the transformation of the classical theatre in the changed socio-political conditions. The final stage in its development is the modern theatre, which occurred because of its encounter with the West in the nineteenth century. This new theatre had its base in Indian urban cities and was clearly deviant from the traditional forms.

So, due to changes in location, language, and aims, Indian performing art has steadily lost its exclusivity and grown more accessible to all Indians. Classical drama was previously restricted to indoor venues under the patronage of royal palaces and temples, but over time, it had to move to more open stages in order to survive. Royal sponsorship faded along with the dissolution of the royal courts due to foreign invasions and other political developments, sending drama—oftentimes literally—out into the streets. The audience for drama significantly increased with the transition from private to public performances, which changed Indian theatre, and it had to modify its execution and purpose to appeal to its non-elite viewers.

Thus, the history of drama from classical theatre to the present-day trends in Indian theatre reveals the transformations and changes that have taken place since its birth. Indian drama can be broadly classified into three primary divisions, namely (1) Margi or classical (*Natya Shastra*-related) or Sanskrit theatre, (2) Desi or folk/regional theatres, and (3) Modern theatre. The different stages in the development of Indian English Drama may be categorised as (1) Company drama, (2) Social drama, and (3) Politically oriented or politically conscious drama.

Under these categorisations, plays originally written in English and plays which were translated into English from the regional languages are also accommodated. Shiv K Kumar, Nissim Ezekiel, Mohan Rakesh, Asif Currimbhoy, Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, Pratap Sharma, Snehalatha Reddy, Gieve Patel, Gurcharan Das, Cyrus Misty, and Dina Mehta are some of the playwrights who belong to the second part of social drama period. The third stage or phase in the history of modern Indian drama is

the politically conscious drama. Begun in 1943, against the backdrop of the Second World War, the Bengal famine of 1943, and the heightened struggle for Independence, the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) is considered to be the first organised national theatre movement in India. Prithviraj Kapoor, Jyotirindra Moitra, Balraj Sahni, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, Bijon Bhattacharya, Ritwik Ghatak, Utpal Dutt, Niranjana Singh Maan, S. Tera Sing Chan, and Khalili Faryadi are some of the names involved in the formation of IPTA. The politically conscious drama in non-proscenium formats without any party affiliation became popular in the 1970s. Shambhu Mitra, Habib Tanvir, Prabhakar Guha, Purna Chandra Rao, and Badal Sircar belong to this phase.

It was much later that Dalit drama, as a genre, came into prominence when the plays by very few playwrights like Swami Achhutanand Harihar, Boyi Bhimanna, Datta Bhagat, Kolakaluri Enoch, Texas Gaekwad, Harshabardhan Choudhury, Raju Das, Namita Das, Manju Bala, K.A. Gunasekaran, Achintya Biswas, M. Jeeva, B.K.Nag, Dolamani Kandher, Shankar Mahananda, M.M. Vinodini, Dr N. Singh, Samkutty Pattomkari, and Samudra Biswas from the Dalit community were explored, who turned to writing drama depicting caste issues, oppressions of the Dalit people, and their resistance as a specific movement. Before the appearance of the genre of Dalit theatre, the presence of 'Ambedkari Jalsa' and 'Satyashodhak Jalsa'² was found in Maharashtra, which later served as models for Dalit theatre. These traditions used to criticise the prevalent Brahmanical hegemony in the first decades of the twentieth century and tried to educate the illiterate populace. Anupama Rao observes, "Satyashodhak activists experimented with new social forms and counter-cultural strategies to challenge Brahmin hegemony and exploitation of female suffering".³ It is found that Swami Achhutanand Harihar composed a Hindi play, *Ramrajya Nyaya (Justice in Lord Rama's Kingdom)*, in 1926 that depicts caste issues. In 1933, Boyi Bhimanna also wrote a Telugu play, *Paaleru*,⁴ which contains instances of caste oppression and caste consciousness. Even before that, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule wrote a Marathi play, *Tritiya Ratna (The Third Eye)*, in 1855. However, Dalit theatre as a genre of theatre written and performed by the Dalit people began its journey in the 1950s with M.V. Chitnis' Marathi play *Yugayatra* which was written under the patronage and supervision of Dr B. R. Ambedkar. This play was first performed in 1955 in Aurangabad and later for the Dalit converts in 1956 in Nagpur in front of 600,000 Buddhist converts.

