
Juned Shaikh

Examining the Marathi translation of *The Communist Manifesto* published in 1931 and situating it in the socio-historical context of workers’ movements in Mumbai in the 1920s and 1930s, this paper argues that the so-called subordinated classes engaged with it and created a workers’ public that was in conversation with the elite public sphere. But it holds that the vernacular version had to navigate the structures of language and a social structure in which caste was an important feature to make itself comprehensible to other intellectuals, trade union leaders and workers. It was in this process that its strategy of obscuring caste subjectivities and creating a new identity of class found its greatest success and also its ultimate failure.

The economic and social histories of the working class in Mumbai have contended with a few key questions. Prominent among these have been how was labour recruited for the city’s textile mills? What was the structure of working-class politics and who were the important agents that shaped it? What identities were forged by the workers and how were these constructed? Answers to these questions have shaped our understanding of the labour histories in Mumbai. For instance, Morris (1965) and Chandavarkar (1981, 1994) argued that business strategies and the contingencies of capital shaped the labour market in the city. Chandavarkar convincingly showed that the labour recruitment policies of mill owners and the repressive apparatus of the colonial state played a crucial role in shaping the politics of millworkers. On the question of the millworkers’ social identities, Newman (1981) and Upadhyay (2004) pointed out that modern institutions like trade unions did not obliterate caste and religious affinities and that Mumbai’s textile workers navigated complex subjectivities.

One of the common concerns shared by these social histories of the working class in Mumbai is the authenticity of the voice of millworkers. Chandavarkar, Newman and Upadhyay acknowledged that the working class was silent and that their voices could only be discerned through the representations of lawyers, journalists, social workers, civil servants, trade union leaders and police reports. How then should histories of the working class depict workers? While engaging with this question, Chandavarkar argued that it was crucial to highlight the assumptions undergirding these representations of the working class and focused on the implication of these representations on the social formation of class in Mumbai (1994: 8). While this essay does not delve into the question of the “authentic” voice of the workers or the accuracy of representations, it does share Chandavarkar’s interest in highlighting the assumptions underscoring the depiction of workers. It engages with this interest by considering how the notion of working class (*kamgaar varga*) was translated and made knowable to Mumbai’s workers in the early 1930s. It studies the Marathi translation of Karl Marx’s and Friedrich Engels’ *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) published by the Kamgaar Vangmaya Prasaraka Mandala (Society for the Propagation of Literature of the Working Class) in 1931 and situates this translation in the socio-historical context of workers’ movements in Mumbai in the 1920s and 1930s. I argue that the translation of this canonical Marxist text into regional idioms helps us understand the vernacularisation of modern notions of class. In other words, a study of how Mumbai’s intellectuals translated *The Communist Manifesto*...
Manifesto provides us insights into understanding the city’s industrial modernity. More specifically, it helps us understand how intellectuals, trade union leaders and workers made sense of the rapid socio-economic transformations in the city in the 1920s and 1930s. In their attempts to negotiate industrial capitalism in Mumbai, trade union leaders and Marxist intellectuals looked towards the polemical histories of European capitalisms and the Soviet revolution for a “scientific” understanding of capitalism and the workers’ movement. But the process of translating European modernity into the Marathi vernacular necessitated that the original models be made knowable by referencing the particular political, economic and social tensions of the region. The essay thus points out that the practice of translation sheds light on the process of the vernacularisation of modernities.

A close reading of the first Marathi translation of The Communist Manifesto, Kamyunista Jahirnama, including its foreword, introduction and notes on key words, suggests that a fruitful approach to grasping the relationship between the different actors who conceptualised and constituted the working class in Mumbai, including intellectuals, trade union leaders and the workers they represented, is to view it as a dialogue in which intellectuals and union leaders relied on a common language and familiar conceptual categories to make The Communist Manifesto accessible to Marathi-speaking workers. The notion of dialogue in this paper does not imply a parity among intellectuals, trade union leaders and workers. Nor does it suggest that the terms were mutually agreed on and uncontested. Rather, the notion of dialogue signifies ethnographic interactions between intellectuals and workers that were predicated on relationships of power, an intimate familiarity with the lives of the workers, and a common language in which certain conceptual categories were shared. Moreover, I believe that the assumptions of intellectuals who considered The Communist Manifesto translatable, comprehensible and relevant to working-class struggles in Mumbai can be explored productively through the concept of dialogue.

What provided the dialogue its lucidity and created the possibility of imagining “a class conscious of itself and for itself” in Mumbai, this essay argues, are the figures of its internal “others”, the Mavali (lumpenproletariat) and the dalit (the untouchables or depressed classes as they were known in the 1930s). The paper argues that to comprehend the conception and formation of the social form kamgaar varga (working class) in Mumbai in 1930s, it is important to understand the history of the category kamgaar varga itself. To grasp this history, the essay points out, it is important to understand the significant role of the categories Maval and dalit in the Marathi translation of The Communist Manifesto. These categories have unstable and multiple meanings in the translation, but they were the product of a dialogue among millworkers, union leaders, and intellectuals and helped them make sense of their everyday lives and lend stability to their conception of the kamgaar varga. Thus, the imagination of class (kamgaar varga) had to engage with and attempt to obscure the knotty issue of caste difference.

