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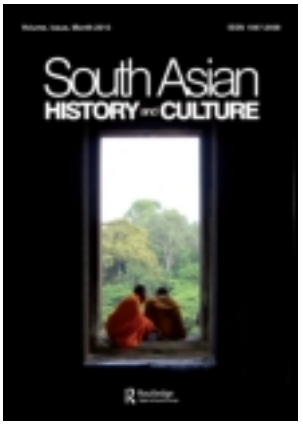

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The Brahmin double: the Brahminical construction of anti-Brahminism and anti-caste sentiment in the religious cultures of precolonial Maharashtra

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Critiques of caste and 'Brahminism' featured prominently in the social, political and intellectual life of colonial India. It is often assumed that Brahmins took the lead in developing such critiques as a consequence of the ideological influences of liberalism and nationalism. But how do we account for such critiques, articulated by Brahmins themselves, in India's precolonial centuries? My essay will explore 'religious' materials from the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries in which Brahmins appear to be agents in the creation of anti-caste and in particular anti-Brahmin sentiment. I situate this Brahminical anti-caste and anti-Brahmin discourse within a largely performative public sphere, where Brahmins balanced their role as 'knowledge specialists' in heterogeneous social, religious and cultural contexts where they were a significant minority. Here, Brahmin advocates of anti-Brahmin and anti-caste sentiment offered a 'double', a discursively constructed 'Brahmin', thus deflecting or diffusing criticism, and enabling the Brahmin performer or composer to maintain a position of importance as a Brahmin in the world of *bhakti* and the larger premodern public sphere.

Keywords: Brahmanism; anti-Brahmanism; caste; religious cultures; public sphere; Maharashtra

The theatre of caste politics

There is a long history of caste critique in Maharashtra[1] enunciated by Brahmin intellectuals and public figures. Opposition to caste has been most famously expressed by low-caste figures like Jotirao Phule (1827–1890) and Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891–1956), often in a revolutionary idiom. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, numerous public and political individuals from Brahman backgrounds offered strident, although ultimately restricted critiques of caste that were posed with a 'reformist' rather than a radical sensibility. Such figures would include social activist and author Gopal Hari Deshmukh (1823–1892); social reformer Gopal Ganesh Agarkar (1856–1895); two founding members of the Indian National Congress, M.G. Ranade (1842–1901) and Gopal Krishna Gokhale (1866–1915); and Gandhian Vinoba Bhave (1895–1982). On the other side of this political spectrum, a critique of caste was equally important for Brahmin founding figures of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, 'National Volunteer Organization') and the Hindu Mahasabha, such as V.D. Savarkar (1883–1966), K.B. Hedgewar (1889–1940) and M.S. Golwalkar (1906–1973). Often these critiques conjured a stereotypical Brahmin antagonist,

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portrayed as bigoted, backward and unsophisticated. Thus this public discourse, located within a kind of Brahmin public sphere nestled in a larger colonial-nationalist public and political sphere, appeared to speak directly to a Brahminical constituency, in a chastising sort of way while at the same time displaying itself to a much larger public sphere, dominated by middle- and low-caste observers and non-Hindus.[2] These public figures seemed therefore to offer both an internal and an external critique of caste, the latter suggesting to non-Brahmins that not all Brahmins shared the same point of view: some were on 'their side', so to speak.

Critiques of caste from a 'high-caste' perspective shared in common an interest in reinscribing Dalit[3] or low-caste identity as 'Hindu', within the fold as it were, rather than as 'outcaste'. Ambedkar, of course, knew this well, and was deeply suspicious of Gandhi and other high-caste leaders.[4] In this essay, I want to suggest that these modern machinations over caste identity in public and political arenas have a genealogy connecting them to precolonial negotiations of Brahmin identity in non-Brahmin contexts. There is no denying the intense effect of colonial order on Indian society, but I believe that colonialism, in this case, did not so much invent these orders as magnify pre-existing structures. Furthermore, I want to orient my perspective away from environments where Brahminical dominance was often apparent, areas such as ritual specialization, literary technologies, historiography, political discourse, scholastic traditions and so on. Instead I want to look towards generalized public contexts, especially environments of live performance, where Brahminical dominance was not a given and where, consequently, Brahmins required new techniques to assert their relevance and importance. It is this genealogy of Brahminical critiques of caste in public contexts, often in an idiom of anti-Brahminism, which I want to address in this essay. This history reaches deeply into the precolonial period but is nevertheless foundational, I believe, to modern political debates about caste.

What do we make of Brahminical support for a community that often espoused anti-Brahminical views? What can we say about the Brahmin/non-Brahmin dialectic in the period before what Nicholas Dirks has called the 'ethnographic state', the state of post-colonial schedules and reservations?[5] In what context, in general, is high caste a liability rather than an advantage?

I will reflect on these questions by looking at critiques of caste, often with anti-Brahminical overtones, attributed to Brahmin figures in the premodern and precolonial periods in Maharashtra, periods no less marked than now by inter-caste rivalries and violence, as well as by sometimes surprising inter-caste alliances. In this context, can we identify a longer discursive forerunner to the modern critique of caste developed by caste elites in Maharashtra, which shows the same anxieties over a minority position for Brahmins in Maharashtrian society?

In this essay, I situate my argument within three periods of historical memory. The first is the founding moment of 'the vernacular', of Marathi as a major medium of public discourse, state record, archival significance and religious expression. I situate this period around the thirteenth century, although Marathi is written much before this time. I propose the location of the 'vernacular turn' in the thirteenth century, rather than at the time of its first iterations in literary record. This is because it is not until the thirteenth century that the use of Marathi in public and state contexts reaches the form of a full discursive field of language, with various idioms, conventions of script and usage (especially in archival contexts) and literary aesthetics. In this period, I will discuss the historical memory of several figures, including Hemadri or Hemadpant, the Brahmin minister of the Yadavas; the Brahmin Swami Chakradhar, reputed founder of the Mahanubhav religious community; and the Brahmin Jnandev or Jnaneshwar, the first *sant* of the Marathi Varkari

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devotionalist tradition. The dates of life of these figures are attributed to the late thirteenth century. The second period is around the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, when Brahminical literary technocrats were integrated into the Deccan Sultanate states and Brahmin public figures flourished in Deccani culture.[6] In this context, I will focus on the Brahmin Marathi Varkari *sant* Eknath (c. 1533–1599), as well as on hagiographies written by Brahmin figures within the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The third period is the late eighteenth century, when the Maratha Empire began to disintegrate due, in large part, to internal dynastic and caste battles, made the more fissiparous by the pressure of a burgeoning British regime. Here I will highlight the career of the Brahmin public performer and composer Ram Joshi (1796–1818).

What unites the Brahminical critiques of caste in all three eras is the public context in which they were presented. This was the literary-performative field of *bhakti* devotionalism. I say 'literary-performative' because, particularly in the premodern period, what we now call '*bhakti* literature' was experienced largely as *bhakti* performance, existing in an oral public cultural context dominated by performers in various forms, most of whom were probably not Brahmins. I will highlight the two dominant forms of public performance in the precolonial era. The first is *kirtan*, a kind of melodramatic performance formed around the songs of the Marathi Varkari *sants* and other figures. Although *kirtan* is practised in many forms throughout South Asia, it has taken on a particular form in Marathi contexts, at least from the sixteenth century. This form emphasizes a narrative, hermeneutic and didactic public performance art woven around one or two central compositions and a primary theme. This theme is often political, although it may also be religious, theological or comic in nature. In other words, the *kirtan* form in Marathi is public theatre, usually performed by one central performer, accompanied by musicians and aimed at addressing a social, moral, political or theological problem.