Dalit theatre in India has become a potent platform for the annihilation of the caste system and the emancipation of the Dalits in India. It aims to create a new foundation for cultural change built on equality, freedom, self-respect, and social acceptance. It not only delineates the day-to-day lives of the Dalits, their customs, rituals, standard of living, misery, and exploitation, but also highlights their protest and rebellion against the existing brutal system. Their everyday experiences are woven within it. In his essay “The Politics of Translating Indian Dalit Drama with Special Reference to *Bali Adugal (Scapegoats)*” (2009), S. Armstrong writes,

Dalit theatre links the day-to-day affairs of Dalits, encourages the participation spirit of the people with emancipatory impulse, re-evaluates Dalit arts and restructures/reconstitutes the misrepresentation made by the dominant castes. Additionally, it provides an alternative forum against the sacred art boundaries of the dominant castes, accelerates the reaction against the demeaning endeavours of the dominant castes over the Dalits, and retells the history, culture and lifestyle of the Dalits. (189)

It is evident that Dalit theatre is an integral yet less prominent genre of Indian Dalit literature which rises to counter the hegemonic oppressive caste system in India. As a result, this monograph aims to highlight the history, growth, and development of Dalit theatre in India and the aesthetics of Dalit plays/theatre from textual and epistemological viewpoints. To shed light on the genre accurately, this research attempts to find answers to the following questions:

1. How did the Dalit plays evolve in the context of Indian theatre?
2. When did the tradition of Dalit drama begin?
3. What are the forms and essential characteristics of Dalit plays?
4. How is Dalit theatre different from mainstream theatre?
5. What are the aesthetics of Dalit plays?
6. What are the distinctive features of the Dalit theatrical performance and production?
7. Who are the Dalits according to the Dalit playwrights?
8. How do the Dalit playwrights portray the Dalit characters in their plays?
9. How do the Dalit playwrights represent the caste issues in their plays?
10. What is the attitude of the Dalit playwrights towards caste and class conflict?

11. How do the Dalit playwrights look at intersections of caste and gender as well as class and gender?
12. How do Dr B. R. Ambedkar's thoughts and ideologies influence the Dalit playwrights?

The monograph intends to find the answers to the questions mentioned above. If we look closely at specific subjects like the Indian caste system and the consequent origin of untouchables vis-à-vis the Dalits; the history, development, and aesthetics of Dalit literature as a movement in India; caste, class, and gender interrelationships in the context of Dalit plays; and the impact and role of Dr B. R. Ambedkar in the formation of Dalit movement and literature, it is possible to find the answers to all these questions in a composite manner. So, this monograph will discuss all these facets simultaneously, along with the Dalit playwrights' representations of caste, class, and gender in their plays, to accomplish a comprehensive overview of Dalit theatre.

METHODOLOGY

Certain methodologies have been followed to find the answers to the earlier-mentioned questions and frame this monograph. The methods employed here are (A.) the textual analysis method, (B.) the interviewing method, (C.) the archival method, and (D.) the ethnographic method.

A.

Research in cultural criticism, which covers English, cultural history, and cultural studies, as well as any other field that focuses on texts or aims to comprehend the inscription of culture, is not possible without textual analysis because "the text 'forces' us to see this feature or that; the text 'makes' us rethink our attitudes".⁵ As Roland Barthes in "The Death of the Author" (1977) states,

a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination

cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted. (148)

There is no such thing as ‘pure’ reading because interpretations always make the difference. As a part of this textual analysis method, a lot of texts which are primarily recognised as Dalit plays have been collected. Undoubtedly, a researcher should start with primary sources rather than relying on second-hand reports because they all introduce biases into the information. So, a close reading of all these texts facilitated in finding the subtle nuances of caste, class, and gender outlooks. These texts, by their treatments of these issues, certainly have created a common thread that has made all the Dalit plays unique and eventually led to forming a particular genre. Apart from the Dalit plays, the plays that have been written by non-Dalit authors but deal with the questions of caste, class, and gender are studied, but not so closely to find out the breaches between the exhibitions of Dalit playwrights and non-Dalit playwrights. This textual analysis has strengthened the philosophies and thoughts of Dalit aestheticians. Secondary sources typically offer well-informed, logically sound, and persuading arguments. Suffice it to say that these secondary texts theorise and justify the arguments conveyed in the primary texts.

B.

