



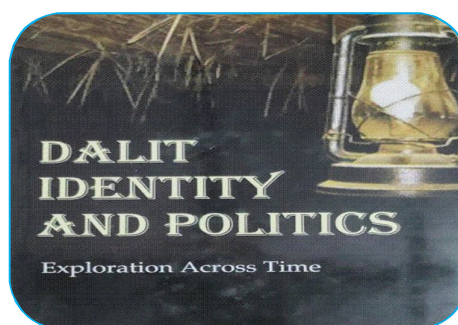
DALITS, IDENTITY AND POLITICS OF STATEHOOD: A CRITIQUE

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ABSTRACT

This article questions how stable the category of “identity politics” really is in political theory. Liberals and Marxists disagree sharply about its worth, yet both tend to pass over a prior question: what discursive mechanisms decide its boundaries to begin with? Taking its cue from M.S.S. Pandian’s essay “One Step Outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere,” the article argues that identity politics works less as a description of certain political projects than as a regulatory, classificatory discourse, one through which dominant groups universalize their own interests while particularizing the claims of the marginalized. It asks who holds the epistemic authority to label one project “identity politics” while letting another pass as simply “universal,” and it turns to the Telangana statehood movement to watch this happen: Dalit-Ambedkarite efforts to foreground caste within the movement were routinely dismissed as divisive, an asymmetry that shows how power controls visibility in order to delegitimize marginalized claims.



KEYWORDS: *political theory, Liberals and Marxists disagree, identity politics works.*

INTRODUCTION

Identity politics is now among the most contested categories in political theory. For roughly three decades it has been invoked, over and over, to explain how historically marginalized communities mobilize around caste, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and religion. Liberal theorists mostly defend that mobilization as indispensable to securing recognition and equality; Marxist critics mostly worry that it fragments collective solidarity and draws attention away from the structural relations of capitalist exploitation. For all their disagreement, though, the two camps share one assumption worth examining: that identity politics is a reasonably stable, self-evident category with clear edges.

I do not take that assumption for granted. Rather than ask whether identity politics is desirable or effective—the question that dominates the literature—I ask the prior one that gets far less attention: who has the authority to call a political project “identity politics” while allowing a different project to pass as a universal claim? The category, I argue, is not simply descriptive. It is political through and through, a classificatory discourse that dominant groups use to universalize their own interests while particularizing the claims of subordinated communities.

The Telangana statehood debates offer a useful place to trace that process. The movement is usually narrated as a democratic struggle against regional inequality and internal colonialism, and in most accounts it succeeds at exactly that. But when Dalit organizations and Ambedkarite intellectuals tried to bring caste domination into the conversation—articulating what came to be called “Dalit

Telangana”—they were frequently dismissed as divisive, as identity politics, sometimes mocked as killjoys threatening the unity of the cause. That asymmetry is the real subject of this article. Identity politics does not simply describe the claims marginalized groups make; it names the epistemic authority through which some identities are rendered invisible and others hyper-visible. Drawing on M.S.S. Pandian, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Gopal Guru, and Ernesto Laclau, I argue that identity politics is best understood as a category of hegemonic classification rather than a distinct form of political practice. The question, then, is not whether identity politics undermines universal politics, but how claims to universality themselves depend on hiding the dominant identities that produce them.

DEBATES ON IDENTITY AND POLITICS

Scholarship on identity politics has run mainly along three tracks. Liberal multiculturalism—Charles Taylor, Will Kymlicka, Axel Honneth—treats identity as central to individual dignity and democratic citizenship. Recognition, on this view, is not merely symbolic but a precondition for equal participation in political life, which makes identity-based claims legitimate demands for justice in plural societies.

Marxist critics are far less persuaded. Ellen Meiksins Wood, Walter Benn Michaels, Adolph Reed Jr., and Vivek Chibber each argue, in their own register, that identity-based mobilization tends to obscure the centrality of class exploitation and to weaken the prospects for a broader emancipatory politics. Capitalism, on this account, is quite content to see social struggle splinter into a series of identity-based demands rather than gather around the shared relations of production.

Both camps have enriched the field, but they share a blind spot. Liberal and Marxist frameworks alike assume, more or less by definition, that “identity politics” refers to the mobilization of marginalized communities, and so neither asks how dominant identities manage to escape being classified as identities at all. Attention stays on the politics of minorities rather than on how universality itself gets produced. That omission is worth dwelling on. Instead of treating identity politics as a neutral category waiting to be evaluated, this article treats it as the outcome of a struggle—over classification, legitimacy, and symbolic authority.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Before turning to Telangana, the theoretical terrain deserves closer mapping, since the critique of identity politics is neither monolithic nor new. The movements that first gave the term currency grew out of the upheavals of the 1960s and 70s, as a corrective to forms of domination that both liberal individualism and orthodox Marxism had largely ignored. Since then, “identity politics” has become a source of considerable theoretical tension—not only over whether it works but over what it does to political agency, recognition, and solidarity. The critiques issue from strikingly different traditions, yet they converge on one worry: that a politics organized around particular identities trades away the possibility of universal, structural transformation.