In what is to follow, I situate Kamyunista Jahirnama in its socio-historical context. The Jahirnama, I point out, is emblematic of the Marathi public sphere; where, as Naregal has argued, bilingual social elites (mostly Brahmins) crafted a vernacular literary sphere to maintain their social dominance (1999). But I complicate this assertion by showing how the so-called subordinated classes engaged with the Jahirnama and other Marxist writings and created a workers’ public that was in conversation with the elite public sphere. Moreover, I argue that the Jahirnama constructed the dalit and Mavali as the conceptual other of the kamgaar varga. Further, I complicate the construction of the Jahirnama by showing the entanglements of caste and class in the everyday lives of workers.

Social History of the Kamyunista Jahirnama

Kamyunista Jahirnama was published by the Kamgar Vangmaya Prasarak Mandala in Mumbai in 1931.8 Its stated goal was to introduce workers to “scientific literature that would nourish a workers’ movement” (Adhikari 1931: 1). The manifesto was translated in Meerut jail in 1930-31 by Gangadhar Adhikari, a scientist who had completed his PhD in chemistry from Berlin University in 1926. Adhikari, who as a student in India “had nothing but contempt for politics (because) it was an irrational field of activity”, embraced Marxism because it was “a strictly rational and political approach to the problems of life” (Desai 1968: 30). Adhikari’s purported and aseptic rationalism and his cynical view of politics are important tropes that merit unpacking, but more crucial to my arguments here is the eventual transformation of his beliefs and his involvement with the communist movement on his return to India. In Germany, Adhikari was inspired by fellow scientists who were deeply interested in politics, and joined the Communist Party of Germany in 1927. His vocation as a research scientist in Berlin and his membership of the Communist Party brought him in touch with figures such as Albert Einstein and American writer Edgar Snow. When Adhikari was jailed in Meerut between 1929 and 1933, Einstein wrote a letter to British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald seeking his release (Rao and Sen 1968: 3-4).

Adhikari was incarcerated in the Meerut conspiracy case within a few months of his return to Mumbai in 1928. The British government charged 32 people, including S A Dange, S V Ghate, S S Mirajkar, Adhikari and other trade union and communist leaders from Mumbai and other regions of India with conspiring to overthrow the colonial government and plotting to establish a branch of the Communist International in India. Ironically, it was the incarceration of these leaders that provided the condition of possibility for their deeper engagement with Marx’s and Vladimir Lenin’s writings or, as Ghate called it, the “University of Marxism-Leninism” (Rao and Sen 1968: 13). Marxist-Leninist literature was made available to the prisoners in the Meerut case because they argued that it was essential for their defence in the conspiracy trials. Moreover, in Adhikari, the prisoners found a willing interlocutor of Marx’s and Engels’ works because he had read them in German. The translation of The Communist Manifesto into Marathi should be seen in the context of these discussions. The Marathi manuscript was edited by Jagannath Adhikari, Adhikari’s brother, and R M Jambhekar and was published in October 1931 by N S Desai. The Marathi edition of the manifesto was proscribed by the state and by 1933, the Mandala stopped publishing books.
The publication of *Kamyunista Jahirnama* was justified by its publisher on the grounds of its relevance to the workers’ movement in Mumbai. The publisher pointed out that “the experiences of the working class in developed countries would be useful to the Indian workers” and that *The Communist Manifesto* “provided a concise exposition of social scientific principles of working class struggles” (Adhikari 1931: 5). The publisher thus believed that Mumbai’s nascent leftist trade union movement and its radical workers would find an exposition of their being in the universal history of class formation offered by *The Communist Manifesto*. The translation of the manifesto offered intellectuals, trade union leaders, and workers an opportunity to imagine a working class at a time when state repression of the communist movement in India, caste tensions among workers and labour leaders, and communal conflict threatened to dissipate the leftist trade union movement in the city.

The *Jahirnama* offered a space to imagine a solidarity that was tenuous in practice. In 1931, the imagination of a working class that was conscious of itself was more easily achieved in the literary public sphere than it was in the field of trade union politics. One of the key arguments of the publisher was that literature was a weapon of class warfare and that literature, hitherto a weapon used to maintain the intellectual dominance of the Indian capitalist class, could be used by the working class to subvert it (Adhikari 1931: 4). *Kamyunista Jahirnama*, the publisher said, was literature of and for Mumbai's working class. It was read in study groups in working-class localities. R B More, for instance, conducted classes on Marxism and Leninism in the Bombay Development Department (nhd) chawls (buildings with several one or two-room housing units) in the Delisle Road area of central Mumbai in the 1930s. The rhetoric of the literature of the working class alerts us to the existence of, or at least a desire on the part of workers and their leaders to craft, an independent public sphere in Mumbai in the 1920s and 1930s.9 In late colonial India, communist intellectuals and trade union leaders in the city struggled hard to create a sphere beyond the regimentation of the colonial state. State intervention though could not be easily avoided; there were periodic incursions of the state apparatus, including the police and bureaucracy, into the everyday lives of workers. In the broader project of which this essay is a part, I explore how the workers' public was in conversation with the dalit public sphere in the 1930s. In this essay, however, I offer preliminary arguments about how this dialogue can be discerned by analysing the categories of dalit and Mavali that figure in the *Jahirnama*.

