

The From Margins to Meaning: Dignity and Resistance in Contemporary Anti-Caste Discourse

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of caste, labour, and marginality in Turning the Pot, Tilling the Land: Dignity of Labour in Our Times and Disaibon Hul: The Call of the Bending Sky through the theoretical lenses of Subaltern Studies and Dalit Aesthetics. While caste has often been studied in adult autobiographical and protest literature, its articulation in texts that foreground labouring communities within accessible narrative frameworks remains underexplored. The selected works foreground agrarian and tribal worlds not as passive spaces of suffering but as sites of cultural assertion, ecological belonging, and political resistance. Drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's interrogation of subaltern voice and Sharankumar Limbale's formulation of Dalit aesthetics as literature of lived experience and social transformation, this study argues that these texts disrupt hegemonic representations of caste by centring dignity, collective memory, and embodied labour. Through qualitative textual analysis, this article demonstrates how narrative voice, imagery of land and labour, and community memory function as counter-discursive strategies. The findings suggest that such works reshape the discourse of marginality by transforming labour from a marker of oppression into a sign of epistemic authority and ethical centrality. The study contributes to contemporary debates on caste representation, subaltern agency, and the aesthetics of resistance in Indian literary production.

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Introduction

Caste remains one of the most persistent and structurally entrenched systems of social stratification in South Asia. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, caste continues to shape access to land, education, labour, and cultural capital. Literature has historically played a critical role in exposing these hierarchies, especially through Dalit autobiographies and protest writing. Nonetheless, recent narrative interventions foregrounding labouring and tribal communities expand the terrain of caste discourse beyond testimonial suffering. Turning the Pot, Tilling the Land: Dignity of Labour in Our Times reorients attention toward agrarian labour as a site of dignity rather than degradation. Similarly, *Disaibon Hul: The Call of the Bending Sky* draws upon indigenous memory and collective resistance to articulate an alternative epistemology rooted in land and community. Both texts resist dominant representations that frame marginalized communities solely through victimhood. Instead, they articulate cultural selfhood, ecological consciousness, and collective assertion. The shift from suffering to dignity is not merely thematic but epistemological. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues that the subaltern is often excluded from dominant discourse not only through economic marginalization but through representational structures that silence their agency: “The subaltern cannot speak because even when they attempt to speak, their voice is mediated through dominant epistemic frameworks that transform resistance into compliance” (Spivak 280). These works invite readers to reconsider labor not as a sign of caste-bound servitude but as a repository of knowledge, resilience, and ethical labor ethics. In doing so, they align with the critical objectives of Subaltern Studies, which seeks to retrieve suppressed histories, and Dalit Aesthetics, which asserts that literary value must be grounded in lived experience rather than elite aesthetic norms.

This article argues that the selected texts reframe caste discourse by foregrounding dignity of labor and collective memory as modes of resistance. Rather than pleading for inclusion within dominant frameworks, they construct autonomous representational spaces. By situating these works within Subaltern Theory and Dalit Aesthetics, the study demonstrates how literature becomes an instrument of epistemic reclamation.

Literature Review

Scholarship on caste representation has largely centred on Dalit autobiographies such as Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan* and Bama’s *Karukku*, where personal narrative becomes a political intervention. These texts expose caste humiliation and reclaim narrative authority. Sharankumar Limbale argues that Dalit literature is “born out of the experience of humiliation and the desire for equality” (Limbale 19). His formulation emphasizes authenticity and social transformation as

key aesthetic principles. “Dalit literature is not written for entertainment but for awakening; it seeks to challenge oppression, expose inequality, and create a consciousness that leads to social change” (Limbale 42).

Subaltern Studies, initiated by Ranajit Guha, sought to rewrite Indian historiography by foregrounding marginalized voices. Guha critiques elite-centric historiography and calls for attention to peasant insurgency and grassroots agency (Guha 3). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak further complicates this by asking, “Can the subaltern speak?” (Spivak 271), highlighting the structural mediation that often silences marginalized voices even when they appear represented. Recent scholarship has begun examining caste in children’s and community-centred literature, noting the importance of narrative accessibility in reshaping social consciousness. However, there remains limited sustained engagement with texts that foreground labor as dignity within theoretical frameworks of subaltern agency and Dalit aesthetics.

This study addresses that gap by analyzing how the selected works shift emphasis from caste as stigma to labour as epistemic and ethical capital.

Objectives and Aim

The primary aim of this study is to examine how caste and marginality are rearticulated through narratives of labour and indigenous resistance in the selected texts.