The second is *tamasha*. Like *kirtan*, *tamasha* takes many forms, especially in Gujarat, North India and Karnataka, and has a particular practice and history in Marathi contexts. Its origins are not clear, but it appears in references from the sixteenth century. Much of its structure and many of its terms suggest a connection with Islamic and Persianate public art forms, which would have been common in the Sultanate contexts of the Marathi Deccan in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In sixteenth century references, and in at least one attributed to Eknath, *tamasha* appears to be a kind of secular version of *kirtan*, with a simple structure organized around entertaining song, dance and comical sketches. However, by the eighteenth century, *tamasha* had become a central feature of Maratha public culture, as a melodramatic performance art undertaken by a theatrical troupe using song, dance, theatrical sketches (often about caste, domestic issues and class conflicts) and engaging the secular, erotic, religious, political – a broad spectrum of human experience.[7] The Marathi *tamasha* was usually organized around the performance of *lavani*, a poetic song-form, sometimes associated with dance, that takes love, and usually erotic yearning or fulfilment, as its central motif – in short, *tamasha* in the late eighteenth century is an early incarnation of the Bollywood filmic form.[8] I will not trace the history of *tamasha* here, but will focus on *tamasha* as a performance art in the late eighteenth century associated with the Peshwa court and Ram Joshi specifically.

The materials I will discuss in the premodern period are expressed in performance arts within a public cultural milieu that was highly heterogeneous but also, importantly, primarily oral. Although I may work, today, from texts, these materials were adjunct creations of the oral-performative context, presented and largely sustained within an oral public sphere of performance, to which the dusty archival shelves that now hold their remnants give little clue. Too often in our studies of the past through textual records we read into that past a

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predominant literary preoccupation or context of dissemination. If we are to understand the social forces underlying caste (meaning, here, both *jati* and *varna*), to uncover its mechanisms of ritual and power, or the influences of colonial ethnology and governance, we have to understand the management of caste identity in the more socially immediate context of public interaction and performance.[9] Some of this work has been done recently, for example, in the environment of the railways and in the context of performance arts, especially Bharat Natyam dance.[10] There has also been excellent work on caste and academic fields, especially history, and on colonial missionary work and its intersection with colonial state policy.[11] My aim is to locate the function of caste in the field of public performance before the modern period. In so doing, I question the equation commonly made between literacy and Brahmins on one hand, and the oral sphere and 'low' castes on the other. Brahmins are regularly key figures in oral performative cultures (not to mention orality as a feature of the transmission of certain sacred Sanskrit texts), and some non-Brahmins (and low castes in general) have long been masters of literary forms. Many of these literary forms are emblemized in *bhakti* literary-performative spheres, where, in the Marathi case for example, most poetic forms of expression have a 'low caste' origin ascribed to them such as the *abhang* as the invention of the low-caste *sant* Namdev (c. fourteenth century) and mastered by the seventeenth-century *sant* Tukaram.[12] We have not sufficiently appreciated how far Brahmins have sought power in non-literary contexts of performance. But how did Brahmins, traditionally associated with the production and maintenance of knowledge in elite literary contexts, transfer their authority into public contexts of performance where their audiences were largely non-Brahmin? The vast audience for popular Indian performance arts probably has always been an audience dominated by the middle and the lower ranks of the *varna* order.[13] Academic discussions of Brahmins as actors in historical contexts have often overemphasized their agency, suggesting that a kind of Foucualdian biopower resides in their hands through the ability of caste to regulate, at a distance, the flow and interaction of society. My essay aims to show that this may be more an effect of the literary sources through which we study them (Sanskritic texts, vernacular genealogies, court records and so on) and their internal textual rhetoric of Brahminical superiority. For in the context of public performance, one of the many places where the Brahmin and the non-Brahmin or Dalit meet in person, different strategies of survival and influence are required. These strategies are, in turn, part of what conditions the nature of caste in such public cultural contexts.

The caste critique I will trace I identify by the phrase 'the Brahmin double'. I define the Brahmin double as a rhetorical strategy deployed *by Brahmin performers* in public contexts. This 'double' is a result of a very specific context where a Brahmin performer or public figure (real or imagined) performs for an audience, the majority of which are likely not Brahmins. The Brahmin double consists of the character of a 'bad Brahmin', who is portrayed as foolish, greedy, pedantic or casteist, and who serves as a 'double' for a 'good' Brahmin. This 'bad Brahmin' is thus a 'body double', receiving abuse and deflecting polemical attack from the performer, giving legitimacy to a Brahmin performer standing before a largely non-Brahmin audience. Alternatively, this 'double' may display publically a self-conscious critical evaluation emerging from within Brahmin contexts, the presentation of two kinds of Brahmins, good and bad, as it were. It may also serve, more insidiously perhaps, as a comic foil that lures the sympathies of a non-Brahmin audience, acting, in a sense, as a 'double agent'. It is in any case the Brahmin double that provides one important way to separate Brahminism and Brahmins discursively in public culture.

This discursive separation is important, I argue, in the context of a public arena of performance where the symbolic capital of high-caste birth or privileged access to literary

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materials, technologies and rituals loses much of its value. In other words, it gets at the heart of the power associated with the term 'Brahmin' over millennia in India, which is the power to mediate, and to some degree control, the production of knowledge in various contexts. These contexts include ritual power, historical documentation, philosophy and grammar, mythic production and both the theory and bureaucracy of statecraft. Thus, the symbolic capital of Brahminism is discursive power, whether it is literary or performative, it is the power to use language to shape society, politics and culture, which is different from other forms of power such as the force of numbers (a feature often of a 'dominant' caste) or the force of arms.

The Brahmin double has a performative precursor in the long-established figure of the *vidushak* or 'fool' common in Sanskrit plays and the theatre and literary arts of other languages and regions in India. It is the *vidushak* that is often also a 'bad' Brahmin, and a figure who has remained a mainstay in Marathi *tamasha* for the last 200 years at least. The Brahmin double is related structurally and diagetically (i.e. positioned within a narrative and functioning within the confines of that narrative) to the *vidushak* in the sense that both provide comical stereotypes of a 'bad' Brahmin. But although any performer of any caste might use the trope of the 'bad' Brahmin – and there is a long history of anti-Brahminism by non-Brahmins in Marathi and many examples of Brahmin 'fools' portrayed throughout South Asian literary and performative traditions – the Brahmin double invokes the social and cultural context of performance or presentation. The Brahmin double exists in relation to the content of the narrative and the remembered caste identity of the figure said to create some particular image of a 'bad' Brahmin. Importantly, therefore, the Brahmin double is an effect of two contexts – a diagetical, narrative context where the bad Brahmin appears and an 'authorial' or agentive context where a purported author or performer is also, in part, represented by his or her caste as a Brahmin. So, for example, the authors of Sanskrit plays who used the figure of the *vidhushak* were almost always high caste in origin, although not usually Brahmin.[14] To identify and analyse the Brahmin double we must pair narrative content with social context; the Brahmin double is *always attributed to a Brahmin agent/author*. Thus, the Brahmin double is more than simply a fictional 'bad Brahmin' lampooned to produce a critique of caste. It is rather a device used by Brahmin communities to speak both outside and inside their fold, to criticize their caste superiority while suggesting a way to maintain status within public discursive networks, especially those of *bhakti* performance.

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Caste, cultural power and the vernacular turn

In the Marathi-speaking Deccan, the vernacular millennium was born simultaneously in the spheres of political power and of religious power. Furthermore, the emergence of a fully formed vernacular (Marathi) set of idioms (literatures, rhetorical conventions, poetic and prosaic forms) historical memory ascribes to Brahmin figures. However, historical memory also recalls that key Brahmin figures opposed the shift of public and professional discourse to a new vernacular form. The Brahmin double, I will argue, constantly rehearses this formative historical rupture, presenting a bifurcating or doubling of the figure of the 'Brahmin' in the history of vernacularization. This becomes a model for other moments (perhaps even other 'vernacular turns') in the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries, and in the late eighteenth century.[15] Fragments of Marathi appear in political engravings in the early part of the Yadava dynasty, around the tenth century CE, and even earlier. However, to locate the routinization and normalization of Marathi as a literary currency, we must look at Ramchandra, last of the Yadava rulers, who reigned from 1271 to 1309

CE.[16] The Yadava dynasty was a political formation organized around networks of caste alliances that we now usually refer to as Maratha and this is the beginning of the political imagination of what later became 'Maharashtra', as a social, cultural and linguistic unit. In this period, Marathi is said to have first come into wide use under the intellectual force of Ramachandra's chief political advisor, the Brahmin Hemadri or Hemadpant, who served from 1259–1274. Hemadri is said to have begun the practice of noting matters of state in Marathi. To him is often attributed the invention of the Marathi *modi* script that became the scribal medium for generations of Brahmin *kulkarni*s or accountants and other literary-archivist elites, including *kayasthas* and others.[17] Yet Hemadri chose Sanskrit, not Marathi, for his magnum opus, the *Chaturvarga Chintamani*, a treatise on the correct behaviour of castes, with a significant preference for the high status of Brahmins in society. Clearly for Hemadri, vernacularization had its place and he seemed to know its dangers: that it should not infiltrate the worlds of *dharma* variously construed.