The existence of a workers’ public in Mumbai in which leftist leaders, intellectuals, and textile millworkers were participants can be perceived from a cursory look through publications in the city in that period.10 In May 1927, *Kranti* (Revolution), a Marathi weekly newspaper of the Peasants’ and Workers’ Party in Mumbai, began publication under the editorship of S S Mirajkar, a co-accused in the Meerut conspiracy case. During the 1928-29 strikes in the textile industry, *Kranti* was known as a mouthpiece of the communist-led Girni Kamgar Union, the trade union at the forefront of the strike. Apart from *Kranti*, there were also plays and novels written by Bhargavarama Varerkar alias Mama Varerkar, who sympathised with the communist movement of the time.11 Varerkar wrote evocatively about migrant millworkers from Konkan and played an important role in creating a romantic notion of a distinct working-class culture in the mill district of Mumbai.12 The Kamgara Vannaya Prasarak Mandala and its first publication, *Kamyunista Jahirnama*, was an intervention in this public and an attempt by intellectuals and trade union leaders involved in the process to translate and propagate a scientific rendering of Marxist-Leninist literature in the vernacular public sphere. The rationalising discourse of class in the *Jahirnama* provided an opportunity to submerge the experiences of caste within the rhetoric of class.

**Marathi Public Sphere**

The Marathi public sphere, in which the *Jahirnama* intervened, was the product of a long process of engagement with print capitalism by “native” elites who were keen on maintaining their intellectual influence under colonial rule in the 19th century (Naregal 1999). Intellectuals in the “Bombay-Pune region” artfully negotiated the differences between English and Marathi, developed felicity in both languages and cultivated “lower middle-class, semi-literate readers” with little knowledge of English. According to Naregal, the intellectuals achieved success and consolidated the vernacular public sphere not by pitying the Marathi public sphere against the English public sphere, but “through a virulent anti-lower-caste discourse” (1999). One of the defining texts of this anti-lower caste discourse was Vishnushastri Chipulkar’s scathing rebuke of the lower-caste leader Jyotirao Phule. Chipulkar was particularly critical of Phule’s willingness to negotiate with British colonial administrators as well as his enthusiastic view of the education offered in missionary schools.

Adhikari’s translation of *The Communist Manifesto* must be seen in the context of the long history of the making of a Marathi literary sphere in colonial western India. When Adhikari and his colleagues in the Meerut jail translated the *Manifesto*, they had to navigate the structures of language and a social structure in which caste was an important feature to make the *Jahirnama* comprehensible to other intellectuals, trade union leaders and workers. It was in this process that the strategy of obscuring caste subjectivities and creating a new identity of class found its greatest success and also its ultimate failure. The paradoxical outcome of the vernacularisation of the *Manifesto* can be gauged by considering the *Jahirnama*’s strategies of denoting categories of people in the city of Mumbai such as kamgara, Mavali and dalit. These categories may have seemed natural to the publisher and their readers but they had no fixed referents and their meanings were contested at the time Adhikari was translating the *Manifesto* and continue to be contested today. For instance, in *Kamyunista Jahirnama*, the term “dalit” invoked two different categories of people. In the foreword, “dalit” was used to describe “all other oppressed people apart from the working classes” (1931: 5) in India who were asked to study the text and help the working class in their struggle. “Dalit” was also a term used to denote the oppressed classes of medieval Europe who were transformed into the bourgeoise in modern times. In the context of Mumbai of the late 1920s and 1930s, the dalits or the oppressed people that *Jahirnama* refers to included some non-brahmin and all untouchable castes in the
region. According to the publisher, Kamgaara vargacya calaval-ila madata karne, va tya sati kamgaara vangmayaca abhyasa karne he itara dalita varganahi atyanta avashyaka ahe (It is important for other dalit classes to study workers’ literature and help the movements of the working class). The term “dalit” was used by B R Ambedkar, who was a leader of the untouchable castes in the region and later became chairman of the committee that drafted India’s Constitution in 1948, to describe the subjects of historical oppression by upper-caste Hindus such as brahmins and non-brahmins in 1928.

The publisher’s assertion that other oppressed people must support the working class should also be situated in the context of workers’ politics in the 1920s. One of the 17 demands of the Joint Strike Mill Committee, which included the three prominent unions in the textile industry, the Girni Kamgar Mahamandal, the Bombay Millworkers’ Union and the Bombay Girni Kamgar Union, was that dalits (depressed classes) be recruited for high-paying jobs in the weaving departments of mills. In the textile industry, dalit men worked mostly in the low-paying ring spinning departments of the mills as watchmen, and dalit women, in the reeling and winding departments (Chandavarkar 1994: 222). According to Pradhan, a sociologist who conducted fieldwork among dalit workers in the city in the 1930s, most dalit families earned between Rs 16 and Rs 30 a month while a family of weavers averaged between Rs 60 and Rs 70 a month (1938: 60-61). In response to the demand of the strike committee, the Bombay Mill Owners’ Association decreed that untouchable workers be recruited to weaving departments. The association blamed millworkers and the “caste feeling” among them for not recruiting dalit workers to weaving departments. Thus the mill owners tried to detach and absolve themselves from using the affective ties of caste in the recruitment of workers to the textile industry. But, as Chandavarkar has shown, caste and kinship ties played a crucial role in finding work and mill owners consciously used this strategy for labour recruitment with the aim of creating a socially stratified labour force. The association shifted the blame of excluding dalit workers from weaving departments to the workers themselves. The following three sections of the paper further explicate the political context in which the Jahirnama was published and read by discussing the engagement of dalits with modern, urban life, the non-brahmin movement, trade union politics and the entanglements of caste and Marxism.

