

**RESISTING
AUKAAT**

Sponsored by Levana Gender Advocacy Center
at Queen's University, Kingston, Canada

Typeset by Tanvi Sharma

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Time is not with us: Aukaat and Kashmir

Nayim Rather

Yours truly: A non-binary nobody

(Same day, every day in the life of a non-binary nobody)

Brindaalakshmi K

I didn't know about caste, you taught me.

Alithea Stephanie Mounika

Ruminations

Prerna Subramanian

Aukaat means borders, boundaries, limits of time and space imposed on people.

Resistance around dominant borders and Boundaries.



Kashmiri peasants working as bonded laborers,

Courtesy: Greater Kashmir

Time is not with us: Aukaat and Kashmir

Nayim Rather

(1)

I remember a conversation I once had with a Kashmiri old man during the height of mass protests in Kashmir in 2016; after giving me a tour of history (as he lived it)—the tumultuous political periods that Kashmir witnessed—he

conclusively said, “*Waqt Chunne Aesse Saath Divaan*”, a Kashmiri proverb which literally translates into; The time is not on our side. It piqued my interest. What does he mean when he invokes time as a factor in the ‘fate’ of nations and people?

(2)

“It was another reminder for the people of Kashmir that it is almost impossible to transmit to all of India the simple fact that India has occupied Kashmir and this occupation is morally indefensible,” writes Manu Joseph, an Indian writer, reiterating in other words that, “Time is with us (India)”.

These two examples are not aberrations. If we magnify them, we will get an entire narrative premised on these themes when it comes to the relationship between India and Kashmir; a kind of toxic marriage that happened without consent, precisely because the two places were placed on different locations in the history of time. India controlled time, and thereby the fate of Kashmir with it;

this mere control by India on the future of Kashmir shows Kashmiris their place, their *Aukaat*.

The word *Aukaat* is an Arabic word; its roots in the word, *Waqt* which means time. In Arabic culture, the status of an individual, a community, or a nation is determined by how time is faring with them. In Arabic literature and story-telling, the character's rise and fall, thereby their status, their *Aukaat* is determined by time. The sense of controlling the time gives the people the power to alter others' lives, thereby showing them their *Aukaat*. For example, in the Arabic epic, *The Arabian Nights*, the prince forces his power on the narrator, the concubine; to avoid death, the concubine has to race against the time, against the prince's showing her, her *Aukaat*.

Like the prince, India tells Kashmiris their *Aukaat* first by robbing Kashmiris of telling their own story. As if India is telling Kashmir that your *Aukaat* is not to tell your story, or since you have no *Aukaat*, you can't have your

story. The power to tell one's story is, as we know, taking control of one's life and correspondingly one's dignified freedom.

What do I mean by when I say this?

To begin with, let's examine what India tells about Kashmir's origin story.

In the beginning, there was a landlocked valley surrounded by tall mountains. The valley was filled with water, and was inhabited by water-demons (Kashmiris) who worshipped snakes, spoke gobbledygook, lived in pits, and ate human flesh. A people who loved driving chariots, drink wine, chant hymns, worship fire, and had organised social and economic life then arrived in the valley, along with a spiritual man, called Kashyap Rishi. Seeing the deplorable condition of the local snake worshipers and their muddy waters, the Rishi emptied the valley of dirty water and purified the land. He gave the valley its name, Kash-Mir. After that, the land bloomed and all the impurities vanished. The settlers brought order and law, and

civilisation, turned it into a *Swargh* (Paradise). Of course, this origin story sets the narrative for future relations between the two people, Kashmiris and the people from plains, that later on will transform into Kashmir and India relations. If we go as far away from the origin story, we enter the modern world. The nature of the world might have changed, but the relationship is still the same; the dynamic of *Aukaat* remains.

In 1947, the subcontinent was partitioned into two nations, India and Pakistan. Kashmir being an independent princely state, was to determine its fate on its own. While Kashmiris were preparing for their right to self-determination and were basking in their own glory (they had, it seemed to them, at last managed to get rid of the skin of slavery), the people from the plains came again: this time through skies, riding aeroplanes, carrying guns, and age-old attitude of being on a civilisation mission to show the Kashmiris their *Aukaat*. How dare the water-demons think that they can determine their fates?