Around the same time, Marathi emerged within a developing field of *bhakti* discursive contexts in the vernacular, and in some contestation with the political position represented by Hemadri. These contexts were also literary, but were clearly emerging from an oral performative source where 'literary' convention had been formalized in non-written (that is performative) contexts – it is no wonder that the 'song' form is the core of the 'literary' form of most primary Marathi *bhakti* materials (and most *bhakti* materials throughout India). Swami Chakradhar, a Deshastha Brahmin, is reputed to have founded his Mahanubhava community in nearby Paithan, in 1267.[18] He imagined a new religious and social order articulated in Marathi rather than Sanskrit, and free of caste and Brahminical superiority. This was a laudable vision only slightly dulled by the fact that his adherents were almost exclusively Brahmins. Still, the rhetoric was real – an end to caste and Brahmin social-ritual power and this in the context of the ascendancy of many of his caste comrades, such as Hemadri, within the ranks of the Maratha Yadava state machinery. Indeed, Hemadri apparently did not like this idea and popular memory recalls that he had Chakradhar murdered.[19] Clearly, in Mahanubhav collective memory, Hemadri is the 'bad' Brahmin double to the 'good' Brahmin Chakradhar. Whether historical fact or foggy memory, the pairing of these two Brahmin figures, and their conflict, as agents of two different concepts of vernacularization, ties religion to politics at the moment when Marathi emerges as a major language of literary public interaction. The pairing also suggests that there were two conceptual types of vernacularization, a political-secular-literary one and a *bhakti* and *dharmic* or ethical vernacular turn.

Let me pause to say that with this terminology – *bhakti* vernacular turn – I am hedging against suggesting that a *bhakti* movement or protest or any kind of ideological cohesion is in evidence here. Actually, *bhakti* groups in this period reserved their greatest vitriol for each other, rather than for what we might call cosmopolitan Sanskritic Hinduism – the establishment, as it were. Moreover, the role of *bhakti* texts in the history of vernacularization is a fraught question. Sheldon Pollock has argued that vernacularization was not the result of a *bhakti* movement or a kind of grassroots popular religious opposition to Sanskritic Hinduism, but rather was a secular process by which political elites sought to maintain their authority in local languages in India.[20] The fact that Brahmins are usually seen as the agents of vernacularization in both secular and religious contexts in Maharashtra aligns with Pollock's point here, and I am largely in agreement with him. However, I will argue that those same political elites, Brahmins primarily, who sought to retain authority in localized discursive political contexts also sought to retain authority in discursive public contexts of performance, arenas that overlapped with the public field of *bhakti*. Pollock's highly persuasive arguments about vernacularization are not challenged

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here, but rather resituated in two arenas largely absent from his work and the work he has inspired, particularly through his brilliant study of vernacularization, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men*.[21] These are the realms of *bhakti* and that of the non-literate, where literacy and performance meet in public contexts, in the *kirtan* or the *tamasha* for instance. I seek to address this lacuna because it seems clear that vernacularization created new discursive realms of which the literary, while the most durable in terms of historical archive, was the smallest in terms of public attention. Vernacularization in public culture, in performance outside elite literary networks or state scribal systems, was a going concern that we have only begun to historically analyse and recall.

To return to the thirteenth century, subsequent to Chakradhar, another figure is remembered to have mounted a similar critique in the voice of the *bhakti sant* and created what is generally considered the first masterpiece of the new vernacular idiom of literary Marathi. This was Jnaneshwar or Jnandev, also remembered to have been a Deshastha Brahmin, said to have been born and lived in Alandi near Pune from 1275–1296. He is chiefly associated with a masterful paraphrase and commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita* in simple Marathi verse – often cited as the first translation of the *Gita* into any language. This text was titled the *Bhavarthadipika* but is popularly called the *Jnaneshwari.*

It was good luck that Jnaneshwar was born the year after Hemadri's death in 1274, as the great Yadava minister may not have taken kindly to the Sanskrit *Gita* being so plebianized. Still, Jnaneshwar was remembered to have met equally strong, if less murderous, kinds of resistance from his own caste members. Jnaneshwar's father had transgressed caste rules by renouncing social life while still a husband and a father of young children. To remove the stain of their father's *varnashrama* transgression, Jnaneshwar and his siblings appeared before the highest *dharmic* tribunal of Deshastha Brahmins in the holiest Brahmin city west of Benares, which was Paithan. In Paithan, not only were Jnaneshwar's parents ordered to commit ritual suicide by the Brahmin judiciary, little Jnaneshwar, then just a boy, was mercilessly scrutinized by the judiciary. One of the most famous scenes of Marathi hagiography, reconstructed in films, songs, plays and popular culture, depicts this moment when Jnaneshwar was tested by the *dharmasabha* of Paithan. Jnaneshwar insists that all living things are sacred and have a soul (not just 'untouchables' but all animals and other living things), and so the Brahmin council demands that he demonstrate the truth of his position. A nearby farmer is seen walking his buffalo, with whom Jnaneshwar shares the same name. The buffalo is summoned and the judiciary demands that Jnaneshwar cause this buffalo to express his sacred nature by reciting the Vedas. As Jnaneshwar enters a state of contemplation, the buffalo begins to recite the *Rg Veda*, to the astonishment of the council.[22]

The precocious children are subsequently returned to Brahmin status by the amazed, yet unflappably conservative, Brahmin *dharmasabha*. Here, then, the Brahmin 'double' takes the form of the Brahmin council judging little Jnaneshwar. Jnaneshwar, it is remembered, would go on to compose the *Jnaneshwari* in direct opposition to the kind of ritual control the Paithan council, and figures like Hemadri, represented, and the exclusionary practices of the Sanskrit literary world. Yet, the *Jnaneshwari* introduces complicated nuances around the question of the Brahmin double. On one level, the text argues, through its form and content, for making available the gems of Sanskrit in a language accessible to the 'common person'. The idiom of Marathi used in the *Jnaneshwari* is the poetic *ovi* form. Most Marathi scholars agree that around the thirteenth century, this form was in use by women to add rhythm to synchronized work, implying that the *Jnaneshwari* was composed in the simplest and most widely understood mode of Marathi oral poetics.[23] Yet, on another level, the primacy of Sanskrit knowledge and high-caste status endures around the *Jnaneshwari*.

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The human agent who enacts this translation from Sanskrit verse to Marathi work song is remembered to have been a Brahmin interlocutor, Jnaneshwar in this case. In his stead over eight centuries, the performance tradition of *pravacana* in Marathi, where the *Jnaneshwari* is recited and explained to an audience, is almost always carried out by a Brahmin performer. As the *Jnaneshwari* and Jnaneshwar's biography speak in multiple ways of a critique of Brahminical and textual elitism, its performative and textual continuities from the past to the present therefore rest almost entirely in the hands of Brahmins.