**Dalits and the City**

Dalits from the Marathi and Gujarati-speaking areas of the Bombay Presidency had been migrating to the city from the turn of the 19th century, lured by its promise of industrial modernity, dignified living and secular education (Jaffrelot 2004: 71). According to the 1921 Census, dalits comprised 12% of the city’s population and lived mostly in the localities of Byculla, Parel, Nagpada, Kamathipura and Dharavi in central Mumbai. The dalit imagination of modernity revolved around the self-conscious transition from the old to the new. For instance, in the city, dalits gradually distanced themselves from rituals and festivals such as the bhandara and jatra that were important features of their social lives. Money, hitherto spent on rituals, was now invested in markers of modernity such as libraries and night schools (Khairmode 2002, Vol ii: 61).

One of the important points of discussion in public meetings and newspapers and pamphlets published by dalits belonging to the Mahar jati (caste or distinctive social group) was the continuance of the 111 Mahar Battalion that was decommissioned after the first world war (Khairmode 2002, Vol ii: 62). Central Mumbai was home to many organisations that claimed to represent dalits. For instance, the Somvanshi Mitra Samaj (Friends of the Somvanshi Community), which held its meetings in Dagdi Chawl and later Chawl No 3 of the Bombay Improvement Trust, had established a fund to construct a temple for Mahars. Apart from religion, education was an important subject of deliberation. The Somvanshi Nirasita Shishkanavardhaka Samaj Phanda (The Fund for the Education of the Friendless and Unsheltered Somavamshi Community) started schools with Marathi and English as the medium of instruction in Dagdi Chawl and later acquired land from the Bombay Municipal Corporation in Kamathipura in 1923 and shifted the schools there (Khairmode 2002, Vol ii: 64).

Thus jati remained an important vector, but not the sole one, for imagining a community in Mumbai. Despite regional and class differences among them, the Somvanshi Mahars’ efforts at the formation of community found traction on the issues of military service and initiatives taken by relatively educated urban Mahars to extend their gains in the city. If the city was a space of intense contest over social reproduction, a section of the Mahars sought to further their claims by imagining and organising the community. Mahar engagement with urban modernity also enabled them to represent the broader community of the beleaguered depressed classes. In Mumbai, Ambedkar sought to move beyond the limitations of jati in his everyday practice. For instance, he adopted a young boy from the mang jati in Naigaum (a locality in Dadar, a Mumbai suburb where he lived), much to the chagrin of his neighbours from the Mahar jati. The importance of central Mumbai as the fulcrum of dalit modernity can also be gauged from the dalit engagement with two features of modernity – the political imagination of a community of workers under the banner of Marxism and the practice of parliamentary democracy. The Government of India Act of 1935 had granted dalits 151 of the 1,585 seats in various provincial legislatures (Jaffrelot 2004: 71). In the election to the Bombay legislative assembly in 1937, Ambedkar contested from a reserved seat in the Parel and Byculla region of central Mumbai under the auspices of the Independent Labour Party (i.l.p), a party that aimed to abolish caste and participate in the workers’ movement. The ability of dalits to engage with parliamentary democracy was curtailed by the system of reserved seats (and not separate electorates) because the Hindus of other castes, who were a majority, had an important say in electing dalit candidates.

Thus Ambedkar had to face a stiff challenge from the Congress candidate for the seat, Balu Palwankar, a dalit cricketer from the Chambhar jati. After the 1937 election, Ambedkar never won an election in the city. Thus, democratic politics opened up and foreclosed the possibility for the creation of a dalit community. The imagined community of dalits fissured along the lines of jati, class and ideology. This theme became a feature of dalit politics in the city.
in the postcolonial period as well and could be seen in the various splits in the Republican Party of India in the 1960s and 1970s.

**The Non-Brahmin Movement and Trade Union Politics**

Dalits had a complicated relationship with the non-brahmin movement in the region and the city. The so-called middle castes, which included the Maratha-Kunbi caste cluster, constituted the fulcrum of the non-brahmin movement in the region. According to the 1931 Census of India, the majority of workers in the textile industry, especially its weaving departments, claimed to belong to the Maratha-Kunbi caste cluster. This caste cluster accounted for one-third of the total population of the city in 1931. They were “poorly educated” and apart from the mills, worked as “general labour” in the city. The census held that “the character of Bombay City, socially, politically, and educationally depends largely on this large element of the city’s population” (1931, Vol I: 40). The census officials were insistent that a study of the characteristics of Maratha-Kunbis in the city was critical to a proper understanding of Bombay and the unique problems it faced, especially problems of law and order (1931, Vol I: 40). For instance, the census report attributed communal disturbances in the city to “badly educated and excitable population of this kind” (1931, Vol I: 40).