In the “Introduction” of his book *Research Methods for English Studies* (2005), Gabriele Griffin states,

Interviewing as a research method often combines with, or is part of, other research methods, including auto/biographical methods, ethnographic methods, oral history and, indeed, textual analysis or discourse analysis at the point where the interview material is interpreted. It thus forms a central plank of many research processes. (12)

There are three types of interviewing methods: ‘structured interview’, ‘semi-structured interview’, and ‘unstructured interview’. Among these methods, the ‘unstructured interview method’ is the least rigid method that is used as a research method in the literature. This interview method is less structured and controlled by the interviewer, the interviewee, or both. It depends on how much the interviewer arranges the questions in

advance and sticks to them, how open or closed they are, and what the interviewer wants to learn. Therefore, the choice of interview format depends on the research design and what the researcher hopes to learn. Before moving on to the more critical portions of the interview, interviews frequently start with questions aimed at making the interviewee feel at ease. Keeping these things in mind, all the living Dalit playwrights whose texts are included here for discussion, like Datta Bhagat, Achintya Biswas, Raju Das, and M.M. Vinodini, have been interviewed. Apart from them, some other Dalit playwrights and performers like Samudra Biswas, Namita Das, Palash Halder, Prangobinda Biswas, Nakul Mallik, Brajendranath Mallik, Dolamani Kandher, B. K. Nag, and Manju Bala have also been interviewed. Through interactions with them, attempts have been made to know the contexts and backgrounds of their texts: why they write, how they craft and perform their plays, the source of their plays, etc. The interviewing method gives the chance to learn about the playwrights' thoughts, ideology, and philosophy. In the process, they have clarified the socio-political and socio-economic settings that forced them to develop their identity as a Dalit playwright. They also voiced their views regarding the past, present, and future of Dalit plays in India. In the process, they have conveyed how they were influenced and motivated by Ambedkarite thoughts and how they think about the aesthetics of Dalit theatre. The outcomes of these interviews are employed in various sections of this monograph to contextualise and validate the arguments. Some of the interviews are also included in the Appendix. This interviewing method is essential in terms of developing the aesthetics of Dalit theatre.

C.

Archival methods, in their most traditional definition, entail the analysis of historical documents, i.e. records that were produced in the very recent past and give access to groups, people, and events that researchers might not otherwise have. Unique original source documents from archives and special collections are used in archival research techniques. Manuscripts, unpublished letters, photographs, maps, rare books, illustrations, and digital texts are just a few examples of the wide range of items that might be used as such sources. Primarily, historical research is based on archival research, but it is also widely conducted in other fields of the humanities and social sciences, including literary studies. Archival research methods have also been employed to develop this monograph. Through this

archival research, an effort has been made to discover the history of Dalit theatre in India. Undoubtedly, Dr B.R. Ambedkar has been instrumental in influencing Indian Dalit playwrights. It is also known from the statement⁶ that he made in his autobiography *Waiting for a Visa* (1935) that the years that he spent in the United Kingdom were instrumental in shaping his philosophy and career since he got a reprieve from the curse of untouchability prevalent in contemporary India. During his stay in London, he categorically mentioned the evils of the caste system that had made and continued to make the life of the untouchables miserable in India. He learned the essence of Western liberalism, history, and philosophy during his stay there and this encouraging environment facilitated him to nurture his mind. It is no wonder that all the Dalit playwrights were deeply influenced by Ambedkar, and their plays resonate with Ambedkar's thoughts and ideas. So, archival research was conducted in the British Library, London, in order to find specific answers to two questions: How did Ambedkar's London stay help him to form his ideology, and how are Ambedkar's ideas portrayed in Dalit theatre? However, this archival research was possible due to being awarded the Charles Wallace Research Grant. The official documents and letter communication of Gandhi and Ambedkar with the British officials regarding the status of the Depressed class in India were of immense help in forming and establishing the arguments in the monograph. This has facilitated an understanding of the caste politics before and after the independence of India, which is intricately intertwined with the Gandhi–Ambedkar conflict. These documents are preserved as “India Office Records” in the Africa Asian Studies section. In addition to visiting the British Library in London, other archival research was conducted at the Ambedkar House, London, which has been turned into a museum. Ambedkar's letters, writings, and some rare documents and photographs were found there. Ambedkar Jayanti Souvenirs, which are preserved there, hold some rare articles and writings by noted Dalit critics and bureaucrats. One significant Dalit text has been discovered in the National Library in Kolkata that has been taken up here for textual interpretation. The personal archive of noted Bengali Dalit writer, critic, and researcher Dhurjati Naskar has also been explored. Some significant writings found in some ancient periodicals and journals turned out to be very helpful in learning the hidden history of Bengali Dalit literature. This archival method has had a great impact beyond the framework of this monograph.