But what Chakradhar and Jnaneshwar both clearly illustrate is that in the historical era of vernacularization in Marathi-speaking regions, the Brahmin 'double' emerges in the figures of Brahmins composing in Marathi who mounted critiques of Brahminism in particular and caste in general. This is important to note because in this setting, vernacularization always comes coupled with a critique of caste, which is a near-universal feature of the rhetoric of *bhakti*. Could it be that language and caste critique are inseparable, that among Brahmins the vernacular transition meant a natural critique of caste when a critique of language was enacted? Perhaps the Brahmin double in this era of a crystallizing vernacular literary field is an effect of a split in the discursive sphere of power? Could the Brahmin double be the result of a riven Brahmin public at the moment of vernacularization, displaying a politics of language and society that is the natural end of a linguistic sea-change, or perhaps even its pre-existing cause?[24]

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The conservative radical

In the sixteenth century, Paithan is, again, the story of Brahminical caste conflict over the issue of low-caste inclusion. According to the hagiographies of Eknath, by the 1500s, the legacies of Jnaneshwar's text had become diffused, expanding into multiple 'corrupted' versions of the original text. Even the physical markers of Jnaneshwar's memory – such as his *samadhi* or burial place in Alandi – had been forgotten and abandoned. Meanwhile, the vaunted social critique of the Mahanubhavs had settled into a small, secretive religious community of Brahmins. Yet Brahminical stature was high within Deccani culture, as Brahmins both served the Sultanate as valued court advisors and archivists, and Paithan, connected through professional and filial networks with the Brahmin centres of Benares, remained a centre and emblem of Brahminical discursive power.[25]

A figure disrupts this equilibrium by returning the Brahmin double to public culture in the sixteenth century. This is Eknath, whose traditional dates of life are from 1533–1599. He is remembered to have been a Deshastha Brahmin *kulkarni* of Paithan, fluent in Sanskrit, Persian, Marathi and several other vernaculars, all necessary for his work. Assessing the historicity of Eknath is easier than with much earlier figures, like Jnaneshwar, or his low-caste comrade, Namdev. Although we have little verifiable material from his reputed lifespan, by the early seventeenth century, perhaps 50 years after his usual date of death, we do have his songs represented in manuscripts (around 1636), which were also maintained in and around Paithan, and nearby Dhule (about 200 km away), and as far away as Pandharpur. At the same time, we have references to Eknath in hagiography and the work of other authors.[26] But my argument here, about a literary-performative trope used within a strategic public context of caste, is aimed at the historical memory of Eknath, rather than his life itself. Nonetheless, the proximity of historical sources to his remembered hagiography situate this story in more or less the same context, place and time.

In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Paithan was under the control of the Ahmadnagar Sultanate, and its capital was approximately 50 miles from Paithan. It was an area of relative stability, and the utility of maintaining a 'soft power' centre

of Brahminical influence was no doubt apparent to the succession of Nizam Shahi rulers until the end of the Ahmadnagar Sultanate, when it was annexed to the Mughal Empire in 1636 under Aurangzeb.[27] The Sultanate appeared to have fostered a fairly pluralistic environment, with an efflorescence of Sufi and Hindu practice that created the contexts in which figures like Sheikh Muhammad (1560–1650), the Varkari's first non-Hindu *sant*, is remembered to have arisen.[28] Eknath is recalled to have come from an illustrious family – his great grandfather, Bhanudas, is said to have led a team to the kingdom of Vijaynagar that repatriated the looted, or perhaps rescued, image of Vitthal removed from Pandharpur by Krishnadevaraya in 1521.[29] But Eknath seemed to choose another path. He is said to have had some sympathy with the Mahanubhavas, and it is also remembered that his guru, Janardan, was a member of a Sufi order.[30] Such a multifaceted religious environment would not have been uncommon in the public culture of the Deccan Sultanates, and this is the context in which Eknath's historical memory is situated.

Given the cultural heterogeneity surrounding the heart of Deshastha Brahminical orthodoxy in Paithan, the legend – or indeed the reality – of a Brahmin with a progressive social agenda is very likely to have found a highly receptive local audience. Eknath was not portrayed as existing on the fringes of Brahminical society in Paithan, but sufficiently near its centre to be in constant conflict, at least in hagiographical accounts as we will see, with the Brahminical elites of Paithan and Benares. Critiques of Brahminical practice attributed to Eknath are therefore significant. Eknath's memory seems to make the most of his position by creating ample exemplars of the Brahmin double in his work and in his hagiography. He is shown to undertake radical caste transgression in an effort to reform his fellow caste-members, yet he always manages to step back, to retreat from critique just enough to avoid significant trouble.

In Eknath's attributed materials, the Brahmin double appears in many places, but most commonly in one innovative genre. Eknath is famous for perhaps inventing but certainly epitomizing the *bharud*. This is a theatrically oriented poem-song in which the depiction of an everyday character or object also bears an ethnical or philosophical message. It comes to be one major feature of an idiosyncratic form of *kirtan* often called *Eknathi kirtan*.[31] So one might have a *bharud* in the voice of a Muslim *qazi* or *fakir*, an acrobat, astrologer, prostitute, snake charmer and so on. Among 300-plus *bharud*s attributed to Eknath, the single character that received the greatest number of *bharud*s was the figure of the 'untouchable' or Mahar, the largest of the Dalit castes (*jati*) of Maharashtra, who make up in postcolonial Maharashtra about 6% of the population, and whose numbers may have been higher in Eknath's time.[32] Such songs were called '*johar*' *abhangs*, in reference to the loud call Mahars would make in order to alert caste Hindus to their presence. The most common form of these *bharud*s would be a dialogue between a Brahmin and his low-caste interlocutor. Let me give some examples.

In one well-known *bharud* (Bharud 3866), a dialogue takes place between a Mahar character and a Brahmin interrogator. The Mahar states to the Brahmin:

> I sweep the four *Vedas*,
> I haul the six *Shastras*,
> I scoop up all the *Puranas*,
> And bring this garbage to the street of the *sants*.[33]

This small song is evocative of the menial, degrading work of a Mahar. It also suggests that the literary production associated with Brahminism was consumed by low castes and outcastes, second hand as it were, mediated through the compositions of the *bhakti sants*.

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This is of course exactly what Jnaneshwar is said to have done, and what Eknath also does – mediates literacy, class and caste.[34]

In another famous *bharud* (3862), Eknath stages a confrontation between a pugilistic Brahmin and a docile Mahar. The Brahmin exclaims, 'Hey you stupid Mahar! Do you think I'm afraid of your father?' The Mahar character, through a series of exchanges, responds in measured, respectful ways, never retaliating, but gently directing the Brahmin to 'the feet of the *sants*'.

In another song, Eknath's Mahar says, 'They say that they are Brahmins, but they don't bathe, pray to the sun, or read the Vedas. They do harm with their chanting, trying to kill and bind, to fascinate and subjugate' (*Bharud* 3891). In one of the most startling *bharud*s, Eknath uses a dog as a metaphor for Dalits in general, perhaps playing off the Manu idea of untouchables as 'dog eaters'. Eknath stages a conversation between a dog and a Brahmin, itself a theatrical event likely to have been quite humorous to the right audience. In this *bharud*, a Brahmin tries to feed a dog, even though the Brahmin is afraid of being 'polluted' by the dog. However, the dog refuses the food out of fear of being polluted by the Brahmin.

Eknath's *bharud*s also involved interreligious critique. The most famous is his 'Hindu-Turk Samvad' or dialogue. The two figures, a Hindu Brahmin and Muslim *fakir* and *qazi* (this persona alternates in the song), pull no punches, but the critique of the Brahmin in the voice of the 'Turk' is scathing. The Muslim throws such zingers at his Brahmin interlocutor as: 'You leap in water like ducks!' and 'Your Brahma laid his own daughter' and 'You are about as clever as an ass!' and 'You'll sleep with a girl then not eat in her house? – you'll have the daughter but not the food?'. Recall that these *bharuds* are said to have been performed publicly by Eknath, in Paithan and elsewhere – the historical memory of their performance importantly recalls this controversial context. Whether he is speaking in character or not, he is still Eknath, a Brahmin of consequence, pretending to be a Mahar or a *qazi* or a dog poking fun at Brahmins in the midst of a Brahmin-dominated sociopolitical environment. Creating a Brahmin double, it seems, may have taken some courage.