Phule, one of the heroes of the anti-caste movement in the region, had mobilised shudras and ati-shudras (Kunbis-Marathas and other non-brahmin castes like Malis, Shimpis and dalits) in the second half of the 19th century against brahmin dominance. Phule was an icon of the non-brahmin and dalit movements of the 20th century. The identification of a common cultural enemy – the brahmin – produced affinities between the non-brahmin and the dalit movements. For instance, Maratha social reformers saw Mahar dalits as “caste brothers” because brahmans treated the relatively high-caste Marathas as “untouchables” (Omvedt 1976: 290). When Ambedkar launched the I.L.P in 1936, he acknowledged that an alliance of the sprusya-asprusya (touchable and untouchable) peasants and workers would energise the labour movement and bring about social transformation (Phadke 2007: 88). But affinities that were easily articulated by intellectuals often failed to materialise in practice. As Ambedkar himself pointed out, “touchable” peasants and workers, mostly belonging to the Maratha-Kunbi caste cluster, who had a profound understanding of their caste and class inferiority vis-à-vis white-collar brahmans (pandharparesa), nevertheless derived psycho-social comfort from that they were not dalits (untouchables). The “touchable” non-brahmins sought solace in the higher status they held over dalits and were therefore invested in maintaining the distinction (Phadke 2007: 88).

**Caste and Communism**

The Marathi-Kunbi caste cluster was an important element of trade union politics in the city. The communist movement in the city encountered a long history of mobilising people along the “cultural” affinities of caste. After the arrest of top communist leaders in the Meerut conspiracy case in 1929, the influential non-brahmin leader Bhaskarrao Jadhav, who was also a minister in the colonial government at the time, sought to promote non-brahmin leaders such as Arjun Alwe and G R Kasle to prominent positions in the Girni Kamgaar Union (Chandavarkar 1994: 427-29). In the 1920s, Jadhav played a prominent role in the anti-brahmin movement and viewed the influence of communists in the trade union movement as evidence of the continued dominance of brahmans in the region (Omvedt 1976: 260). In 1924, Jadhav lobbied British officials to organise labour unions along the lines of caste and kinship to counteract the influence of the Congress Party. He suggested a similar strategy against the communists and this policy resonated in the pages of Kamyunista Jahirnama (one that propagates a cause and avenges wrongs), the newspaper of the non-brahmin movement in the region.

In Kamyunista Jahirnama, the leaders of the non-brahmin movement emphasised their sensitivity to the cause of workers and denounced the “communist bhats” (communist brahmans) for betraying the workers’ movement, ridiculing them for their “caste elitism” (Omvedt 1976: 260). In the wake of the Meerut arrests, anti-brahmin leaders like Govindrao Shinde invoked the names of leaders of the non-brahmin movement such as Phule and Narayan Meghaji Lokhande to argue that non-brahmin leaders were the true representatives of the working class rather than the “middle-class brahmin leadership” (Omvedt 1976: 260). According to Omvedt, leaders of communist trade unions like G R Kasle accepted this view and textile workers of the Delisle Road area of central Mumbai, who had hitherto been supporters of the radical red flag unions, were now mobilised under the banner of bahun samaj (the non-brahmin majority).

**Dalit, Mavali and the Jahirnama**

In its foreword, the term “dalit” referred to a powerful undercurrent of caste politics that Kamyunista Jahirnama tried to submerge in its rhetoric of class politics. The use of the same term to describe the precursors of the modern bourgeoisie in medieval Europe was also not without significance. In the context of Mumbai’s workers’ politics of the 1920s and 1930s, it represented a communist critique of the non-brahmin and untouchable movements of the time. The communists argued that the non-brahmin and depressed classes movements could not make a substantive contribution to working-class politics because their goal was to satisfy the aspiration of the literate elites within these castes and enable their followers to enter the colonial administrative apparatus. For the communists, these movements catered only to the aspiration of the elite within these castes to enter the middle class. The telos of dalit politics in Mumbai, the communists argued, was to create a bourgeoisie among them who would “perform services and create opportunities for their kinmen, co-villagers and caste fellows” (Chandavarkar 1994: 429).

Adhikari used the term “mavali” to signify the lumpenproletariat. Mavali, a moniker for people from the hilly regions of western Maharashtra in the Bombay Presidency, signified categories of people prone to create law and order problems for the colonial police. In his explication of key words to the Marathi edition of the Manifesto that was published along with the Jahirnama, Adhikari characterised the Mavali as a class below the working class, who were “paupers” and lived in the city’s slums. He explained, Daridri kimva bekaara kangaara, bhukekangala kangaara, va Mavali ya kangaarvargacya adhogatiya ekeka khaliya
payrya aheta (Destitute and unemployed workers, paupers, and the lumpenproletariat are a step below the kamgaar varga on the social ladder). He translated a passage from Das Capital to explain this point further, Udyogadhandyatuna kadhina takkle lokam moityavasticya shahratuna gardi karani rahtata; va gunda, dadaloka, Mavali mhanuna prasidhdhasa yetata. Utpadan kriyachi va yanci karyamci pharkata shali aste; ase loka arthataca paisha karita vata aya pratigami pakshala svatla vikyana mage pudhe phahata nahi (The paupers who have been fired from work live in crowded slums in cities and become famous as criminals. They have been permanently separated from the means of production and therefore these people do not think twice before selling themselves to counter-revolutionary forces for money). The Mavali varga here refers to the persistent threat of strike breaking using violent means. The non-specificity of the term “mavali” as poor slum dwellers who could be deployed as violent strike breakers in the textile mills but who also signified a threat to the security of the state, the city's middle class and labour unions is accentuated if we consider that dalit poet Namdeo Dhasal imagined the lumpenproletariat as “dalits” and as agents of revolutionary social transformation in the 1970s.