Wendy Brown's *States of Injury* (1995) offers perhaps the most searching psychological version of that worry. Rather than begin from class or economics, Brown asks how identity is formed through injury. Drawing on a Nietzschean genealogy of resentment, she suggests that many contemporary movements organize not around a vision of liberation but around the memory of suffering. When political identity is built on historical wounds—exclusion, humiliation, trauma—it turns recursive: instead of moving toward a political future, the subject stays tethered to the past, finding its sense of self in the repeated performance of its own victimhood. Brown calls this a “politics of resentment,” in which the aim quietly shifts from emancipation to recognition, from changing one's condition to having one's suffering acknowledged. Identity politics, so read, risks becoming a trap: it produces subjects whose agency is reactive, caught in a loop of injury rather than turned toward transformation.

A further danger lies in what Brown calls the “fetishization of the wound.” Once political legitimacy is tied to how much a group has suffered, victimhood begins to function as a kind of capital, and politics becomes a contest over whose oppression runs deeper. Rather than working to transcend domination, politics collapses into the management and recognition of injuries—a substitution, Brown

suggests, of memory for transformation, which leaves the underlying structures of power intact while subjects go on reproducing their own grievances.

Where Brown's critique targets subjectivity, Nancy Fraser's targets structural displacement. In *Justice Interruptus* (1997) and her later work on recognition (2003), Fraser tracks a broad shift in progressive politics away from questions of political economy and toward questions of culture. Earlier movements fought over the redistribution of resources; contemporary identity-based movements concentrate far more on representation and cultural esteem. This is not to dismiss recognition—Fraser is clear that status subordination is a real injustice—but she warns of a “displacement” in which recognition ends up cannibalizing redistribution.

That displacement matters because it suits global capitalism rather well. A neoliberal system finds it much easier to absorb symbolic recognition—diversity initiatives, representational equality, multiculturalism—than to confront widening inequality and precarious labor. Recognition, that is, can be bought without touching the underlying relations of exploitation. Fraser's distinction between an “identity model,” which reifies groups into stable, static entities, and a “status model,” which seeks to remove institutional barriers to participation, is crucial: absent a shift toward the latter, identity politics risks reinforcing the very group boundaries that an emancipatory politics ought eventually to dissolve.

Adolph Reed Jr. presses the materialist critique harder. In *Class Notes* (2000) he argues that identity politics has not merely been displaced by capitalism but actively absorbed by it—that much of what passes today for “progressive” identity politics is really a politics of the professional-managerial class, a way of folding minority elites into existing power structures without changing much for anyone else. A diverse cabinet or a diversified corporate leadership, on Reed's account, often serves as a distraction from the deeper reality of neoliberalism, letting institutions present themselves as inclusive while continuing to enforce austerity and wealth concentration.

The danger Reed identifies is that identity-based categories fragment working-class solidarity. Centering political discourse on race, gender, or ethnicity, often in isolation from class, risks treating those categories as if they existed in a vacuum. Reed does not deny racial oppression; he argues that race is increasingly deployed as an ideological lens that obscures the wider processes of capitalist restructuring, so that a focus on identity trades the universal dynamics of labor and exploitation for a contest over representation within institutions whose underlying logic stays put. The shift from redistributive politics to “managerial diversity,” on this view, is not progress but surrender.

Vivek Chibber develops many of the same themes within a broader defense of Enlightenment universalism and historical materialism. In *The Class Matrix: Social Theory after the Cultural Turn* (2022), and in a series of essays in *Catalyst*, he traces identity politics to an intellectual lineage—poststructuralism, postcolonial theory, the cultural turn—that rejected the possibility of universal interests in favor of culturally specific identities, trading materialist analysis for discursive accounts of difference. His objection is not that race, gender, caste, or sexuality are politically insignificant, but that identity politics tends to treat them as autonomous systems of domination, independent of the universal dynamics of capitalist exploitation. That move, he argues, fragments political agency, encouraging separate struggles around discrete identities rather than collective mobilization against shared structures of economic domination. Because capitalism subjects individuals to broadly similar imperatives regardless of their particular identities, class politics is uniquely placed to generate broad-based solidarity, whereas identity politics—privileging difference over commonality—erodes the durable coalitions capable of challenging capitalist power. Chibber does not deny that racism, patriarchy, and caste are real forms of domination; he insists only that they be understood within the structural logic of capitalism rather than outside it.

Walter Benn Michaels presses further, treating identity politics as one of neoliberal capitalism's most effective ideological instruments. In *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality* (2006) he contends that liberal societies have increasingly displaced questions of economic inequality with an almost obsessive concern for cultural diversity. Celebrating diversity does not challenge capitalism; it legitimizes it, by redefining justice as the equitable representation of different identities within institutions that remain unequal. A corporation staffed across every racial

and gender category can still reproduce profound economic inequality without contradiction—diversity is valuable precisely because it leaves the unequal distribution of wealth untouched. The political question then shifts, subtly but decisively, from whether inequalities exist to whether they are sufficiently diverse. For Michaels this amounts to a real depoliticization of class: it lets people celebrate cultural difference while accepting widening economic disparity as simply not a political problem. Identity politics is compatible with neoliberalism precisely because capitalism has little trouble incorporating diversity while resisting redistribution; contemporary multiculturalism substitutes symbolic inclusion for economic justice, so long as those occupying privileged positions represent a sufficiently diverse cross-section of identities.