The objectives are:

- 1.To analyze representations of labour as dignity rather than degradation. 2.To examine how narrative strategies construct subaltern agency.
- 3.To apply Subaltern Theory to interpret voice, silence, and representation.
- 4.To interpret the texts through Dalit Aesthetics, focusing on experiential authenticity.
- 5.To evaluate how these works challenge dominant caste narratives.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative textual analysis approach. The selected texts are examined through close reading, focusing on narrative voice, imagery, thematic patterns, and symbolic structures. Subaltern Theory provides the framework to analyze issues of voice, mediation, and historical retrieval. Dalit Aesthetics offers evaluative criteria grounded in lived experience, social commitment, and transformative intent. Rather than treating theory as external imposition, the analysis integrates theoretical insights organically with textual interpretation. In addition this article employs Comparative thematic analysis to identify convergences in representations of labour, land, and collective memory. The methodology prioritizes contextual sensitivity and theoretical coherence. Ranajit Guha highlights that subaltern historiography must prioritize marginalized voices and everyday resistance, stating that “the small voice of history speaks through

fragmentary narratives, local struggles, and collective memory rather than elite political documentation” (Guha 5).

Representation of Labour and Epistemic Authority in *Turning the Pot, Tilling the Land*

Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd observes that caste society systematically undervalues productive communities, noting that “India’s knowledge systems were built not in temples and courts alone but in fields, workshops, and cattle sheds where productive communities developed practical intelligence” (Ilaiah Shepherd 71).

Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd’s *Turning the Pot, Tilling the Land: Dignity of Labor in Our Times* articulates a sustained critique of caste by foregrounding productive labor as the foundation of civilisation. In this work, he challenges the ideological separation between intellectual and manual work, arguing that caste hierarchy privileges ritual authority while obscuring the knowledge embedded in everyday labor. Ilaiah Shepherd writes, “Those who produce food, milk animals, shape tools and build homes are the real creators of social wealth” (Ilaiah Shepherd 42). This statement reverses the traditional caste hierarchy that assigns symbolic prestige to priestly functions while marginalizing those engaged in production. Through this assertion, labor is not framed as mechanical repetition but as creative and epistemic activity. He further argues that caste society “made the producer invisible while celebrating the non-producer as superior” (Ilaiah Shepherd 57).

The metaphor of “turning the pot” symbolizes transformation and agency. The act itself represents continuity of skill, memory, and creativity. In one reflective passage, he observes that “the knowledge of the soil, seasons and seed is not written in scriptures but in the hands of the tiller” (Ilaiah Shepherd 63). This line encapsulates Dalit Aesthetics’ emphasis on lived experience as the basis of literary and ethical authority. Knowledge here is tactile and intergenerational, challenging textual and scriptural dominance. Through accessible, direct language, Ilaiah Shepherd rejects ornamental prose in favour of political clarity. His stylistic choice aligns with Sharankumar Limbale’s argument that Dalit literature must emerge from “the experience of the oppressed” rather than abstract imagination (Limbale 32). Thus, labour becomes both subject and aesthetic principle.

Indigenous Memory and Collective Resistance in *Disaibon Hul*

Disaibon Hul: The Call of the Bending Sky states caste marginality within Adivasi history and ecological belonging. The word “Hul,” historically associated with rebellion, signals collective resistance against structures of domination. This evokes history to challenge both colonial and internal hierarchies. One evocative passage shows, “The sky bends low to hear the cry of the forest people; it bends not in defeat but in witness” (18). The bending sky becomes a metaphor for cosmic participation in subaltern struggle. Unlike caste ideology, which stratifies human relations through rigid hierarchies, it’s imagery emphasises interconnectedness. He further reflects, “Our land is not property but ancestor; our labour is not pollution but prayer” (27).

This powerful reversal contests caste ideology that associates manual work with impurity. Labor, in this formulation, acquires spiritual and ethical significance. The line destabilizes the ritual logic that equates bodily work with degradation.

From a Subaltern Studies perspective, this text reclaims narrative agency for Adivasi communities. Ranajit Guha emphasizes that elite historiography often excludes peasant insurgency from national memory (Guha 3). This work counters this erasure by centering collective rebellion as foundational rather than peripheral. The text's aesthetic structure marked by repetition, rhythmic cadence, and communal voice aligns with Dalit and indigenous aesthetic traditions. Beauty emerges not from refinement but from resilience. Indigenous narratives often frame land as memory and identity. As the text reflects, "The forest remembers the footsteps of ancestors, and each tree stands as testimony to survival and resistance" (Hembrom and Tudu 34).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak cautions, representation of the subaltern often risks appropriation (Spivak 275). The writer avoids this by writing from within a shared cultural consciousness rather than speaking on behalf of it. Together, these texts dismantle caste ideology by repositioning labor as the source of social and cultural wealth. Iliaah Shepherd explicitly critiques the symbolic elevation of non-productive elites, while the latter redefines labor through ecological cosmology. Both works resonate with Limbale's assertion that Dalit literature "is not for aesthetic pleasure alone but for social transformation" (Limbale 43). Their interventions extend beyond literary representation to challenge epistemic hierarchies. They demonstrate that the dignity of labor is inseparable from narrative authority.