Thus both dalit and Mavali are non-specific terms that nevertheless have ideological valence in the Jahirnama. In the context of the communist movement in Mumbai that was affected by the incarceration of its leaders, the terms reflected the threat posed by caste identities to an imagined solidarity of the kamgaar varga. The assumption that class solidarity could be constructed and permanently maintained in Mumbai was one that was borrowed by the publishers of the Jahirnama from their understanding of orthodox Marxism. But this desire proved difficult to actualise in practice.

Moreover, the terms dalit and Mavali played a crucial symbolic role in the Jahirnama. Dalit and Mavali as non-specific categories helped give shape to an equally non-specific category – the kamgaar varga. In other words, the Jahirnama is able to give form to the category kamgaar varga only when it simultaneously constitutes the categories dalit and Mavali. The categories of dalit and Mavali in the Jahirnama enable the possibility of imagining a kamgaar varga. For Adhikari and his colleagues, the grotesqueness that the term Mavali symbolised and the opportunism that dalit politics represented constituted the other of the rationalised notion of class. It is in the conceptualisation of the dalit and the Mavali as the other of the kamgaar varga that the dialogue between intellectuals, trade union leaders and workers achieved its success. In the Jahirnama, the dalit and the Mavali were the products of the shared conceptual repertoire of communist intellectuals and workers. But the intellectuals' success in publishing the Jahirnama and providing a Marxist notion of kamgaar varga obscured the complex subjectivity of the workers. Ironically enough, the Jahirnama itself provided the tools (the categories dalit and Mavali as the other of the kamgaar varga) for the amplification of sectionalism amongst Mumbai's workers by mill owners and the state. The formation of class solidarities in Mumbai was thus already ephemeral.

In the 1930s in Mumbai, communists in the city were anxious about the dilution of the radical workers' movement by caste and religious differences and the arrest of key leaders of the communist movement. The Meerut conspiracy attenuated communist unions in the city. According to Potkar, the trial had been designed to “tear apart the workers' movement, to pour sand on the peasant movement, to destroy the Lala Bavlta Union (Red Flag Union), to make the revolutionary youth fearful, to continue the pilanuka (exploitation), to arrest the Indian masses in chains, to exploit the workers, to perpetuate imperialism, to consolidate the shaky throne of capitalism, and to destroy the workers' movement” (1935). He blamed the nexus between capitalists and the colonial state for the “plight of the workers”, their movement and for the ravages of the Great Depression of the 1930s (1935: 1). He said that the state had declared the radical Lala Bavlta Girmi Kamgaar Union, Tarun Kamkari Sangh (Young Workers' Association), Kamgaar Vangmaya Prasarak Mandala, and the Marxist League illegal and banned them in Mumbai (1935: 2). Potkar’s ire was also directed at leaders of the non-brahmin movement such as Arjun Alwe, “reformist” leaders N M Joshi and R R Bakhale, and factions of the communist movement that held allegiance to M N Roy. He blamed them for splitting the trade union movement and diluting its efficacy.

Caste and the Workers’ Public

While the Marathi literary sphere, within which I have located the Marathi translation of The Communist Manifesto, was shaped by the entanglements of caste and class and the tensions between these two important features of social stratification in ways that sought to subsume them in the interest of class, in the localities of Mumbai, social relationships were shaped by the more complex conjoining of caste and class necessitated by the practices and tactics of everyday life. This section highlights the complex subjectivities inhabited by the workers of Mumbai by discussing literary representations of workers' lives in the city as well as the important role played by dalit leaders, both in the communist movement and in the dalit movements in the city.

Newman has pointed out that literacy, or the lack of it, was a feature of life of the urban labour force in inter-war Mumbai (1981: 25). But this did not affect the savouring of newspapers by the working class – “one man reading aloud to an attentive throng” (Newman 1981: 25). The tea house was an important space for workers' sociability. Mama Varerkar's novel Dhvata Dhota (Flying Shuttle) depicts the décor of a tea shop as a fascinating fusion of high art – the walls are adorned with prints of paintings by Raja Ravi Varma – and pithy sayings attributed to saints from the region. The owner of the tea house is described by Varerkar as a “lover of art” (1972: 26). The incongruence of the setting – where high art adorns a tea shop frequented by labourers immersed in the mechanical reproduction of textile goods – suggests that in Varerkar's rendering the workers' public sphere was not sealed from the elite public spheres in the city. By imagining a tea stall as the setting for an exhibition of Ravi Varma's paintings, Varerkar opens the possibility of workers' engagement with high art and high theory (Marxism-Leninism).