Mark Lilla comes at the question from democratic theory rather than historical materialism. In *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* (2017) he argues that liberal democracies have slowly traded the language of citizenship for the language of personal identity. Political mobilization increasingly organizes around narrow categories of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and religion, producing an electorate too fragmented to sustain broad democratic coalitions. Earlier progressive movements, Lilla suggests, succeeded because they appealed to shared civic obligations rather than particular social identities; identity politics instead teaches citizens to understand politics through their own experience of recognition and exclusion rather than through collective responsibility. Democratic politics loses its universal vocabulary and becomes, in effect, a competition among groups for symbolic acknowledgment. Lilla does not dispute the legitimacy of struggles against discrimination, but he insists that democratic politics needs a common civic language capable of transcending particular identities—without which progressive movements stay electorally fragmented and politically ineffective. The problem, on his account, is not that minority identities should be ignored, but that democratic citizenship cannot survive an endless multiplication of particularistic claims.

Francis Fukuyama, in *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (2018), reads identity politics through the broader problem of recognition. Drawing on the Hegelian notion of *thymos*, he argues that political conflict increasingly turns on demands for dignity rather than material interest. Identity movements seek public recognition of their moral worth, and that politics of recognition has gradually displaced universal citizenship with ever more particular claims to dignity. Progressive identity politics and right-wing nationalism, on Fukuyama's account, spring from the same underlying desire for recognition, and the multiplication of identity claims generates reciprocal resentment as groups compete for public validation of their grievances. Liberal democracy grows unstable as citizenship fractures into communities defined by historical injury and cultural particularity, which is why Fukuyama calls for reconstructing a shared civic identity able to integrate diverse populations without erasing cultural difference. His critique differs from the Marxist one in dwelling less on capitalism than on the psychological and institutional consequences of recognition politics, but like Brown and Lilla he concludes that identity politics risks undermining the universal frameworks democratic solidarity requires.

Asad Haider offers a more internally complicated account in *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump* (2018). Unlike the conservative and liberal critics above, Haider does not reject identity politics as such. He distinguishes instead between the radical identity politics of movements such as the Combahee River Collective and its later liberal appropriation. The original formulation grew out of Black feminist critiques of both white feminism and orthodox Marxism, insisting that political analysis begin from the experience of those occupying several positions of subordination at once. But contemporary liberal identity politics, Haider argues, has cut identity off from that revolutionary origin: identity now functions as an individual possession rather than a collective political relation, and structural critique gives way to moral claims about personal privilege, representation, and symbolic inclusion. This liberalized version is exactly what permits its incorporation into neoliberal governance, where diversity substitutes for redistribution and representation for transformation. What makes Haider's critique distinctive is that it comes from inside the tradition of identity politics rather than from outside. The problem, for him, is not organizing around experiences of oppression, but letting identity detach from the broader project of universal emancipation and collective class struggle.

These critiques diverge sharply in their philosophical commitments and converge on a shared worry. Brown warns against resentment and the fetishization of injury; Fraser traces the displacement of redistribution by recognition; Reed exposes the compatibility of identity politics with neoliberal elite incorporation; Chibber defends universal class politics against cultural fragmentation; Michaels shows how diversity can legitimize economic inequality; Lilla laments the erosion of a common civic language; Fukuyama diagnoses the fragmentation of democratic recognition; Haider critiques the neoliberal domestication of a once-radical politics. They differ over causes and remedies, but together they suggest that identity politics grows politically limited precisely when it abandons a universal project of structural transformation for ever more particular struggles over recognition and representation. Their arguments have reshaped the field by insisting that an emancipatory politics depends on recovering solidarities capable of transcending identity without erasing the histories from which those identities emerged.

That body of criticism has, in turn, generated an equally sophisticated defense. Where critics say identity politics fragments solidarity and swaps symbolic recognition for structural analysis, its defenders reply that the critique misreads both the origins and the aims of identity politics. Far from rejecting universal emancipation, many of these theorists hold that identity politics emerged precisely because existing universalisms excluded or rendered invisible significant forms of domination—which means the defense rests not on celebrating difference for its own sake but on the claim that universal principles become genuinely universal only once they are reconstructed through the experience of those historically shut out of them.