Kashmiris expressing their political agency

COURTESY: GETTY IMAGES

We know from Fanon that to express personal agency, that is to choose what governs one's collective life, is essentially an act in the expression of equality of human spirit and brotherhood. It restores people's dignity and their agency to act. In his seminal work, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon begins by moving away from the euphemistic nature of the protest and calls on the subjected people to overthrow the state with violence, thereby problematizing the very nature of the violence

or how it is understood. “Decolonisation is essentially a violent phenomenon”, he writes, analysing historicity of violence, much like Marx’s famous opening sentence of *Communist Manifesto*. Fanon argues that violence from the subjected peoples directed towards the oppressor is not only moral but importantly is the expression of the agency and will of the subjugated peoples. In other words it is an act in fighting against the dehumanisation and restoration of *Aukaat* of the oppressed. It gives people their place in the world. After 1947, Kashmiris tried to restore their lost freedom. They formed political organisations, and began to tell India that it is not welcome here and occupied the place. India responded by violence, an essential method to show people their place. Hundreds of people were incarcerated, hundreds tortured, and many were killed. As India was doing it, it had to find a narrative to support it. And it did find one; an old tested doctrine that the upper caste state used against its lower castes. The caste and political determination of Kashmiris get mixed, thereby the caste interpretations of the word

Aukaat. They begin to say: “Kashmiris can’t have free will.” “Pakistan instigates them”. This narrative serves two purposes. It places Kashmiris on the lowest pedestal of human hierarchy (by mere lack of free will)—read caste—and thereby legitimises violence against them. After all, Kashmiris are *Mlechhis* who belong to the lower rung and can’t have their political rights. At the same time, India legitimised that it can choose on behalf of Kashmiris as Kashmir is an integral part of its cartographical folds in the subcontinent.



A scene of protest in Srinagar. COURTESY: FAISAL KHAN

One of India's chief methods to show Kashmiris their *Aukaat* is to snatch the agency of Kashmiri body—to bereft it of any rights whatsoever, to treat the Kashmiri body as a mere object where Indian State can paint its power of being superior race or absolute dominance. Kashmiri bodies are expendable. Homo Sacer is the closest anthropological term I recall—and if we look historically at the relationship of Indian body with the Kashmiri body, we can get ample examples of this dichotomy. If a person is Homo Sacer, it by default is a person without any right. When Afzal Guru, a Kashmiri, was sentenced to death, the Supreme of India observed that there was no evidence against Guru, but it was to “satisfy the nation's conscience” that he was sentenced to death. This incident is not unprecedented; it is a representation of master-slave relation—a practice of sacrificing slaves to satisfy gods—in this case, to satisfy the Indian nationalism by sacrificing a Kashmiri, thereby showing the *Aukaat* to them.



Homa Sacer; aftermath of Sopore Massacre

A related systemic method of Indian State to show Kashmiris their place is rape. Systemic rape not only directed towards woman but an entire population. Hundreds of Kashmiri women have been raped by Indian army and paramilitary personnel. The Indian state tries to reinforce the conventional narrative of attacking masculinity and a people's honor via violence on women's bodies. In the villages of Kunan and Pushpora, when more than 60 women were raped, it was India's way of telling

Kashmiris that we can rape Kashmiri women without any fear of reprisals. In this particular incident, Indian State denied the allegations first (our men cannot rape, these women are lying, the state can't trust their words, they don't have the *Aukaat* to be trusted). Later, the Indian state—employed this incident to disempower & degrade the women and men of Kashmir by elongating the process and tacitly admitting that the incident indeed happened and that more and more can happen if you don't subscribe to our ways.



The survivors of Kunan and Pushpora mass rape.

What is at stake here is the fundamental dignity of Kashmiris, thereby their *Aukaat*. Historically, in occupied territories, sexual violence has been used as a weapon of debasing a people and putting them in their place. The Indian occupation apparatus uses it with the adage of caste and feudal attitude which lies at its identity's core—the *Aukaat* of India vis a vis Kashmiris is settled by it. The armed movement needed such a response if a nation like India wants to emasculate. Since Kashmiris rose with guns, India needed to emasculate them, and show them their *Aukaat*.

Legally, Indian State has legislated many laws in Kashmir that state one thing to Kashmiris; the idea that any Kashmiri can be detained anytime, their freedom curtailed, and incarcerated without any trial for years. PSA and AFSPA are in concept laws whose genesis lies in *Aukaat*. It says legally Kashmiris have no status; they are *persona non-grata*. If the people of a region are rendered *persona non-grata*, its land as well is treated in the same

way. By land I mean its resources; they are plundered ruthlessly. In the past few decades, Indian state is altering the very nature of the Kashmiri landscape— an interference with nature and the time itself and thereby showing Kashmiri landscape including its people its *Aukaat*.