Eknath is remembered for making trouble in more academic ways too. He is said to have received censure for critically editing the *Jnaneshwari* in the middle of the sixteenth century – a text that was probably quite unpopular in Paithan given the stories of Jnaneshwar's tribunal there. But Eknath's greatest literary affront to Brahminical orthodoxy was his translation and commentary on the 11th *skanda* of the *Bhagavata Purana*. Some stories in popular Varkari memory recall that Eknath had to face the wrath of fellow Brahmins in Benares in 1573 for this work, and accepted several forms of penance to 'purify' himself from the act, though his hagiographers do not record this requirement of penance.[35]

Within a half century after his death, Eknath's hagiographies begin to appear attributed to Brahmin authors. The oldest is attributed to a Brahmin *kulkarni* of Paithan, Krishnadas Jagadananda, in his *Pratishthanacharitra* or 'The Story of Pratishthan/Paithan' probably composed in the middle to late seventeenth century in Paithan.[36] By the eighteenth century, two key figures composed hagiographies of Eknath. They are Keshavswami, probably writing in the eighteenth century and Mahipati (1715–1790), a Deshastha *kulkarni* of Taharabad.[37] Mahipati appears to draw on the work of both figures in his various hagiographies of *sants*.[38] These hagiographies are filled with the figure of the Brahmin double, but here in two distinct layers. The first is in the form of the persecution Eknath is described as having suffered at the hands of other Brahmins. The second is in the figure of Eknath himself, who plays both sides as we will see, who transgresses caste boundaries and then atones for his transgression – a man portrayed as torn between form and reform, as it were.

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Two examples from Eknath's hagiography reiterated in late eighteenth century hagiographies should illustrate this, though there are many more. I have selected these two because they involve dining, so often a site of contention about caste and religious difference and a theme that runs through many iterations of *bhakti* in Marathi materials. These stories also form the core of many modern retellings of Eknath's life, such as in the 1935 film *Dharmatma*.

One day three Brahmins wander into Paithan in search of food.[39] They are turned away from every door because torrential rains have made it impossible to find wood for cooking. But when the Brahmins arrive at Eknath's house, he begins breaking down furniture to light a fire. Before their meal, the Brahmins go off to bathe, and in the meantime, three *fakir*s, who are of course Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva in disguise, arrive asking for food. Eknath feeds them first, and as they are leaving, letting out contented belches, the Brahmins come back, and are shocked. They refuse to dine where Muslims have dined, and ridicule Eknath at the very idea of suggesting they do so. The Brahmins sarcastically suggest that perhaps Eknath's famous great grandfather will return from the dead to dine in their stead. Naturally, Bhanudas does return, in a shimmering ethereal form. The Brahmins find this acceptable, and dine with Bhanudas. But we should note that they are now dining with fellow Brahmins, and not with Muslims.

This story is a kind of tale type for Eknath, and so we see it repeated. In another episode, a Mahar named Ranya, who is a big fan of Eknath's *kirtan*s, invites Eknath to dine at his house.[40] Eknath accepts the invitation and quotes a verse (7.9.10) from the *Bhagavata Purana* (which is a text from which he has translated two portions into Marathi (Book 2, Chapter 9 and Book/Skandha 11)). The quotation, in sum, states that 'a dog-eating outcaste who has made an offering to God [with his life, is still better than a Brahmin who] has turned away from the feet of God'. When the Brahmins of Paithan hear of this, they are outraged, in part because they have mistakenly assumed the quotation is from the Rg Veda – which of course is also meant to show that they do not know their Veda. They condemn Eknath for sharing the secrets of Sanskrit verse with a Mahar, for, as they put it, 'smearing sandalwood on an ass'. The Brahmins demand that Eknath undergo a purification penance, even that he be excommunicated. Eknath chooses penance, which he does, publicly, and also before the eyes of Ranya. Though Ranya is heartbroken at the sight of this apparent capitulation, he still retains some faith that Eknath will yet come to dinner at his house.

Eknath is now in a dilemma – he, a Brahmin, cannot eat at a Mahar's house, but he cannot disappoint poor Ranya. So God, or rather Vitthal, steps in, as he invariably seems to do. He takes the form of Eknath and dines, in his place, at the home of the Mahar. Interestingly, in the 1935 film *Dharmatma*, where this moment becomes a centrepiece for the film's narrative, it is the real Eknath who goes to the house of the Mahar, not Vitthal in disguise; the Vitthal Eknath-double stays in Eknath's home in Eknath's form. In the eighteenth-century version the Brahmins rush back and forth from the Mahar's house to Eknath's house, and in both houses there is the image of Eknath, his 'doppelganger' happily dining with the Mahar family whereas in reality he sits at prayer at home.

The critique of Brahminical practice here is multivalent. It both condemns practices and skirts the consequences of those caste violations. In other words, the Brahmin double offers a reformist critique, not a radical one – a mode of critique that several generations of Brahmin public intellectuals who opposed caste in the colonial and postcolonial periods would adopt. Eknath publically conforms to Brahminical orthodoxy by dining at home, but also presents caste critique by appearing to dine at the home of a Mahar; his caste critique is in theory, or one might say, in faith. But the miraculous doubling of Eknath is also a

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metaphor for the very paradox of the Brahmin double: How does one separate being born a Brahmin from being Brahminical? How can these two social selves be divided?

Similarly, the *bharud*s displace Eknath as the narrating character of the songs, and so diagetically the critique attributed to Eknath is second-hand. It is delivered by the voice of a Mahar or a Muslim, and so on – not by Eknath directly. Like Vitthal taking Eknath's form to dine with Ranya, Eknath's *bharud*s allow him to fill another form as well. This makes Eknath's rebellion a conservative one, although in a radical voice. The Brahmin double, in the figure of Eknath in biographical sources, is used to critique Brahminical practice, although at the same time maintains the rules of Brahminical culture, which are portrayed as important to Eknath. Criticism and protection, in a sense, are simultaneous in the use of the Brahmin double associated with Eknath. Likewise, the *bharud*s allow the figure of Eknath to maintain a rhetorical distance from his own criticisms – they displace his own 'authorial' voice, so to speak, through fictionalized characters. Eknath, as he is represented in his *bharud*s, thus seeks some shelter behind the personas of his characters. But his public memory, through films and stories, recalls that he performed these songs himself. He could not escape his own corporeal authorship even in hagiography – in other words, it is important to remember that Eknath (in historical memory in any case) was a Brahmin who opposed, to a great degree, Brahminical practices around caste, and he enacted this opposition through things he did and the songs he composed.

The doubling of Eknath to avoid the ramifications of dining with Muslims or Mahars hints at another sense of 'performance', of playing the part of one's caste status in public while harbouring another, more subversive or transformative, politics. One can read the stories of Vitthal taking Eknath's form – stories that are central to the modern deployment of Eknath as a high-caste critic of untouchability in late colonialism – as a suggestion that caste is inherent not in the body or in ideology. It is found rather in the play of public life, in the display of status through the marks of that status, such as public commensality, cleanliness and public personal interaction. Vitthal can 'double' Eknath – allowing him to remain at home and so conform to conservative caste rules of commensality while also allowing him to dine with a Mahar family or with Muslim holy men – because Eknath is already in some sense a double figure. He is a critic of caste and someone who reinforces the importance of maintaining some caste rules; he opposes *dharma* in its socially regressive modes but supports Brahminical *dharmic* rules of social interaction. Here, as elsewhere, it is clear to see why late colonial high-caste Gandhians and others would later make profitable use of the memory of Eknath.

So Eknath as portrayed in his biography both offers critique and maintains the status quo. As a Brahmin double himself, Eknath is almost a double agent in much of his hagiography, allowing both sides to believe they are at an advantage. This biographical portrayal of Eknath would endure throughout the eighteenth century, and would return to its more strident criticism of caste only in Marathi cinema and plays based on Eknath produced in the last decades before independence. One reason why hagiographers of the eighteenth century might have situated Eknath as a kind of Brahmin double agent was to patronize the prevailing power of Brahmins in the Maratha Empire from the mid-eighteenth century onwards in the context of a divided, but confederate, Maratha Empire.