Linda Martín Alcoff, in *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (2006), offers one of the most influential of these defenses. She rejects the common assumption that identities are merely subjective constructions or ideological illusions to be transcended in favor of abstract universality. Identities, on her account, are socially real locations that shape knowledge, perception, and political judgment—neither biological essences nor arbitrary cultural inventions, but historically constituted realities that organize institutional opportunity, social interaction, and recognition itself. Because identities structure access to particular kinds of social experience, they carry genuine epistemic weight; the knowledge generated from a marginalized location cannot simply be replaced by abstraction, since domination itself works through differentiated experience. To abandon identity in political theory, Alcoff warns, risks reproducing the very invisibility identity politics set out to challenge—universal theories that ignore situated identities tend, quietly, to mistake the experience of dominant groups for universal human experience. Identity politics, so read, does not oppose universality so much as expose the false universalism embedded in dominant political traditions, and it presses for a more inclusive reconstruction of democratic principles.

Iris Marion Young offers a complementary defense in *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990), where she challenges distributive theories of justice for reducing political inequality to the allocation of resources. Oppression cannot be understood through economic exploitation alone, she argues, because domination takes several institutional forms—marginalization, cultural imperialism, violence, powerlessness—that operate independently of class relations even as they intersect with them. The demand for universal citizenship often presupposes assimilating marginalized groups into norms set by dominant ones, which makes that universalism exclusionary: it asks difference to disappear before equality can be achieved. Young proposes instead a differentiated citizenship, in which democratic institutions recognize the political significance of social difference without reducing individuals to fixed identities. Identity politics becomes indispensable here because it makes visible forms of structural domination that abstract theories of justice tend to overlook; the goal is not to institutionalize permanent identities but to democratize institutions by acknowledging the unequal social positions from which citizens actually take part in public life.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality mounts a different kind of defense, showing that systems of domination cannot be analyzed through isolated categories of class, race, or gender. In "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" (1989) and "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color" (1991), she argues that conventional political

theory routinely erases the experience of people who occupy several positions of subordination at once. Black women, for instance, face forms of discrimination that neither a gender-centered feminist analysis nor a race-centered anti-racist one can fully explain. Identity politics, on Crenshaw's account, arises not from essentialist commitment but from the sheer necessity of grasping how different structures of domination interact institutionally—identities function here as analytical categories through which institutional power becomes intelligible, not as a replacement for structural analysis. The problem, she insists, lies less in identity politics itself than in critics who conflate strategic political identity with essentialist notions of identity; intersectionality shows political identities to be relational, contingent, and historically produced rather than fixed.

Judith Butler reconstructs identity politics along a different axis, questioning whether identities have any stable ontological foundation at all. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), *Bodies That Matter* (1993), and *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler argues that identities are performatively constituted through repeated social practice rather than expressions of some prior essence. Critics often read Butler's anti-essentialism as a rejection of identity politics, but she consistently maintains that political identities remain necessary as strategic instruments of collective action—movements need identities to mobilize against institutional domination, even as those identities stay internally heterogeneous and historically contingent. The distinction Butler draws is between treating identity as fixed ontological truth and using it as a provisional political category; the instability of identity, on this account, does not undermine mobilization so much as keep movements from reproducing exclusionary boundaries within marginalized communities themselves. Identity politics becomes democratically productive precisely because identity stays open to contestation and revision.

Sara Ahmed develops one of the more sophisticated recent defenses by reworking the relationship among identity, history, and affect. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) she accepts Brown's critique of the fetishization of injury while rejecting the conclusion that identity politics should therefore be abandoned. The real problem, Ahmed argues, is not the political articulation of historical injury but the abstraction of injury from the history that produced it. Political identities turn problematic only when wounds harden into static characteristics detached from the histories of racism, colonialism, patriarchy, caste, or state violence that made them. Identity politics remains indispensable, on her account, because bodies are historically shaped by these relations of power—emotions like fear, shame, disgust, and hate circulate socially rather than privately, producing collective identities and the institutional boundaries between who belongs and who is excluded. Identities, she suggests, are sedimentations of historical relations rather than merely subjective experience; universal theories that ignore that history end up reproducing the exclusions through which universality was itself historically constituted. Identity politics, in this sense, works as a form of historical remembrance, resisting the erasure of institutional violence concealed beneath abstract political equality.

Nancy Fraser's later work offers a partial defense in its own right, unsettling the simple opposition between recognition and redistribution. Even as she criticizes forms of identity politics that reify group identity, Fraser holds that recognition is an indispensable dimension of justice. In *Redistribution or Recognition?* (2003) and *Scales of Justice* (2008) she shows that status hierarchies deny some groups equal participation in public life independently of economic exploitation—redistribution alone cannot dissolve institutionalized cultural devaluation, racial stigma, or gendered exclusion. Political justice, on her account, requires both economic redistribution and cultural recognition; her critique targets not identity politics as such but the versions of it that sever recognition from broader institutional transformation. Properly understood, recognition is about removing institutional barriers to equal participation, not affirming essentialized group identity.

Stuart Hall likewise rejects the opposition between identity politics and materialist analysis. Across essays such as "Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance" (1980) and "New Ethnicities" (1989), and in the collection *Essential Essays, Volume 1: Foundations of Cultural Studies* (2018), Hall argues that identities are historically articulated through specific political and economic formations rather than floating free of material structures. Race, ethnicity, and nation are not ideological distractions from capitalism but constitutive elements of historically specific capitalist

societies. Hall is critical of both essentialist identity politics and reductionist class politics, neither of which grasps the complex articulation of different forms of domination; political identities matter, on his account, because they show how capitalist societies organize labor, citizenship, culture, and state power through racialized and gendered divisions. Universal class politics cannot simply replace identity politics, since class itself is lived through historically differentiated social identity.