Yours truly: A non-binary nobody

(Same day, every day in the life of a non-binary nobody)

Brindaalakshmi K

TRIGGER WARNING:

Sexual harassment, abuse, gender dysphoria.

NOTE:

The instances mentioned in the piece below are only some examples and are not reflective of all the realities of all non-binary individuals assigned female at birth or all forms of gender-based discriminations faced by all gender minorities, including cisgendered women, in India.

DISCLAIMER:

Aukaat is a term used in the Hindustani language roughly translating to boundaries. Evidently, as a south Indian speaker, it is not part of my vocabulary, given Hindi too has been a tool of oppression for South Indians.

On that note, here's another note

Thank you for stopping by.

Thank you for clicking on this page to read this story

You see this really is the story of a nobody

Oh! Wait! Don't leave already.

Not to worry, it is not going to be some pity story

But the story of how nobody came to be called a nobody

More precisely put — a non-binary nobody

Life on that day for this nobody and the writing today,

Both will be just like life,

Poetry for sometime

And then back to reality.

So don't mind the words moving

In and out of some poetry

Breaking away from reality

That day, just like every other day for a nobody...

ANOTHER NOBODY (N) AT 11:

N was dressed in a pair of shorts, t-shirt and sports shoes. It was a Monday —that meant basketball. Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays were the days for basketball coaching at school. N was on the school team. Thanks to a great game, the team had a good workout. A good sweat meant good exercise — also an end to N being overweight and being seen as thin. Simply put, she could soon start eating all that she wanted to without restrictions. N's life was simple enough.

After a good game, N began walking home wondering about her evening snack — the one she would eat while watching her favourite cartoon on TV. Shaking the sweat off her short hair in its not-so-feminine and infamous boy cut, she continued walking with the basketball in her hand, down the lane next to her home. It was a short five-minute walk home for N from school. In that

five-minute walk, there was that one stretch that she didn't like crossing. It was the stretch near the tea shop at the turning into her road.

Almost every street corner in India has a tea shop with men crowding around it, to stare at their muse for the day; all women, children or anyone that resembled a girl or woman. They watched them as they sipped on their cup of evening tea, sometimes with a drag or two of a cigarette. More often than not, a man or two would call out to one of them. Of course, this is a proud male tradition, a hand-me-down of the gift called patriarchy.

Fortunately for our 11 year-old N, though unfamiliar with the word patriarchy, she was quite familiar with the tea shops at every street corner. As she walked by that stretch with dread, two men leaving the tea shop hissed something in Tamil, only loud enough for the entire street to hear,

“பொண்ணா பையனான்து தெரியல!”

Ponna paiyyannane theriyala!

Not sure if it is a boy or a girl!

Anyone watching N's face close enough would have recognised the blood rush on her face. Her cheeks were red. Her only response to herself was,

God! I should start my period cycles soon or people will find out that I'm neither a girl nor a boy and that's not a good thing.

We don't expect you to understand the fear or the plight of an eleven year-old child. One of the other many traditions in the culturally rich India: the continued practice of the long-running tradition of loudly shaming transgender persons on the road, streets, trains, movies, bathrooms, shops, markets, parks, beach, basically everywhere. India's sound culture of loudly insulting people who are different from the (rarely) 'awe-inspiring' upper-caste men, also popularly portrays a transgender person as someone born

male and hence needs to be insulted for relinquishing their other worldly status of being a man. Brahmanical patriarchy is also a reason for the Indian social order viewing trans-ness as out-of-the-ordinary, especially for anyone assigned male at birth. This insult is a result of their injury: of injured masculinity that heals only when it insults. Some would even say that low self-worth drives the need to insult.

Agency (more so permission) to be anyone other than a man or woman is not a thing in India's rich culture. Of course, we as Indians, also (mostly) do not understand the idea of someone born female identifying themselves as anything else other than a woman. Who will do the household chores then? Not my son!

With no permission or visibility for anyone assigned female at birth identifying as anything else but a woman, N had no words to describe herself. But thanks to studying in an English medium school, she would grow up

to one day recognise 'they' to be their preferred pronoun and learn about the word that really described them - non-binary! But until that happens, they will continue to remain a 'she' and another non-binary nobody.

This was just the experience of somebody who had no word to understand what they felt or to recognise who they were. Then there are others who recognise it at five or twenty-five or forty-five years of age or never because...