Love, caste and culture at the end of empire

In contrast to Paithan in the sixteenth century, Pune in the eighteenth century saw an alliance between Brahminical influence in socio-religious contexts and in the overall field of political power.[41] Although the Maratha Empire had been founded by the Maratha leader

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Shivaji (1627–1680), by the time of Shivaji's grandson Shahu's rule in 1720, the control of the empire had shifted to the prime minister or Peshwa, which became a hereditary post within a single Chitpavan Brahmin family seated in Pune. And many lesser functions of the state throughout the Maratha realms also passed under the control of Brahmins. Throughout the ascendancy and decline of the Maratha Empire under the Peshwa – and the break-up of the Empire into five confederate regions – Pune remained a political capital and the centre from which the dharmic values of the Peshwa's government were protected. Popular historiography, as well as historical fiction in plays, novels and films, tends to ascribe the downfall of the Maratha Empire to incompetence at the hands of Brahmins. Brahmin historians like V.K. Rajwade or G.S. Sardesai have created Brahmin doubles in the historiography of the Maratha period. So, on the one hand, we might find the 'good' Brahmins of this period, like the Peshwa Baji Rao I (who ruled from 1720–1740) or his son Balaji Baji Rao (who ruled from 1740–1761), who brought the empire to its zenith. On the other hand, we have their double in the figure of the last Peshwa, Bajirao II (ruled 1796–1818), who married into the Peshwa lineage and is described as a drunk, indifferent, sex-crazed incompetent ruler whose vices infected the Maratha metropole and sapped the martial might of the Marathas. This idea is echoed in popular cultural forms as well, from films to novels and plays by Brahmins. One such was the highly controversial play *Ghashiram Kotwal* by the playwright Vijay Tendulkar, written in 1972, which viciously lampooned Pune Brahmins at the end of the Peshwai. Even in everyday life in Pune of the present day, one hears this kind of critique. When Marathi Brahmins want to poke fun at a son-in-law living off the beneficence of his in-laws, they will invoke the name of Bajirao in reference to the common Marathi sweet, referring to their son-in-law as a 'Ladoo Bajirao'.[42] Indeed, the Maratha period typifies a long history of intra-caste rivalry, among Brahmins, and between Brahmins and high-caste claimants, such as *kayasthas* and other literary administrative communities from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries.[43]

In the time of 'Ladoo Bajirao', as the Maratha Confederacy began to disintegrate, the Brahmin double had ample representation in popular culture. One of the most common public performance art forms in Pune during the eighteenth century was the performance of *tamasha* by *shahir*s, composers who would create erotic songs called *lavani* and heroic ballads called *povada* for audiences in Pune and throughout the Marathi Deccan's urban and rural social spaces. *Shahir*s came from all castes – Mahars, Kolhatis, Malis, Kumbis, Marathas, Kayasthas and Brahmins – and from among Muslims and other religions. However, *tamasha* as an art form is said to have originated in primarily low-caste semi-rural contexts, and the dancers, often prostitutes, who danced to the *lavani* songs were traditionally from Dalit and other low castes.[44] So, perhaps ironically, the most popular forms of public entertainment in the Brahmin Peshwa period were arts created and often displayed by low castes and Dalits. Indeed, most of the audiences for *tamasha* or *lavani* performances were not Brahmin, but from within the Maratha, *shudra* and Dalit castes that have always comprised the vast majority of Marathi speakers. There were usually free performances, in a field or a *darbar* open to the public. The patrons of such performances were motivated by a desire to entertain their constituencies, often their labourers, land tenants and other subalterns. Although few records exist of non-state sponsored performances – which must have made up the lion's share of performances – the Peshwa *daftar* or archive records the patronage of many *shahir*s of all castes and religions and the commissioning of their performances before the Brahmin court in the centre of Pune. A low-caste art at the heart of a Brahmin-dominated political and social order is another likely place to find the figure of the Brahmin double.

One of the most important figures in this public performance context at the end of the eighteenth century was Ram Joshi, a Deshastha Brahmin of Sholapur who relocated to

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Pune to pursue his profession. As popularly remembered, Ram Joshi came from a family of erudite Sanskrit scholars, but he rejected the family business in order to pursue what would have been the modern-day equivalent of a career in rock and roll. Predictably, perhaps, Ram Joshi is described as having descended into the world of prostitutes, alcohol and *bhang* but was rescued by the love of a low-caste courtesan named Bayabai.

Ram Joshi's love affair with Bayabai, apparently defying caste conventions, led him to add *bhakti*- and *kirtan*-inflected performances to his *lavani* and *tamasha*, adding to his repertoire of patriotic songs (*povada*), love songs and songs of social or political critique. Indeed, his textual legacy suggests a career with a steady production of both secular, saucy *lavani* and *tamasha* and sacred *kirtan*, which, as I have argued elsewhere, was the lot of any public performer of Ram Joshi's ilk who wanted to make a living.[45] Yet both his *kirtan*s and his *tamasha lavani*s retained critiques of Brahminical culture. He not only criticized his co-Brahmins' worldly vices but also criticized their otherworldly pretentions.

Let me offer two illustrative *lavani*s, which are two of the most popular songs attributed to Ram Joshi. The first *lavani* was reimagined in the Marathi film *Lokshahir Ram Joshi*, made in 1947 by V. Shantaram.[46] The *lavani* is sung in the film during the performance of a *tamasha* at the entry to a Brahman *matha* or monastery, whose Brahman head is Ram Joshi's nemesis, just as the Mahant is Eknath's nemesis in *Dharmatma* – V. Shantaram used the Brahmin double to great effect in many of his films. As we enter the scene, the comedic performer in the *lavani* troupe is donning a false beard and impersonating the *matha*'s chief Brahmin leader. He is enacting the role of the *vidushak* here. As the *vidushak*, he enters the stage of the *tamasha* and encounters the troupe, especially Ram Joshi. The Brahmin is offended by the presence of *shudras* and claims that his 'sacrifice' (*yajna*) will be spoiled. Joshi asks about the sacrifice, and the *vidushak*, whose disguise includes a long beard, explains that he will sacrifice to God a 'long-bearded goat'. At this point, the real Brahmin leader of the *matha*, who also has a long beard, becomes enraged at Ram Joshi as he detects the implications.

Joshi's attention then moves from the diagetic encounter in the play to the leader of the *matha*. He sings to him this *lavani*.

> Letting your hair grow matted and dying your robes saffron
> Will all this holy bother ever get you to heaven?
> Whether you're in the forest or in public, your mind must be firm:
> Hari's name is what lets you experience and learn.
> Around your neck why do you wear the wooden beads of the tulsi?
> Would it work just the same to get to heaven for a monkey?
> Outwardly you arrogantly strut around, but inside you're hostile to Hari.
> How can you call yourself a wise [Brahmin] when this is the style of your *bhakti*?
> You'd rather drink milk than the ambrosia of God.[47]

The second *lavani* was not included in V. Shantaram's film but it is a song that has consistently appeared in compendia of Ram Joshi's compositions, and it expresses some of the same anti-Brahminical sentiments as in the *lavani* above.