Literary representations of workers’ lives also highlighted the importance of caste. The significance of caste ties in negotiating
life in Mumbai can be gauged from *Dhavta Dhota*. Set in 1917-18, a period when increased hours of work due to first world war had not yielded higher wages, the protagonist of the novel, radical labour leader Baba Shigvana asks Kanhooba, his guest and prospective sub-tenant, “Tujhi jaat kona?” (What is your caste?). When Kanhooba answers that he belongs to the kulavadi caste, the same caste as Shigvana, he takes him to his one-room tenement in a chawl in the mill district and also helps him find work in the mills. The importance of caste and kinship ties in these relationships is also supported by the social histories of the Mumbai working class. For instance, Chandavarkar pointed out that newly arrived migrant workers relied on their caste and kinship networks to find work, housing, and credit in Mumbai city (1994: 170). According to Hazareesingh, the various mohallas (neighbourhoods) and localities of central Mumbai “derived their distinctive identities from the jati (caste), religion, language or occupation of the majority of their residents” (2007: 15).

Varerkar’s depiction of the localities of Mumbai sheds light on the social relationships and identities produced within them. By the 1920s, the mill district of central Mumbai, popularly known as girangaon (village of mills), came to be represented as a distinctive locality of mill workers. The sense of locality was fraught with tensions of caste, class, region and religion within it but was also based on a celebration of the difference of the mill district from the middle-class and upper-caste locality of Girgaon. Girgaon was represented as the locality of white-collar brahmins. The mill district of Mumbai was set apart from Girgaon because of its unique ability to form a community despite the differences within it. Varerkar likens mill workers’ solidarities to the rhythmic beats of *tala*. According to Varerkar, the mill workers ability to maintain a rhythm was a feature of their social life and crucial to their survival in the city. Interestingly, Varerkar imagined the community formed by mill workers as one that was created despite the absence of *bhavikta* (trust or the confidence to confide in each other) among them (1972: 15). This community was forged on the basis of their common goal of surviving industrial work and navigating everyday life in the mill district. The rhythm of the cymbals symbolised the potential to form a community; though the community was based on secular notions of class it was expressed through the idiom of a religious community forged during the singing of *bhajans* (religious songs). According to Varerkar, the middle class brahmins of Girgaon lacked this ability to forge a community (1972).

Varerkar’s notion of mill workers’ community in the localities of central Mumbai was based on the entanglement of caste and class. For instance, the rendering of the residents of Girgaon as brahmins and white-collar employees showed the articulation of class and caste. Varerkar, as we have noted, was also aware of the differences among mill workers, but believed that these could be overcome. Apart from the common experiences of work and the social relationships that developed in the neighbourhood, Varerkar’s imagining of the brahmin-white collar nexus alluded to endeavours in the 1920s and 1930s, which could be traced back to Phule’s initiatives in the second half of the 19th century, to forge a solidarity among all non-brahmins, including depressed classes, artisan castes and peasant castes.

The entanglement of caste and class can also be seen in the important role dalits played in the communist movement and the movement against untouchability led by Ambedkar. The localities of Central Mumbai – Byculla, Worli, Naigaum, Agripada, Bombay Central and Delisle Road – were the locus of several movements in the city – dalit, communist and non-brahmin. More, a communist leader who was active in the dalit movement, was one of the important leaders of the Mahad Satyagraha in 1927 that was led by Ambedkar. More also organised classes on Marxism-Leninism for dalit youths in the localities (More 2003: 154). One of the focal points of his initiatives was the BDD chawls on Delisle Road. The BDD chawls were constructed by the state to house industrial workers and were part of an initiative for city development. In the BDD chawls, More was assisted by communist leader S V Deshpande and his friends in Chawl 14, including Govind Tamhankar, Baburava Garud and Bhargaava Sonavane (More 2003: 154). Thus, in Central Mumbai in the 1930s, the translation of Marxist texts helped induct some dalit youth to the communist movement through face-to-face interactions.

The link between the communist and dalit movements was not, however, simply about individuals with complex subjectivities. That nexus was forged in the public sphere through public institutions such as the Friends Union, an association that organised plays and festivals that addressed the political, economic and social issues faced by workers and dalits in the city. For instance, a play on unemployment during the Great Depression of the 1930s had dialogue by the communist leader D S Vaidya and songs composed by S R Gaikwad and Baburava Garud (More 2003: 155). The music for the play was composed by Hindi film musician C Ramchandra. More and the Friends Union were also at the forefront of the first public celebration of Ambedkar’s birthday, which remains an important event in dalit cultural politics even today. The first public gathering on Ambedkar’s birthday was organised by the BDD chawls on Delisle Road in 1933 (More 2003: 155).