Through Subaltern Theory, these texts function as counter-histories that restore visibility to marginalized communities. Through Dalit Aesthetics, they redefine literary value in experiential and ethical terms. Labour, in both works, becomes a site of resistance against caste's symbolic violence. The narrative tone reclaims dignity by refusing internalized stigma. Labour becomes celebration; resistance becomes continuity rather than rupture.

Revaluation of Labour and Political Implications

The findings suggest that both *Turning the Pot, Tilling the Land* and *Disaibon Hul: The Call of the Bending Sky* undertake a significant epistemic intervention by repositioning labour as a source of dignity and knowledge. However, the political implications of this revaluation require careful scrutiny. If caste hierarchy historically operated through the ritual devaluation of manual work, the recovery of labour as epistemic capital challenges not merely social prejudice but the ideological foundations of Brahminical supremacy.

In *Turning the Pot, Tilling the Land*, the dignity of labor is articulated as both ethical and civilizational. By foregrounding agrarian production as the basis of social wealth, Iliaah Shepherd contests the symbolic separation between intellectual and manual work. Yet this reframing also raises an important theoretical question: does the celebration of labor risk romanticizing forms of work that remain materially

exploitative under contemporary capitalism?

While the text powerfully restores visibility to productive communities, a critical lens must acknowledge that dignity alone does not dismantle structural inequality. The transformative potential of such narratives therefore lies not merely in affirmation but in their capacity to expose the historical mechanisms that rendered labor invisible in the first place. “The struggle for dignity must be accompanied by structural change, otherwise recognition risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative” (Limbale 58).

Similarly, in *Disaibon Hull: The Call of the Bending Sky*, the question of voice becomes particularly significant. Disaibon Hul reconfigures subaltern voice through collectivity rather than individual testimony. By embedding narrative authority within communal memory, the text circumvents the representational dilemma articulated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak regarding the mediated nature of subaltern speech. However, this strategy also complicates the notion of voice: collective narration resists appropriation, yet it may obscure internal differences within marginalized communities. The text privileges shared cosmology and resistance, but future scholarship might interrogate how gender, generation, or intra-community hierarchies operate within this collective frame.

Ecological Consciousness and Anti-Caste Discourse

The ecological consciousness in both works further expands the scope of Dalit and subaltern discourse. Labor is represented not as extractive domination over nature but as relational engagement. This reframing aligns caste critique with environmental ethics, suggesting that the devaluation of manual labor historically accompanied the commodification of land. Yet the texts’ ecological idealism may also be read as counter-modern critique, challenging developmental narratives that justify displacement in the name of progress. In doing so, they reposition agrarian and indigenous knowledge systems as sustainable alternatives rather than residual traditions. Importantly, these texts shift the discourse of marginality from testimonial suffering toward epistemic sovereignty. Earlier Dalit autobiographical writing foregrounded humiliation as exposure of caste violence. While that intervention remains foundational, the present works extend the aesthetic terrain by centering dignity, creativity, and intergenerational knowledge.

This shift does not erase oppression; rather, it refuses to allow caste discourse to remain confined within narratives of victimhood. At the same time, the move from stigma to dignity must be read as strategic rather than totalizing. Structural caste inequalities persist in access to land, capital, and institutional power. The texts’ emphasis on cultural sovereignty therefore functions as symbolic reclamation, which may precede but does not automatically ensure material transformation. Their intervention lies in reshaping the imaginative order through which caste is understood, through Subaltern Studies, these narratives operate as counter-histories that retrieve suppressed modes of production and memory. Through Dalit Aesthetics, they redefine literary value in experiential, ethical, and transformative

terms. Yet their most significant contribution lies in demonstrating that the politics of representation can move beyond exposure toward reconstruction from documenting injury to articulating alternative futures.