Wielding the power
Wielding the power
Of language and its courage
Of words and its knowledge
Comes with,
With the power
With the power
Only to the name ordained
Only to the place ordained
In the book of privilege
The book of *Aukaat*
So without the power of language
To think about who you are
To think about how you are
To think about you
Is anything but out of ordinary
For anyone born
On the female side of the binary
It is not within our *aukaat*
Or privilege to understand
Any one or thing beyond the binary

Somewhere else, on the same day, just like every other day, was life for another nobody:

ANOTHER NOBODY (N) AT 14:

Unlike the N at 11, the N at 14 is not accustomed to how the world sees her. This is a different N in the same world. You'll be surprised how full the world is of nobodies yet somebody always has a point of view — even about the supposedly insignificant nobody.

Unlike her school friends who live close to school, N can't just walk home. She needs to take a bus and then walk home from the bus stand. That evening as always, carrying her sack called school bag, N got off the bus and began walking down the road towards the lane where she lives. She was in her school uniform. She was wearing her long hair in two plaits, as prescribed by her school. The lane that she lived on, was usually quite uneventful. But the lane before hers, had a park. N aimlessly watched all the people walking in and out of the park, as she walked past the lane with the park.

“If only I could have short hair like those playing on the field! The shock on paati’s face would be followed by a sound lashing from amma. I’ll get a lengthy lecture on how I’m not being a well-bred girl and disobeying the ‘elders’ in the family. When I grow up, I DON’T HAVE TO BE like a girl. I will be anybody I want to be,” mumbled N to herself. The well-meaning ‘elders’ didn’t realise that their words were driving their girl to internalise misogyny. But would they change their words if they knew?

Mumbling under her breath and wondering about her younger brother’s assignments that she would have to help with before starting her homework, she turned into her lane. It happened in a lightening. A boy, not more than fifteen, came running towards her, grabbed her almost non-existent breasts for a quick squeeze. She was quick to react and grab his hand in an attempt to drag him to a halt but her sweaty hands gave way for him to get away. She screamed and yelled for help but in English. Speaking

in Tamil meant getting punished at school so her immediate response was still in English, not in Tamil even on the road. She suddenly became aware of her body in ways that she had never realised before, something that she had buried deep within herself resurfaced. She was being treated like a girl. 'I'm not a girl. Stop treating me like one. But if I'm not a girl then who am I?' — wondered N in anger.

She yelled, 'Help! Help!'

Who would help a school-going child screaming in English in the heart of Chennai, a Tamil speaking city? N wasn't going to learn about who they are or the concept of preferred pronouns beyond he or she for a long time. But what N learnt after that one incident was to up her swearing game in Tamil. In another year's time, the fifteen year-old N would have joined the pro's club of all the women and individuals assigned female at birth. She would become proficient in using Tamil swear words at

all the creepy men trying to say or do anything creepy to her in any public space. In the process of learning all the many survival skills required to manoeuvre the rich patriarchal tradition of India, their gender identity and the thought of feeling different, got buried some place deep within this young teenager – could have also been another of the many survival tricks. One can only guess and maybe nobody would ever know. As the wise-old elders (the lot that is always credited for everything that Indian parents want to enforce on children), would say the space to think about who you are or how you feel is not an option available to anyone born on the female side of the binary.

To think about who you are
To think about how you are
To think about you
Is anything but out of ordinary
For anyone born
On the female side of the binary
It is not within our *aukaat*

To be anything other than ordinary
So with that set in stone,
And a definite ring in their tone
Be sure to be told,
To think and then to think you are
Beyond the binary
Is anything but derogatory
To who your parents are
To who your grandparents are
To who all the who's who in the society are
So to think about you
To think about who you are
To think about how you are
To think about you
Is anything but out of ordinary
For anyone born
On the female side of the binary
And you think
You think you can dare to say that you are non-binary?

Somewhere else, on the same day, just like every other day, was life for yet another nobody...

AND A 20 SOMETHING NOBODY:

Then there is another N in another corner of some other world. A typical conversation that this N has with her best friend, M who is a man, usually goes something like this:

M: நம்ம ஊர்ல ஒரு பொண்ணும் பயனும் ஃபிரண்டா இருந்தாலே பிரச்சனை. அதை தப்பாவே தான் பாப்பாங்க.

Namba urula oru ponnum payyanum friend ah irundhale prachna. Adha thappave dhan papanga. This world constantly questions the friendship between a guy and a girl. The motive of the friendship is always questioned.

N: ஆமாம்பா நீ சொல்றது கரெக்ட்.
Amman pa nee sollaradhu correctu.