A distinctive defense also comes from anti-caste political thought. Gopal Guru argues that identity is an indispensable source of political knowledge, because experiences of humiliation reveal dimensions of domination inaccessible from privileged social locations. In *Humiliation: Claims and Context* (2009), and with Sundar Sarukkai in *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory* (2012), Guru challenges universal social theory for privileging abstract conceptual knowledge over lived experience. Dalit identity, on his account, functions not merely as a cultural category but as an epistemic location from which caste domination becomes visible; universal theories that ignore that experience end up reproducing upper-caste perspectives as though they were objective knowledge. Identity politics matters here not because identity carries some intrinsic political value, but because social experience is distributed unequally within hierarchical societies. Sarukkai makes a related argument, that experience is a legitimate source of theoretical reflection rather than raw data awaiting universal interpretation. Together, Guru and Sarukkai defend identity politics by showing that epistemic equality requires recognizing historically marginalized experience as constitutive of political knowledge itself, not merely its object.

Perhaps the most systematic recent defense comes from Olúfemi O. Táíwò in *Elite Capture* (2022). Táíwò readily grants that identity politics has often been appropriated by political and corporate elites, but he resists the conclusion that identity politics is therefore to blame. The trouble lies not with identity-based political analysis but with the capacity of elites to appropriate emancipatory movements for managerial ends. Identity politics, on his account, originally emerged from radical struggle against structural domination, not from a demand for symbolic representation—so the neoliberal incorporation of diversity discourse is better understood as an instance of elite capture than as evidence that the concept has failed. To abandon identity politics, Táíwò argues, would leave the underlying structural inequalities untouched while rewarding neoliberal co-optation with exactly the outcome it wants.

Taken together, these defenses suggest that identity politics cannot be reduced to essentialism, victimhood, or fragmentation. Identity functions, rather, as a historically constituted analytical category through which institutional domination becomes intelligible. Its principal contribution is to expose the limits of abstract universalism—to show how apparently neutral political principles have historically reflected the experience of dominant social groups. Rather than rejecting universality, these theorists seek to democratize it, insisting that universal principles become genuinely universal only through sustained engagement with historically marginalized identity. Understood this way, identity politics is not the abandonment of universal emancipation but one of its more important conditions of possibility.

POWER AND THE NAMING OF IDENTITY POLITICS

This article treats identity politics as a form of classificatory power. Building on Michel Foucault's account of discourse, I argue that political categories do not simply describe reality; they help produce it. To name a movement “identity politics” is, in the same breath, to imply a contrast with some other politics presumed universal, rational, or public. Such classifications are never neutral. They are techniques by which some claims acquire legitimacy while others are pushed to the margins of democratic discourse.

Pierre Bourdieu's notion of symbolic power extends the point. Symbolic power works best when its classifications are misrecognized as natural or self-evident. Dominant groups prevail not through material domination alone but by establishing the very categories through which political reality is perceived. The capacity to define what counts as national interest, development, secularism, or social justice is, in this sense, among the most consequential forms political power can take.

Seen this way, identity politics looks less like a distinct form of mobilization than like a discursive label, unevenly distributed across the political field. Some identities become normalized enough to vanish into claims of universality; others stay permanently visible as sectional interests.

Ernesto Laclau's theory of hegemony explains the mechanism behind that concealment. In *Emancipation(s)* (1996) and *On Populist Reason* (2005), Laclau argues that universality has no content of its own; it is an empty place that some particular content can occupy only contingently and temporarily, standing in for a fullness the community can never actually reach. Hegemony names just this operation—the process by which a particular demand or identity comes to represent an absent universality. Because the universal is always a particularity that has managed to occupy this empty place, there is no neutral, unmarked universal hovering above the play of particular interests; every claim to universality conceals the particular content that has hegemonized it. Laclau distinguishes further between a logic of difference, in which each demand stays discrete and particular, and a logic of equivalence, through which disparate demands link into a common front beneath an empty signifier that comes to stand for the whole. Read this way, the label “identity politics” marks those demands held within the logic of difference—kept perpetually particular—while dominant identities, having already hegemonized the empty place of the universal, get to appear simply as politics as such. Universality, on this account, is not the opposite of identity but its most successful and least visible form.

THE CASTE OF UNIVERSALISM

M.S.S. Pandian's work on Brahmin and non-Brahmin politics offers a particularly useful way into this asymmetry. Pandian observes that dominant-caste politics tends to succeed by dissolving itself into broader categories—nationalism, secularism, development, modernity—so that upper-caste interest appears as universal value rather than caste interest, while the political mobilization of subordinate castes is explicitly named as caste. As Pandian puts it, “Upper caste politics which refuses to speak caste as caste is what gets written as politics without any qualification. Politics that invokes caste is always Dalit politics or the politics of the ‘backwards.’” The result is an asymmetrical field, in which dominant-caste identity becomes invisible precisely because it has already acquired the status of the universal.