D.

As a research methodology, ethnographic research is primarily associated with social sciences and, more particularly, with the disciplines of sociology and anthropology. It is essentially a qualitative research methodology that depends heavily on the participant's observation and is primarily concerned, in the broadest sense, with the examination and analysis of cultural behaviour. The typical picture of an ethnographer is that of an academic who travels to the field and spends a lot of time living closely with the locals while watching their social interactions, habits, and rituals. The researcher's duty is to record everything based on their observations. On one hand, these records may be used as a primary source of research. On the other hand, they can be used to rationalise or evaluate the claim of some primary research material and, hence, can be a crucial secondary source. The second method has been adopted here to interpret the texts through the experiences gathered by visiting the 'field'. First of all, various theatre groups led by Dalit playwrights have been interacted with. Meetings with playwrights like Raju Das and Palash Halder and the members of their groups have been arranged. It has been documented through long interactions with the performers from the marginalised lower castes how they feel associated with the content of the plays and the facets of oppression, injustice, and humiliation projected there. It is palpable that due to their real-life experiences, they perform Dalit plays from their hearts; they perform their own lives on stage. Apart from visiting these groups, I have also encountered the Jana Sanskriti Centre for Theatre of the Oppressed in Patharpratima in South 24 Parganas, West Bengal. It is interesting to see that these people are not playing a script but rather scripting a play, taking sources from their day-to-day life experiences of caste, class, and gender oppression. The binary of spectators and actors gets submerged there and evolves into a group named 'spect-actors' who are simultaneously the performers and the audience. And finally, being a member of a lower-caste community, born and brought up in a rural village of Raidighi in the Sundarbans, I had the chance to observe various lower-caste marginalised people and their lives closely. I have grown up watching and experiencing instances of caste humiliation, class oppression, and gender-biased attitudes. These people are my family members, relatives, neighbours, friends, and dear and near ones. So, whenever I go back to my village, my home becomes the 'field' and the 'field' becomes my home. All these experiences helped enormously to develop this monograph.

NOTES

1. “Bharata Muni (Hindi: भरत मुनि) was an ancient sage who the musical treatise Natya Shastra is traditionally attributed to. The work covers ancient Indian dramaturgy and histrionics, especially Sanskrit theatre. Bharata is considered the father of Indian theatrical art forms. He is dated to between 200 BCE and 200 CE, but estimates vary between 500 BCE and 500 CE”. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bharata_Muni. Accessed on 12 May 2023.
2. “The Satyashodhak Jalsa/Tamasha was an instructional theatre of the (Satyashodhak) Samaj and came into prominence only in the 1890s. The period of 1873–90 has been noted as one in which the membership and reach of the Satyashodhak Samaj spread in and around Pune... The content of the Satyashodhak Tamashas or Jalsas was drawn from the ballads, songs, abhangs and poems of the Satyashodhak leaders, especially Phule and was presented in a redefined form of the Tamasha of the time”. Taken from Sharmila Rege’s article “Understanding Popular Culture: The Satyashodhak and Ganesh Mela in Maharashtra” published in *Sociological Bulletin*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (September 2000), 193–210. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23620114>. Accessed on 12 May 2023.
3. Mentioned in Anupama Rao’s book *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*, published by the University of California Press in 2009. 52.
4. An extract of the play has been translated into English by Kaki Madhava Rao and appears in the book *The Oxford India Anthology of Telugu Dalit Writing as The Farmhand*. The book is edited by K. Purushotham, Gita Ramaswamy, and Gogu Shyamala and published from New Delhi: Oxford University Press in 2016. 171–175.
5. Catherine Belsey, Swansea University, wrote “Textual Analysis as a Research Method” in the book *Research Methods for English Studies* edited by Gabriele Griffin. Published by Edinburgh University Press Ltd in 2013.
6. “My five years of staying in Europe and America had completely wiped out of my mind any consciousness that I was an untouchable, and that an untouchable wherever he went in India was a problem to himself and to others. But when I came out of the station, my mind was considerably disturbed by a question, ‘Where to go? Who will take me?’ I felt deeply agitated” (Section-II. 6).