Yes, I completely agree with you.

M: நான் உன்ன பத்தி பேசல. பொண்ண பத்தி
பேசினேன்

Na ponna paththi pesinen unna pathi ila!

I was talking about a girl, not you!

N: ஹலோ! நானும் பொண்ணுதான்

Hello! Nannum ponnu dhan.

I'm a girl too!

Though with a laughter, M meant every word that he spoke. M's laughter was not meant to hide his misogyny or subtle transphobia. He meant what he said. N was just not woman enough for him. It was not about N's hair or clothes. N had long hair and wore salwar kameez, as most young cultured Indian women are supposed to.

நீ பொண்ணா? சொல்லவே இல்ல.

Nee ponna? Sollave illa

You are a girl? Nobody mentioned it to me!

M laughed.

M: “உன்னை எல்லாம் எந்த பையன் கல்யாணம் பண்ணுவான். நீ அவன் கிட்ட சட்டம் பேசுவ, அதுவும் அரைகுறை இங்கிலீஷ்ல. எவனுக்கு வேணும் அந்த மாதிரி ஒரு பொண்ணு.”

“Unnalam endha paiyyan kalyanam pannuvan? Nee avan kitta satam pesuve, adhumvon aragora English la. Yavanukku venum andha madhri oru ponnu?”

“No man will marry you! You’d argue with him like a lawyer, even with your broken English. Who wants to marry a woman like that?”

Along with everything else, M made fun of N’s English too. But that never stopped N because she understood the privilege of someone who could speak that language. N spoke some semblance of English that she taught herself in the hope of someday heading out to Chennai, from her hometown in the outskirts of Thanjavur district in Tamil Nadu.

N was not encouraged to speak in English by anyone

around her but language never stopped N from being straightforward about her opinions to M or cutting him short when he made no sense. Unlike many of her peers, she had managed to find her own ways to stand up for herself even with her family. She had managed to graduate with a distance-education degree in business administration. Unlike, girls from her caste, she had managed to stay unmarried even after turning twenty. It was a real struggle but she was determined to stay unmarried. And so she will never be woman enough for M.

“சீ போ! உனக்கு வயித்தெரிச்சல் பொறாமை.”

“Chi po! Unakku vaithu erichal, poramai.”

“Go away! You are just jealous.”

was N's response – a retort to M's words.

N was uncomfortable with M's words. N did not want to be seen as different.

“இருக்கலாம் ஆனால் உன்னை பொண்ணு என்று

சொல்ல முடியாது. நீ பையனும் இல்ல. அப்போ நீ
என்ன அவளா?”

“Irukkulam! Ana unayo ponnunu sola mudiyadhu. Nee
paiyyanum ila. Appo nee enna avala?”

“Quite possible! But then you can’t be called a girl. You
are neither a guy. Are you then the other kind?”

asked M, with a wink.

M’s words infuriated N but she had nothing to counter M’s
words. Even with N being forthright about her opinions,
she did not have the language to call out M’s misogynistic,
homophobic and transphobic thinking.

The ‘other kind’ was supposed to be the funny way of
calling someone transgender. It was normal to look
down on anyone who identified themselves as transgen-
der because anyone transgender was supposed to be
abnormal.

N did not want to be seen as someone who is transgen-
der or abnormal. The word transgender was abnormal

enough for her to never want to learn more about it, even if it meant learning a new word in English. So just like many other times before, with so many others in the past, she buried her questions or feelings about who she was or how she felt. She was used to this. In response, she was used to neatly packing her sense of self along with her attraction towards women and burying them all together in a quiet remote corner of her mind — a compartment where no one will ever find it. No not even herself.

M's words, like that of most others, most overtly, paved the way for N to internalise homophobia & transphobia, enough to never question her sense of self ever in her life. The greater hurry was to resist her family's insistence on being married to a strange man. Instead, she wanted to find a job and ways to avoid ever marrying a man. Besides, what did her gender identity or sexuality have anything to do with any of this? That can exist in its own little box in that remote corner where no one will ever find it!

To think about who you are
To think about how you are
To think about you
Is anything but out of ordinary
For anyone born
On the female side of the binary
For *aukaat* also resides in language.
For non-binary doesn't exist as a word
For most Indian languages think in the binary
With no word and no way to understand you,
You don't cease to exist,
You just never begin to exist.
For you never had the *aukaat* to exist
You just never existed!
So to think about who you are
To think about how you are
To think about you
Is anything but out of ordinary
For anyone born
On the female side of the binary
And you think

You think you can dare to say that you are non-binary?