The insight reaches well beyond Tamil politics. Across India, political projects led by dominant social groups are routinely described in apparently neutral terms—governance, merit, regional development, national integration—while Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim, and feminist mobilizations are named, again and again, through the language of identity. This is not a merely semantic asymmetry. It structures the distribution of democratic legitimacy itself.

The universal, in short, is not the absence of identity but the successful concealment of a particular identity beneath a universal vocabulary.

TELANGANA AS A CASE STUDY OF IDENTITY DISCOURSE POLITICS

The reorganization of the Telugu-speaking region in 2014, which made Telangana India's twenty-ninth state, was a landmark in the long history of post-independence sub-national movements. The Telangana movement is usually told as a struggle against regional neglect, unequal development, and internal colonialism within the former state of Andhra Pradesh. Dominant accounts stress disparities in irrigation, employment, education, and public investment, presenting the movement as an inclusive regional project that spoke for the collective aspirations of Telangana's people.

Such narratives, however, tend to obscure the differentiated experience of caste within Telangana itself. Ambedkarite activists and Dalit intellectuals asked, pointedly, whether a separate state would actually transform entrenched caste hierarchies or merely relocate them. Their interventions implied that regional autonomy alone could not guarantee social justice without a redistribution of political power inside Telangana. The demand for a “Dalit Telangana” was not, then, a rejection of statehood. It was an attempt to redefine what statehood would democratically mean.

Tellingly, while the broader movement was celebrated as a legitimate struggle for self-determination, Dalit critiques within it were often dismissed as sectional identity politics. That

differential reception shows that the politics of statehood was never simply a conflict between region and state; it was also a struggle over whose experience got to define what Telangana itself would mean.

To see how the Dalit critique emerged, it helps first to lay out the structural coordinates of the dominant narrative that shaped the movement for decades. “Internal colonialism” became the primary framework through which Telangana intellectuals articulated their grievances against the unified state of Andhra Pradesh, formed in 1956 under the States Reorganisation Act on a linguistic basis. The merger of the Telugu-speaking areas of the former princely state of Hyderabad (Telangana) with the Andhra state was contested from the start, which is why it required the Gentlemen's Agreement of 1956, promising constitutional safeguards on employment, resource allocation, and political representation. Mainstream scholarship has documented at length how successive state administrations, dominated by coastal Andhra elites, systematically violated those safeguards (Vemireddy and Mallam 2022). The resulting disparities are usually grouped under three heads. First, the political economy of water became a central battleground: Telangana contributed a large catchment area to the Krishna and Godavari, the region's major perennial rivers, yet budgetary allocation and engineering priorities consistently favored the canal irrigation networks of the coastal Andhra delta, leaving Telangana's agriculture dependent on rainfall and expensive groundwater extraction through borewells—a dependency that fed a severe agrarian crisis, widespread farmer suicides, and deep rural distress. Second, the “Mulki” rules—administrative decrees from the Nizam's era meant to protect employment for local residents—were repeatedly bypassed, as public sector jobs, state bureaucracy, and administrative posts in Hyderabad went increasingly to better-capitalized, educationally advantaged migrants from the coastal districts, fueling underrepresentation and frustration among educated Telangana youth (Vaddiraju 2017). Third, the agricultural surplus generated in coastal Andhra after the Green Revolution found a lucrative outlet in Hyderabad's rapid urbanization, as Andhra capitalists poured investment into real estate, private education, Tollywood, healthcare, and infrastructure—a visible dynamic of economic dominance that native intellectuals read as a textbook case of internal colonization (Vemireddy and Mallam 2022). This structural imbalance fed the mass agitation of 1969 and laid the ground for a second wave of mobilization in the 2000s. In these accounts Telangana's regional identity was built against an external “other”—the Andhra migrant, capitalist, politician—and political parties, along with dominant civil society organizations, drew successfully on cultural symbols, regional dialect, and local festivals like Bathukamma to forge a cross-caste consensus around the idea that ending Andhra rule would, more or less automatically, usher in an era of democratic, equitable development, often called *Bangaru Telangana* (Golden Telangana).

The chief limitation of the “internal colonialism” framework was that it reduced all socio-economic exploitation to a geographic and regional binary. By presenting the region as an undifferentiated, harmonious collective, mainstream narratives obscured the entrenched, often violent realities of local caste hierarchy—varna and jati—that structured Telangana's agrarian economy. The region's social structure had long been shaped by the legacy of Asaf Jahi (Nizam) feudal administration, which relied on a layered hierarchy of revenue collectors, land grantees, and dominant landlords: Deshmukhs, Doragaru, Velmas. Unlike coastal Andhra, where the commercialization of agriculture and the Green Revolution produced a rising capitalist peasantry among castes like the Kammas and Reddys, Telangana's countryside remained gripped by semi-feudal relations far longer, with upper-caste landlords exercising near-absolute sovereignty over village life. In this local matrix of domination, the exploitation of subaltern groups—Dalits (Madigas and Malas) above all, along with various Backward Classes—was carried out not by some external Andhra elite but by native upper-caste Telangana landlords. For rural Dalits, everyday life meant structural landlessness, systemic untouchability, and Vetti, the brutal institution of forced, unpaid labor extracted by landlords from lower-caste families. Dalit intellectuals argued accordingly that the structural roots of subaltern precarity in Telangana could not be explained by the “regional neglect” thesis alone (Koyya 2011). The flight of capital to coastal Andhra was real, but the immediate, lived experience of violence, humiliation, and destitution for a rural Dalit came from the local Telangana Dora—the feudal lord—not from Hyderabad or Vijayawada. This tension sharpened over the late twentieth century as the region saw powerful subaltern counter-