It is important to remember that it was not just dalits and workers who were engaging with Marxist theory and reading communist texts translated into the Marathi vernacular. Marxists in India and Europe were reading representations of dalits or the untouchables as authentic accounts of their lives. Communist leaders in India, England and the Soviet Union were curious about untouchability and Mulk Raj Anand’s books *Untouchable* (1935) and *The Coolie* (1936) were issued by Wishart-Lawrence, a publishing house in London that published communist books. *Untouchable* was also translated into Russian and framed as a book that provided “a fair picture of the lives of the lower classes in India”. Anand, who was one of the founding members of the Progressive Writers’ Association in London, was also commissioned by Wishart-Lawrence to edit a book on Marx’s writings on India. But his literary proclivities made him suspect in the eyes of communist leader Rajni Palme Dutt. Dutt believed that Anand was not qualified to expatiate on Marx and recommended that the book be thoroughly checked by Marxian experts. He wondered why an important part of Marx’s work should have been entrusted to the “mercies of such a tyro”. The engagement with
social difference (caste) thus raised the spectre of dilution of Marxist thought among intellectuals, an apparition that gained sustenance from the practices of labour recruitment in the city. In their social practice though, workers classified both as non-brahmin and dalit displayed a creative engagement with Marxism and the communist-led trade union movement as well as social movements that mobilised them in terms of narrower social identities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has sought to situate Kamyunista Jahirnama in its socio-historical context. The Jahirnama, I have pointed out, was representative of the Marathi public sphere, where bilingual social elites (mostly brahmins) crafted a vernacular literary sphere to maintain their social dominance over the lower castes. But while acknowledging this assertion, I have moved beyond it by showing how the so-called subordinated classes engaged with the Jahirnama and other Marxist writings and created a workers’ public that was in conversation with the elite public sphere. Moreover, I have pointed out that the Jahirnama constructed the dalit and Mavali as the conceptual other of the kamgaar varga. For the translators of the Jahirnama, the Mavali and the dalit represented the other, which was threatening and therefore needed to be subsumed. In this way, I have argued that the Mavali and the dalit created the condition of possibility for imagining a kamgaar varga in the early 1930s. Moreover, the imagination of the kamgaar varga also sheds light on how the communists envisioned caste and class. Finally, I have complicated the construction of the Jahirnama by showing the entanglements of caste and class in the everyday lives of workers.

NOTES

1 Chandavarkar provided an excellent account of the spaces in which the dialogue took place. He stressed the importance of the social life of the neighbourhoods and the important work done by the communist Girni Kamgar Union in organising processions and public meetings, and commemorating events like the birth of Karl Marx or the lives of those who died in the strike of 1928-29 (1981: 603-47).

2 I derive this notion of dialogue from Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin and his belief that to live is to engage in dialogue, to question, to listen, to answer, to agree. The notion of shared conceptual categories in dialogue also implies a shared culture; this idea also derived from Bakhtin and Stuart Hall. According to Bakhtin “culture consists in the discourses retained by collective memory (the common places and stereotypes just as much as the exceptional words), discourse in relation to which every uttering subject must situate himself or herself” (Todorov 1984: X). Antonio Gramsci also reflects on the dialogue between intellectuals and subalterns (or the simple as he call them) in his notion of the philosophy of praxis. According to him, if a philosophy of praxis has to be effective, it should not present itself at the very outset as polemics that supersede the existing mode of thinking. It has to work through common sense to critique common sense. According to Gramsci, a philosophy of praxis does not entail the injection of a scientific form of thought into everyday life but of renovating and making critical already existing thought. See Forgas (2000: 331-32).

3 Mavali in the context of the Marathi translation of The Communist Manifesto signifies the lumpen-proletariat.

4 Dalit means ground down, or oppressed. It was also a social category used to connote the depressed classes in late colonial Mumbai. But in Kamyunista Jahirnama, the term had an expansive meaning and included “all oppressed classes”, not just the untouchable castes. Though I focus on the terms Mavali and dalit, the vernacularisation of other concepts also conveys the complex genealogy of categories. For instance, the term “bhudas” (serfs) encompassed harijans, who are described as permanent servants (Kamyunista Jahirnama 1931: 117).

5 My concern here is with the articulation of the category kamgaar varga or working class. Chandavarkar highlighted the important role of political action in creating class consciousness, however ephemeral the identity borne of this consciousness might be. See Chandavarkar (1994). My point here is that for the imagination of the discursive category kamgaar varga, the category of Mavali (lumpenproletariat) and dalit (depressed classes) played an important role. I call the Mavali and the dalit the internal others because, according to the translators of the Manifesto, the people comprising these groups came out of the kamgaar varga and threatened to undercut class solidarity. The external other of the kamgaar varga, which was also crucial to its imagination, was the bhandivaldar varga, or the capitalist class.
For an understanding of how social historians should also reflect on the history of categories (Eley 1996: 193-243), I borrow from Jones' conception of Dalit, or kamma varga in this text, is a word that should be analysed in its linguistic context. I also derive from his treatment of class as a discursive reality (Jones 1983). Chakrabarty made a similar point. He said, "an analytical strategy that seeks to establish a 'working class' as the subject of its history must also engage in the discursive formation that makes the emergence of such a subject-category possible" (1989: 6).

7 In 1932, this novel shares the premise of Chakravarti's argument that it is important to engage with categories of historical difference, the argument and goal of the paper is different. Unlike Chakrabarty, who argued that the class identity of workers could not be distilled out of pre-capitalist identities, I argue that in Mumbai, during the period under review, class (kamma varga) was imagined by constructing the Mavali and dalit as its others. The imagination of a kamma varga was not just the prevarication of incorrigible communist leaders; workers participated in this dialogue and the translated communist literature was read by workers and dalits in the mill districts.

8 The Bengali translation of the Bengali text, is a word that should be analysed in its linguistic context, are also the centres of social activity where mill workers congregated at the end of the day. The crafting of the workers' public was made possible by the colonial state's interest in the productivity of labour, the radical middle-class intelligentsia's role in creating a Marxist class (kamgar varga) movement and goal of the paper is different. Unlike Chakrabarty made a similar point in his essay "Workers and Unions in Bombay 1918-1929: A Study of Organisations in the Cotton Mills" (Chakrabarty 1983: 20-26).