Somewhere else, on the same day, just like every other day, was life for yet another nobody...

AND A 40 SOMETHING NOBODY:

It was 8pm. N was busy cooking dinner for the family. Things would hopefully get better for N once her mother-in-law leaves back to her home in Madurai, the next morning. It will be the end of any interference in her kitchen, at least for sometime. Her kitchen would be hers again.

One of the finer nuances of patriarchy is the meticulous pitting of anyone assigned female at birth against one another, generation after generation. This process repeats itself effortlessly like a well-oiled machine until someone recognises the design of patriarchy and decides to break out of it striving for equality. It is worth noting that equality exists as mentions in the Constitution of India but not so much in reality in our 'cultured' Indian society.

“அம்மா! அம்மா!”

Amma! Amma!

Her 13 year-old daughter Roja yelled out to N from the bathroom. Roja was the last of N's three children. N had two older sons who were twenty-one and seventeen years old.

“கத்தாத ரோஜா. அம்மா சமைச்சுக் கிட்டு இருக்கேன் இல்ல,” responded N.

Kathadhe Roja. Amma samachukittu iruken ila.

Stop yelling Roja! I'm busy in the kitchen

“அம்மா சீக்கிரம் வாம்மா” insisted Roja.

Ammaaaa! Serkaram va ma.

Amma! Hurry up!

Before N could say another word, her mother-in-law intervened,

“குழந்தை கூப்பிடுது, அதைவிட என்ன வேலை?”

Kozhandhai kupudhu. Adhavidha enna vela?

Your child is calling you. What could be more important than attending to her?

Now N had no choice but to turn off the stove, leave the half cooked dinner and run into the bathroom on the other end of the house.

“அம்மா!!!”

“Amma”

Roja looked up at her mother with an awkward expression.

“என்ன ஆச்சு? கத்து கத்துன்னு கத்திட்டு இப்ப ஒன்னும் சொல்ல மாட்டேங்குற,”

“Enna achu... Kathu kathunu kathittu ipo onnum sol-lamatengara”

“What happened? You say nothing now after hurrying

me here” asked N.

“ரத்தம் அம்மா!”

“Ratham Amma,”

“There’s blood,”

said Roja showing the blood stain on her panty to her mother.

Even with the million thoughts running in her mind as response to Roja, N was expressionless. Without saying another word, N walked out of the bathroom. When she walked back into the bathroom, she had a bundle of newspaper in her hand. She unwrapped the newspaper to reveal a pack of sanitary pads. She pulled out a sanitary pad and gave it to her daughter. She rewrapped the pack of sanitary pad and left it aside in a dark and dry corner of the bathroom. She then showed her daughter how to place the pad on her underwear.

“குளிச்சிட்டு துணி மாத்திகிட்டு வா. குளிச்சிட்டு

வீட்டுக்குள்ள போகாதே. அப்படியே வெளிய இருக்கிற
ரூம்ல போய் படுத்துக்கோ. நான் சாப்பிட ஏதாவது
எடுத்துகிட்டு வரேன்,”

Kulichuttu thunni mattikittu va. Kulichuttu vittu kulla
pogadhe. Apidye veliya irukararoom la poi paduthuka.
Na sapda yedhavadhu yeduthuttu varen.

“Take a shower and wear a different pair of clothes.
Don’t step into the house after your bath. Go into the
extra room and rest there. I’ll bring you something to
eat.” said N.

“சரி அம்மா. எனக்கு என்ன ஆச்சம்மா?”

Seri ma. Enakku enna achu ma?

“Ok amma. What has happened to me though?”
asked Roja.

“ஒன்னும் ஆகல. நீ வயசுக்கு வந்துட்ட. இனிமே
மாசாமாசம் இந்த மாதிரி ஆகும். போகப்போக
பழகிடும். கவலைப்படாதே.”

“Onnum agala. Nee vayasukku vandhute. Innime masa

masam indha madhri agum. Poga poga pazhagidum.
Kavala padadhe.”

“Nothing has happened to you. You have reached your
puberty. You will bleed every month. You will get used
to it with time. Nothing to worry.”

said N with a mild smile.

N walked backed into the house. She went to her mother-
in-law.

“அம்மா ரோஜா வயசுக்கு வந்துட்டா”

“Amma Roja vayasukku vandhuta.”

“Amma Roja has reached her puberty.”

N was matter-of-fact in her tone.