Epistemic Justice and Knowledge Production

While the preceding discussion has emphasized dignity and collective agency, the broader theoretical contribution of these texts lies in their intervention in what may be termed epistemic justice. Caste hierarchy historically functioned not only through economic and ritual exclusion but also through epistemological stratification determining whose knowledge counts as legitimate. Scriptural authority, literacy, and textual tradition were elevated as markers of intellectual superiority, while embodied and manual knowledge systems were relegated to invisibility. In *Turning the Pot, Tilling the Land*, the assertion that knowledge resides “in the hands of the tiller” destabilizes this epistemic hierarchy. Agricultural practice, animal husbandry, tool-making, and soil knowledge are presented as cumulative intellectual traditions transmitted across generations. This framing challenges the entrenched division between “thinking” and “doing,” revealing it as a caste-inflected construct rather than a neutral distinction. The dignity of labour, therefore, is not only ethical but epistemological it asserts that production itself is theory in practice.

Similarly, *Disaibon Hul* articulates an indigenous cosmology in which land, sky, and community form a relational network of meaning. Knowledge emerges not from detached observation but from participation in ecological rhythms. Such a framework resists both caste ideology and colonial modernity, which often privilege extractive rationality over relational understanding. By embedding memory within landscape, the text positions land as archive and resistance as historical consciousness.

This reconfiguration invites a reconsideration of Subaltern Studies itself. While the Subaltern collective sought to retrieve suppressed histories, critics have noted that historiographical recovery alone may not dismantle epistemic hierarchy. Spivak highlights epistemic inequality by arguing that “knowledge produced by dominant institutions often erases alternative ways of knowing, rendering subaltern knowledge invisible within academic discourse” (Spivak 285).

The selected texts go further by presenting alternative modes of knowing that operate outside elite textual frameworks. They do not merely insert subaltern subjects into existing narratives; they reconstitute the terms of narrativity itself. By framing resistance as cultural continuity rather than sudden rebellion, the text disrupts dominant historiography that portrays subaltern communities as passive until mobilized by elite leadership. Instead, resistance appears cyclical and community - driven.

Dalit Aesthetics becomes particularly significant here. Sharankumar Limbale argues that the aesthetic value of Dalit literature lies in its experiential authenticity and ethical urgency. In the present works, this principle expands into what might be called an aesthetic of productivemateriality where the act of labor becomes both

subject matter and structural metaphor. The potter's wheel, the cultivated field, the bending sky: these are not decorative images but epistemic symbols. They encode systems of knowledge grounded in material engagement. Conversely, the move toward epistemic justice also raises critical questions. Can literary recognition alone transform entrenched institutional hierarchies that continue to privilege elite knowledge systems? Do these narratives risk being absorbed into academic discourse without altering structural inequities? Such tensions underscore the limits of representation even as they affirm its necessity.

By foregrounding epistemic justice, these texts extend anti-caste writing beyond exposure of humiliation toward reconstruction of intellectual sovereignty. They suggest that dismantling caste requires not only social reform but transformation of the criteria through which knowledge, culture, and value are measured. In this sense, dignity becomes more than moral affirmation it becomes a demand for restructuring the symbolic order itself.

Conclusion

A significant contribution of both texts is their repositioning of marginality from periphery to centre. Conventional caste discourse situates Dalit and tribal communities as socially and culturally marginal. These texts invert that logic by presenting labouring and indigenous life-worlds as foundational rather than peripheral. This study has demonstrated that *Turning the Pot*, *Tilling the Land* and *Disaibon Hul* reconfigure contemporary caste discourse by repositioning labour as epistemic authority and collective memory as political agency. Through the frameworks of Subaltern Studies and Dalit Aesthetics, the analysis shows that these texts disrupt ritual hierarchies by foregrounding embodied knowledge, ecological belonging, and productive labour as civilizational foundations. Rather than appealing for inclusion within dominant aesthetic standards, the works construct autonomous representational spaces grounded in lived experience. Labour emerges not as stigma but as historical intelligence; land functions not as property but as archive; community becomes not object but subject of narration. At the same time, the revaluation of dignity must be understood as a strategic intervention within ongoing structural inequality. The texts do not resolve caste oppression; instead, they alter the conceptual vocabulary through which marginality is imagined. In doing so, they expand the aesthetic and political possibilities of anti-caste writing by shifting emphasis from suffering alone to sovereignty, continuity, and epistemic reclamation. Limbale asserts that Dalit literature ultimately aims at social transformation, arguing that "Dalit writing seeks not merely to narrate suffering but to create a new social vision grounded in equality and justice" (Limbale 71).

Such interventions are particularly urgent in contemporary India, where caste continues to shape material realities even as it is rhetorically denied. By transforming labour into a site of knowledge and ethical centrality, these works contribute to broader debates on representation, environmental justice, and the future of subaltern agency in Indian literary production.

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