mobilizations. The rise of the radical left—the Naxalite, or CPI-ML, movement—in the 1970s and 80s targeted the power of the Deshmukhs and Doras directly, forcing many feudal landlords to abandon their rural mansions, or Gadhis, and flee to Hyderabad. Yet even as Marxist-Leninist factions armed the subaltern population and challenged the material terms of feudal landlordism, their strict adherence to orthodox class categories often kept them from fully addressing the autonomous ideological dimension of caste hierarchy and Brahminical hegemony (Koyya 2011). By the 1990s, the shifts set off by the Mandal Commission and the global celebration of Ambedkar's centenary sparked a major Dalit-Bahujan intellectual awakening across the Telugu states. Dalit activists and writers began producing critical life narratives, poetry, and political treatises that challenged both the orthodox Marxist reduction of caste to class and the mainstream regionalist erasure of internal hierarchy (Koyya 2011), insisting that Dalit subalternity was produced not merely by class relations or regional unevenness but by a durable system of caste-based dispossession that predated, and structured, modern capitalist state formation.

As the second wave of the statehood movement gathered pace in the early 2000s, under the leadership of elite political configurations, Dalit-Bahujan organizations positioned themselves not as passive participants but as critical interlocutors. The key conceptual intervention of the period was the demand for a “Dalit Telangana,” articulated by radical intellectuals and organizations—most notably the Telangana Maha Sabha, founded by figures like Maroju Veeranna—alongside subaltern writers, poets, and student leaders active in spaces like Osmania University (Kalyani 2022). The demand did not reject geopolitical separation from Andhra Pradesh; Dalit intellectuals fully accepted that a centralized, Andhra-dominated state apparatus was structurally incapable of delivering justice to the region. What they refused was the romanticized, cross-caste solidarity promoted by mainstream leadership. A new state, they argued, would have no democratic validity if it merely consolidated the hegemony of native upper-caste landed elites—Reddys, Velmas—over the numerically dominant but politically marginalized Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Backward Classes, together termed the Sabbanda Varnalu, or the multi-caste subaltern masses (Vemireddy and Mallam 2022).

The “Dalit Telangana” critique developed along three main lines. First, it deconstructed political power itself: Ambedkarite activists argued that the modern democratic state is not a neutral administrative shell but an apparatus that reflects the social relations of the society it governs. If Telangana's social fabric remained fractured by caste supremacy and land monopoly, replacing an Andhra bureaucracy with a Telangana one would change only the cultural identity of the rulers, leaving the structural vulnerability of the oppressed intact (Koyya 2011). Social justice, on this view, could not be a secondary byproduct of state formation; it had to be the primary condition of the statehood demand itself—which is why the movement pressed for Dalit-Bahujan agency to be built explicitly into the leadership and constitutional imagination of the proposed state, down to the concrete demand for a Dalit Chief Minister. Second, the framework fueled an intense agitation for radical agrarian land redistribution. Where mainstream narratives of regional neglect fixed on macro-level allocations for mega-irrigation and urban infrastructure in Hyderabad, the Dalit Telangana framework fixed on the micro-dynamics of the village economy, noting that despite decades of land-reform rhetoric most Dalits remained landless agricultural laborers in continuing precarity. True liberation for Telangana, on this account, could not be measured by Hyderabad's skyline or by the accumulation of capital among native elites; it had to be measured by the dismantling of the village Gadhi and the statutory redistribution of land to the Dalit families who had tilled it for generations, since land ownership was not merely an economic asset but a precondition for social dignity and protection from upper-caste violence. Third, a sharp divergence opened over how to frame the region's cultural and historical past. Mainstream Telangana nationalism often reached for a nostalgic image of the pre-1956 past, romanticizing the region's distinct cultural history to build sub-national pride; Dalit writers, by contrast, exposed that same past as an era of unrelenting feudal terror. For a Dalit, the Gadhi—the fortified mansion of the upper-caste landlord, so often invoked as a symbol of regional heritage—was a site of historic torture, systemic rape, and Vetti labor. The Dalit Telangana intervention stripped the regional movement of its elite romanticism and forced a reckoning with the historical trauma embedded in the region's own geography.