A girl reaching her puberty called for celebration. But in
no way, was this a good news to N. This news also meant
her mother-in-law was going to go nowhere. She would
stay back for another thirteen days till the celebrations
for Roja were all done. The house was soon going to be

filled with guests who would want to see Roja, congratulate her, give her gifts for her now-active ability to birth a child – the patriarchal purpose of a woman's existence.

N never understood the need to celebrate a girl reaching her puberty. Life beyond that point was going to be a well-known, age-old drill for Roja: school, marriage and children. N only wished to give her daughter a college education before she is married off. N studied only till tenth class in the Tamil medium government school in her village. She was to be married at 18 so it seemed unnecessary for her to be educated beyond class ten. Eventually, like other girls in her caste, N was married off at sixteen. But will N really have a say in her daughter's life or education? N had no answers. She wished Roja had not reached her puberty. Would Roja have escaped the life of playing a woman if she never got her periods? Or with time, would Roja have to face the greater torture for not being woman enough?

These thoughts triggered a long forgotten memory in N.

She was just about Roja's age. N vaguely recollected her prayer as a child.

“கடவுளே! நான் வயசுக்கு வந்துடனும். இல்லன்னா என்ன பத்தி எல்லாருக்கும் தெரிஞ்சுடும். நான் பொண்ணு இல்ல பையனும் இல்லன்னு கண்டுபிடிச்சுடுவாங்க.”

“Kadavule! Naa vayasukku vandhudanum. Ila na enapathy elarakkum therinjundum. Na ponnum ila payanum ila nu kandupuduchuduvanga.”

“God! I should start my period cycles soon or people will find out that I'm neither a girl nor a boy and that's not a good thing.”

N could stay with that memory for only about a second. Before she could take a second more, she heard her mother-in-law call out her name. Her mother-in-law was quick to give N her instructions.

“எல்லாரையும் கூப்பிட ஆரம்பித்து விடு. செய்ய நிறைய

வேலை இருக்கு.”

“Poiy elariyum kupada arambichudu. Saiya nariya vela irukku.”

“Start calling the guests already, won’t you? There’s lots to be done.”

Indeed, there’s lots to be done
What you ask
In all honesty,
Well, there’s just one too many
And to begin with,
Let’s just begin with patriarchy
Let’s just begin with breaking
the privilege of patriarchy
Caste, religion, education, language,
Labour, marriage and even technology,
Did we miss anything? Of course, most definitely
Because there’s just one too many!
Let’s just work on, just about any,
Any form of gender-based violence against anybody

And not just a non-binary nobody
But against anyone born,
Anyone born,
And anyone who wants to be,
On the female side of the binary
Why you ask,
Dare you ask,
Then you must be somebody
Somebody with the *aukaat* and the insensitivity
Somebody with the privilege and no spine
To think about only you and no other entity
But it's time to break it to you
It is not upto you or anybody
To tell me who I'm supposed to be
To tell me how I'm supposed to be
And shrink me to be something,
Based on what's in my panty

I didn't know about caste, you taught me.

Alithea Stephanie Mounika

What is *Aukaat*, to a South Indian Christian woman? It is a Hindi word, but the experience of *aukaat* is a very Indian one. Social boundaries, having to navigate people telling you what your place is; this happens whether you're from South India, East India, Kashmir, or the vast Hindi speaking world.

This is a story of how I, as a person with a DBA (Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi) heritage, have discovered caste. And that journey was not through books on caste, or my parents telling me how things were; but by Indian social order teaching who I could eat or play with, who I could marry, and what kind of treatment I should accept at the workplace.

Before I begin, I want the reader to know that this was not easy to tell. I spent a lot of time working up to the

words. It took a lot of courage to make public my worst anxieties, which make my hands shake in private. There is raw anger to this story which is a natural reaction to the decades of unjust treatment, two decades of something that is hardly in my control.

SCHOOL.

When I was younger, I always felt a little different from the people around me. I was in a Christian school, presumably where I would be just like anyone else. Where I am supposedly able to find people like me and learn and be treated with respect. But as many minority people will discover, they will somehow be made aware of their differences. Was it because of the way my tiffin box smelt? I sometimes carried chicken curry or (rarely) mutton on Monday afternoons, which means that my mother had made the weekly meat indulgence on Sunday and probably carried over to the next day's lunch.

–What is that?

–Chicken! Do you want some?