> The lowly have their own kind of religion.
> The idea of empty ritual is boring to them.
> Veda, Shastra – that all belongs to Brahmins
> So why would they bother to ask of things so alien?
> Brahmins are obsessed with empty intellectualizing
> And their vacuous rituals have brought them nothing
> They've lost touch as real enlightened preachers
> They've just stayed students – never teachers

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> But the lowly castes have become practical
> And some have become masters of learning.
> The Shudra has no use for empty actions
> That's the job of the Brahmins.
> Brahmins will soon have to face this
> And the world will turn away from their practice
> Their false pride will dissipate
> Into utter foolishness.[48]

Ram Joshi's prediction for the fate of his fellow Brahmins is powerful, but it has some of the air of the double agent, as in hagiographical portrayals of Eknath. For example, Ram Joshi is also famous for composing *povada* or ballads that praised the might of Brahmin rule, as in this famous couplet that begins a long ballad in praise of the Peshwa (*Brahmani Rajya Jordar*):

> Hail the mighty Brahmin Empire
> Whose fierce soldiers sat upon their mounts.
> That vast army faced their enemies
> And wiped them all out.[49]

So Ram Joshi played both sides, but he had to: he was no saint – God never solved his problems. He was a public performer who had to mediate popular tastes largely prescribed by a non-Brahmin public, while appeasing the hubris of the Brahmin Peshwa court. Ram Joshi's world was perhaps more precarious and complex for a Brahmin who wished to entertain a vast non-Brahmin audience who had lived under Brahmin rule for almost a century and who were watching that rule crumble before them. Under the Peshwas, as their *daftar* records indicate, lavish gifts of money and land, bountiful feasts and week-long celebrations were regularly given to Brahmins for the performance of rituals for the Peshwa.[50] But on the eve of British control in 1818, such practices came to an abrupt conclusion. The age of Brahmin political power in Maharashtra ended, although Brahmins would remain disproportionately represented in arts, literature, academia, colonial service and business. The memory of that time of Brahminical strength during the reign of the Peshwas – sweet to some and sour to others – would bedevil Marathi politics from 1818 to the present.

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The play of caste in public culture

The 'Brahmin double', like the one portrayed here by Ram Joshi, emerged from a context in precolonial Maharashtra when Brahmins dominated ritualistic environments and vernacular political literacy and record keeping, and, in some cases, the field of politics as well. Yet they did not dominate the public sphere of interaction that existed amid oral performance, where writing was secondary to orality, and where *bhakti* and public entertainment displaced ritual power and the reified world of literary technologies. I consider this the sphere of premodern popular culture, in which performance art forms, both secular and religious, held centre stage in the context of what I have called the literary-performative sphere. This is an area of cultural history that is hard to research, falling between the cracks of collective memory and the traces of its passing in the written archive. Yet I think this area of social life contains, perhaps inchoate, the seeds of India's unique political modernity.

I want to imply, although I can in no way prove, that the precursor to the postcolonial field of political theatre is to be found in the premodern fields of public performance I have discussed, where caste, as well as class, gender, region, language and so on had to

be managed socially and performatively by public figures. This is a world where caste status and political power are intimately connected, but often inversely so: the lower or more 'middle' one's caste the great one's political power. The field of precolonial public performance, in which caste identity played a crucial role, is structurally far more similar to the modern field or 'theatre' of politics than other precursors to modern politics, such as precolonial dynastic or feudalist statecraft, texts of classical Sanskrit political theory such as the *Arthashastra* or Brahminical technocracy within precolonial polities or the colonial state.[51] Thus, I understand the Brahmin double to be a figure that presages forms of modern political action by high-caste actors invested in issues of caste equity. The Brahmin double then is a literary figure embedded in a public and political performative context as a mode of caste critique. But it is also a means of protection for a group that held high intellectual and political capital, but who held less public capital in the larger context of precolonial Marathi society.

The way in which Indian public culture of the colonial era traced the precolonial theatre of caste politics into the colonial sphere is clear from the film *Dharmatma* (1935, Dir. V. Shantaram). The film was made in the context of vociferous public debates around the Communal Award Act of 1932 and the Poona Pact of that year. This time period saw an epic and public battle of wills between Ambedkar, who wanted a separate electorate for Dalits, and Gandhi, who believed separate electorates would divide Hindu culture irrevocably. This was widely read as a caste cleavage, with the desires of Dalits pitted against upper caste interest in not bifurcating a future imagined Hindu electorate, which they sought to control. This film was made in the midst of these debates and recalls similar issues surrounding the Brahmin double contained in Eknath's historical memory. This film, which describes the poet as 'Mahatma Eknath', is a classic critique of caste from a Brahminical perspective, encouraging caste Hindus to repent of their attachment to the practice of untouchability, and Untouchables themselves to adopt, as Gandhi put it, 'clean' lifestyles. The British were quite correct in thinking, at that time, that this film was a thinly veiled endorsement of Gandhi and his efforts to unite India by purging caste Hindus of the 'sin' of 'untouchability'. Yet it is my position that the film, rather than an endorsement of Gandhi, is a revival of Eknath, a moment to suggest that Maharashtra had its 'own' Gandhi or rather had a Brahmin double that expressed the sentiments of a centuries-old politics. The film could suggest that the 'problem' of 'untouchability' was one internal to Hinduism, a problem of *varna* and its relations of status improperly exercised upon a collection of *jatis* understood to be 'untouchable.' This indeed was the position of a broad spectrum of the Hindu intelligentsia, from Gandhi to Savarkar.

The way this dual mode of critique and protection operates taps a deep structure in Indian society, the structure of caste consciousness. It is hard not to recognize the way in which caste consciousness pervades Indian society, among all religions and economic classes. To adapt a Marxist term, caste consciousness is a primary formative force in the superstructural forms of politics, public culture, religion, popular culture, urban social geography, literature, language and so on. The difficulty is explaining, in any given context, how caste consciousness is accessed, publically and strategically engaged and reified to create new forms.

My argument has placed the Brahmin double within the context of caste consciousness situated in three distinct eras of 'vernacularization': the first wave of vernacularization in the thirteenth century; a second wave in the hybrid cultures of the Deccani Sultanate; and a third wave on the eve of colonial modernity. In all three cases what accounts for the Brahmin double is a social reorganization of caste status to align with political power exercised by a dominant non-Brahmin caste conglomeration. However, I have not emphasized the technologies of writing that are crucial to other studies of the displacement of the old

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cosmopolitan languages – whether Latin or Sanskrit – but rather sought to situate attention on oral public performance in the context of popular culture. The ability to control literary production, while not a simple feat, still situated discourse within a technology that limits access and the means to participation. The sphere of oral performative public culture, however, is much harder to control. The Brahmin double exists in this oral performative context as a by-product of the asymmetry of Brahminical participation in a popular cultural milieu that is primarily not Brahmin. This is not a story of Brahminical 'appropriation' of a caste critique, or a social-radical position – no voice is 'Sanskritized' here. The critique of caste status is not the sole possession of any language of South Asia. Instead, this is a story of the historical memory of the fraught place of caste in the politics of public culture at any time, past or present.

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Notes

1. I use the term 'Maharashtra' to refer to the general region where Marathi has been spoken, and is spoken, in its greatest concentration, which is roughly coterminous with the modern Indian state of Maharashtra. Although it may be anachronistic to call this region 'Maharashtra' before 1960, it saves the reader from enduring many qualifications for the designation of this region over the long period I study in this essay.
2. I use the term 'public' in part following the work of Michael Warner who provides seven succinct aspects of what constitutes a public. In summary, they are as follows: (1) a public is self-organized (2) and is a relation among strangers; (3) the address of public speech is both personal and impersonal; (4) a public is constituted through mere attention; (5) a public is the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse; (6) publics act historically according to the temporality of their circulation; (7) a public is poetic world making (Warner, *Publics*, 67–118). I differ from Warner in that I understand publics to exist in all historical periods and places, not limited to Western modernity. In this sense then I use terms such as 'public culture' and 'public sphere' with many of the implications of scholars who have used these terms in modern contexts (such as Jurgen Habermas, Donald Horne, Carol Breckenridge and Arjun Appadurai), but I use these ideas to express similar social forms in non-modern or precolonial contexts.
3. I have used the word 'dalit' or 'downtrodden' here, a term adopted by some former 'untouchable' communities in India, but certainly not all. I have also used, in quotation marks, the term 'untouchable' at times, and have also used other terms as they seemed appropriate. I mean no disrespect or insult by use of any of these terms.
4. See Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question*.
5. Dirks, *Castes of Mind*.
6. Guha, 'Transitions and Translations', 23–31.
7. See Sawant, *Tamasha*; and Kumar, 'Tamasha Folk Theatre of Maharashtra'.
8. For one of the few studies of *lavani* in English, see Rao, 'The Lavani of Maharashtra'.
9. For some studies of caste in public contexts, see Novetzke, 'Divining an Author,' and Novetzke, *Religion and Public Memory*; Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*; Dirks, *Castes of Mind* and Rao, *The Caste Question*.
10. Bear, *Lines of the Nation*; and Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*.