The struggle over the ideological core of the movement played out not only in legislatures and rallies but through intense cultural and spatial contest. Cultural expression became a primary medium through which subaltern communities asserted their presence and pushed back against elite appropriation of the regional imaginary. The most visible instance was Dhoom Dham, a dynamic, syncretic public performance form that combined folk music, subaltern dance, and radical political speech (Vemireddy and Mallam 2022). The cultural imaginary of unified Andhra Pradesh had long been dominated by the linguistic standards, literary aesthetics, and cinematic representation of coastal Andhra elites, who routinely stereotyped Telangana dialect and culture as backward or unrefined; the mainstream statehood movement answered by asserting a distinct Telangana pride. But within that revival it was Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi artists who supplied the real energy of grassroots mobilization. Dhoom Dham artists toured hundreds of villages and urban slums, drawing on subaltern oral tradition to voice the everyday realities of oppression (Vemireddy and Mallam 2022). Crucially, their performances did not stop at critiquing the distant Andhra capitalist; they targeted the immediate, local structures of oppression—the village landlord, the corrupt official, the persistence of caste discrimination within the region itself. Through the subaltern body and voice, Dhoom Dham worked as something like the movement's conscience, continually pulling the discourse away from abstract regionalism and back toward the material realities of the working masses. Academic space did similar work: Osmania University became a vital arena for these contested ideologies, serving as the institutional and intellectual center of the separate Telangana movement and supplying much of its student leadership and radical energy (Kalyani 2022). Yet the campus's own political landscape was marked by complex negotiation over identity and hierarchy. Subaltern student coalitions—organized under various Dalit, Adivasi, and Bahujan banners—worked to democratize campus space, resisting attempts by right-wing and elite-led student factions to cast Telangana identity in exclusionary, upper-caste Hindu terms. In its place they introduced radical anti-caste discourse into the heart of the agitation, organizing high-profile interventions like Beef Festivals and forming subversive musical troupes such as the Bhim Drum (Kalyani 2022)—deliberate ruptures of the Brahminical codes of the academic public sphere, asserting that the cultural lifeworld of the lower castes, their diet, their music, their historical icons in Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, had to form the bedrock of the new Telangana identity.

The differing reception of mainstream regionalist rhetoric and Dalit critique reveals how elite political movements manage internal dissent. While the broader, cross-caste movement led by elite actors was widely validated as a noble struggle for democratic self-determination, the specific interventions of Dalit-Bahujan activists were routinely met with institutional hostility, academic marginalization, and political dismissal. Mainstream leaders and dominant intellectuals deployed a fairly consistent set of rhetorical strategies to neutralize the Dalit critique. The most pervasive was what might be called the “postponement” thesis—the argument that internal social reform and debate over caste hierarchy had to wait until the primary goal of statehood was secured, so that anyone who raised the caste question mid-agitation risked being branded a saboteur or a traitor to the regional cause. A second strategy was the accusation of “sectionalism,” which framed Dalit-Bahujan demands as narrow, fragmenting identity politics threatening to split the essential unity of the Telangana people against their common Andhra adversary. The elite leadership also practiced a selective co-optation of subaltern cultural capital: it eagerly adopted the energetic folk songs, dances, and public formats of Dhoom Dham to mobilize the masses, while systematically stripping those performances of their radical anti-caste lyrics and structural critique of local landlordism whenever the movement was presented on national platforms. This pattern shows that the dominant discourse around statehood operated through a strict hierarchy of political legitimacy: the grievance of the upper-caste Telangana landlord against his coastal Andhra competitor counted as a structural, universal issue of regional self-determination, while the grievance of the landless Dalit laborer against that same Telangana landlord was minimized as a particularistic, sectional matter of identity politics. That double standard is itself evidence that the sub-nationalist movement was never simply a horizontal conflict between a financialized regional elite and a neglected sub-region. It was a deeply contested internal struggle over representation, in which elite

leadership sought to maintain a clean binary of external colonization while the Dalit intervention permanently ruptured that binary by exposing the internal colonialisms structured by caste within the region.

CONCLUSION

The history of the separate Telangana movement cannot be understood through macroeconomic disparity and regional imbalance alone. The systematic extraction of surplus by coastal Andhra elites gave the agitation its initial material impetus, but the movement's internal trajectory was shaped just as deeply by ideological conflict over caste, labor, and social justice. The "Dalit Telangana" framework exposed the conceptual limits of the mainstream "internal colonialism" thesis by showing that geographic autonomy alone cannot guarantee a democratic society if the internal landscape remains structured by caste supremacy and semi-feudal relations. By insisting that democratizing the statehood demand was inseparable from redistributing political power and agrarian land, Dalit intellectuals, subaltern student activists, and folk performers stretched the boundaries of democratic politics in the region in ways the mainstream movement never intended. Their systematic marginalization by that movement's elite leadership shows how readily sub-nationalist mobilization relies on silencing internal social hierarchy in order to project an illusion of regional solidarity. The history of the Telangana movement, in the end, is a reminder that the struggle for statehood is never simply about redrawing administrative borders on a map. It remains a continuing, unfinished conflict over whose historical memory, whose lived trauma, and whose democratic vision will define the meaning of the region itself.

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