11. Deshpande, *Creative Pasts*; and Viswanath, 'Spiritual Slavery'.
12. See Tulpule, *Classical Marathi Literature*, 336.
13. The earliest reliable figure for caste demographics is the 1931 Census. See also the National Sample Survey of 1999–2000. Of course the reader must judge whether these modern numbers reflect premodern realities.
14. Famous figures such as Kalidasa and Shudraka are remembered to have been *kshatriya*; other famous playwrights such as Ashvaghosha were Buddhist. Whatever the truth of the biographies of these figures, they were not, in any case, remembered to be of the *shudra* or *atishudra* ('untouchable') castes.
15. I do not want to overemphasize a connection between Brahmins/Brahminism and Sanskrit. Of course, much (maybe most) Vedantic literature, drama, epic, hagiographical and mythological literature in Sanskrit are not attributed to Brahmins, and Brahmins have been attributed many works in precolonial contexts that are not in Sanskrit. The 'vernacular turn' was not a Brahmin event, as it were. See Pollock, *Literary Cultures*, 70–4. However, I do wish to point out that, at least in the context of Marathi, Brahmins are often the agents of vernacularization as well as its opponents.
16. See Tulpule, *Classical Marathi Literature*, 312–15.
17. Historically speaking, this is probably an apocryphal attribution, however.
18. See Feldhaus in Zelliot and Berntsen, *Experience of Hinduism.*
19. See Sardesai, *New History of the Marathas*, 23.
20. Pollock, *The Language of the Gods*.
21. See Ibid., especially 423–36, for his refutation of *bhakti* as central to vernacularization.
22. This story is first related in hagiographies attributed to Namdev (c. fourteenth century) and repeated by hagiographers, crystallizing in the work of Mahipati in the *Bhaktavijaya*. For Namdev, see Novetzke, *Religion and Public Memory*, 42.
23. Tulpule, *Classical Marathi Literature*, 451–2.
24. Cf. Pollock, *The Language of the Gods*, 428.
25. For example, see Guha, 'Transitions and Translations'; O'Hanlon and Minkowski, 'What Makes People Who They are?', O'Hanlon, 'Letters Home', and O'Hanlon, 'Speaking from Siva's Temple', in this volume.
26. Novetzke, *Religion and Public Memory*, 139–44.
27. A report by Garcia de Orta from the 1530s, for example, recounts the high positions of Brahmins at the Ahmednagar court. See de Orta, *Colloquies*, 291. See also Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur*, 198, and Fukazawa, *The Medieval Deccan*, chap. 1.
28. See Asher and Talbot, *India Before Europe*, 46–7.
29. Davis, 'Indian Art Objects as Loot', 22–48.
30. This idea may be apocryphal, but was widespread by the eighteenth century. Mahipati in the *Bhaktavijaya* composed in 1762 appears to reference the idea that Janardan was part of a Sufi order or took instruction from a *fakir*. In that text, Mahipati recalls that a *fakir* who met with Eknath's guru Janardan was revealed to actually be the deity Dattatreya in disguise (part II, chap. XLV, verses 83–129 [pp. 161–5]. Neither Mahipati nor his characters supply any theological or moral rationale for this charade, however. The *Bhaktalilamrta* (1774) also recalls this story: see the story in Abbott (trans.), *Bhaktavijay*, 18–22.
31. I thank Jon Keune for this definition of a *bharud*.
32. For the current statistics on population in India from the 2001 Census, see http://censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/SCST/dh_sc_maha.pdf (accessed June 10, 2010).
33. From Avathe, *Sakala Santa Gatha*. Translations here and elsewhere in the essay are mine unless otherwise noted. See Zelliot, 'Chokhamela and Eknath'; and, 'A Medieval Encounter between Hindu and Muslim'; and 'Eknath's Barude'.
34. This mediation can take on many forms. Notice, for example, in the colonial period the statement of Vishnushastri Chiplunkar on the role of Brahmins in modern colonial society: 'However unjust or wicked brahmins may be, one fact is incontestable: that they retain possession of the keys to the storehouse of knowledge. And there simply are not avenues for the other *jatis* to have access to education/knowledge [*dnyan*] without their help.' *Nibandhmala*, no. 48, December, 1877: 24, cited in Naregal, *Language Politics, Elites, and the Public Sphere*, 258.
35. My source for this reference is personal conversation with Varkaris.
36. We have little information on Jagadananda's life, but historical memory recalls that he composed his biography in the mid- to late seventeenth century and, in some cases, suggests that he was the great-great-grandson of Eknath. I thank Jon Keune for this information.

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37. Mahipati's *Bhaktalilamrta* of 1774 appears to contain Keshavsvami's text, and in this essay I reference on Mahipati's two key hagiographies that talk about Eknath, the *Bhaktavijay* of 1762 and the *Bhaktalilamrta*, which contains many more stories about Eknath, presumably supplied in part by Mahipati's discovery of Keshavsvami's text. For English versions of Mahipati's work, see Abbott, *Stories of the Indian Saints*; and Abbott, *Eknath*.
38. Mahipati did not use Keshavsvami's text in his sections on Eknath in the *Bhaktavijay* (1762), but did use it when he wrote about Eknath in the *Bhaktalilamrta* (1774), which would explain the much more copious treatment of Eknath in the *Bhaktalilamrta*. John Keune, personal communication.
39. For this story, see Mahipati, *Bhaktalilamrta* (chap. 17, verses 55–111 [pp. 85–91]). In the *Bhaktavijay*, this story is told by replacing the *fakirs* with 'untouchables' (part II, chap. XLVI, verses 45–107 [pp. 176–81]).
40. This story is told by Mahipati in the *Bhaktalilamrta* (chap. 19, verses 153–240 [pp. 141–9]). This story is not told in the *Bhaktavijay*: presumably it is a story first told by Keshavsvami.
41. See Deshpande, *Creative Pasts*, for a study of the historiography of Brahminical power in the Maratha period. For one recent perspective on Brahminical power in the Maratha period, see Eaton, *A Social History*, chap. 8. For Pune in this period, see Gokhale, *Poona*.
42. I thank Prachi Deshpande for this reference.
43. For a rich examination of Brahminical caste culture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Marathi contexts, see O'Hanlon, 'Speaking from Siva's Temple', and 'The Social Worth of Scribes'; and O'Hanlon and Minkowski, 'What Makes People Who They are?'.
44. See Rege, 'The Hegemonic Appropriation of Sexuality' and 'Conceptualising Popular Culture'.
45. Novetzke, *Religion and Public Memory*.
46. V. Shantaram was one of the founders of the famous Prabhat Studios in Pune, and who also made *Dharmatma* in 1935, as well as other films about famous *lavani* figures of the Peshwa period, such as *Amar Bhoopali* (1951), which was nominated for the Grand Prize at Cannes, about the Maratha-*gavali* composer, Honaji, as well as other famous Marathi films, such as *Shejari* (1941). For more on V. Shantaram, see Jaikumar, *Cinema*, 221–6.
47. Kulkarni and Moraje, *Ramjoshikrita Lavanya*, 109.
48. Varde, *Marathi Kaviteca Ushahakala kimva Marathi Shahir*, 25.
49. Kulkarni and Moraje, *Ramjoshikrita Lavanya*, 130.
50. See Joshi, *Bajirao II*, 268–88. See also Parasnis, *Poona in Bygone Days*, 112–36.
51. For parallel points, see the excellent study in Naregal, *Language Politics, Elites, and the Public Sphere*, and for South India, Bate, *Tamil Oratory*.

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