–Chee! (upturned nose, moving to the next table)

School was the first time I found that people in this world find our rare treats distasteful. Since then, many people have tried to tell me that my eating meat was animal abuse. My meat-eating ‘habits’ were ‘disgusting’, that eating was causing degradation to the world. But I want to talk about how people also treated me like I was ‘lesser’ than even the chicken I was eating.

Because of this lunchbox debacle, my classmates probably recall their grandparents and mothers’ warning that I wasn’t worth playing with because of meat-eating. Like any other child, I wanted to be part of the cliques; I tried to play group games. But they didn’t even want to touch me. I spent much of my break times playing in the mud by myself while yearning to play those clapping games that the rest of the girls in my class played. I could see and

hear them play:

“There was a girl
Standing tall and fair
Her hair, her hair,
Was just the color of ginger”

“Yam, cheese, yam, burger, sauce, potato, chip chip
chip”

But I was never part of the group, which was clapping. I was always watching. Then one day, I was tired of watching, and I decided I was going to play. I asked a couple of girls, but they said no, so since I knew the chants by heart, being the spectator so much, I finally found a willing play buddy in the playground’s compound wall. Ignoring my classmates’ stares and the children from higher classes, I began playing the clapping game against the wall.

“There was a girl
Standing tall and fair
Her hair
Her hair
Was just the color of ginger.”

I kept going, faster and faster, I didn't stutter, and my play buddy kept up and didn't miss a single beat. I had the most fun that day. It suddenly stopped when a child from a higher grade, a student leader, came up to me, stopped me, and told me that the headmistress wanted to speak to me.

I don't remember what happened that day, but I remember dread. Probably nothing horrid, but I have been there many times.

She often 'wanted to speak to me', and I don't remember what she would talk about, but it almost always meant that I would get a spanking. She kept a wooden plank in her office to beat the 'bad children' on the bottom.

“Face the wall and touch your toes.”

“Bend lower.”

“Lower.”

WHACK! WHACK

(and sometimes,)

WHACKK.

It stung for several minutes afterward. I stung while I walked back to class and stung while I sat down and looked very serious, not really hearing the prying questions (did you get a spanking how does it feel does it hurt what did she say did she shout will you do it again next time). While other children often immediately started crying or cried in anticipation of the spanking, I was stubborn. After the first time of her spanking me and me crying in shock and pain and seeing her smile smugly, I decided to never give the headmistress the satisfaction of crying afterward.

Years later, I discovered that teachers were afraid of disciplining me because of the blank look on my face while I was getting shouted at or punished. “We never knew what

you were thinking. Did it even get into your head that we are trying to teach you something?” I often was called in ‘to be spoken to’ given I often acted out at being ignored and excluded so often. I would just resort to random attention-seeking rubbish in class. The first time this happened, I was called in for ‘scribbling in my classmates’ book.’ No one asked me why this happened: because I had the answer. The girl next to me copied it and pretended that it was hers, and the teacher appreciated her for it.

But unfortunately, I was not the only one who was often called to the headmistress’ office. I remember that many of my classmates were also called in to get spoken to. These were mostly boys who were also primarily dark-skinned, and often for similar reasons: acting out, not bringing a pencil or book that day. (Arguably not our fault, we were six years old).

That’s when I learned that people with dark skin are treated differently. Light skinned boys and girls are given

a lot more leeway than dark-skinned boys and girls. I remembered questioning this for the longest time: do dark-skinned children behave worse than light-skinned people? I was constantly reminded of it. My high school science practical exam-teachers ignored me for the entire year in high school. I spent that last year of school being suspended during the cultural events to complete my records at home. That year was the worst of the exclusion and bullying. My classmates had discovered sarcasm and would call me SNOW WHITE, and none of my teachers would correct this behavior. The boys would convince themselves that I liked it and continued to call me that even at the graduation ceremony, where we all wore white. That's when I decided not to keep in touch with any of my classmates in high school.

It is well established that school is where people are socialized and taught how to live in a system. Some people say that high school never ends, and I would tend to agree. Though you learn to stand up to injustice, you

take better advantage of reporting mechanisms. The dynamics one encounters and learns in high school only get repeated in various situations.

LOVE.

When many of my classmates were falling in love with each other in high school, none of my classmates wanted to have anything to do with me.

This is also a caste experience. While they are happy to have friendly discussions with women who look like me, it is almost generally accepted that being romantically linked with me, or women who looked like me is contemptible. In fact, classmates in school would come up to me and declare their love for me, only to laugh in my face as soon as they saw my facial expression. In other words, telling me that they liked me was nothing but a big joke, definitely not going to happen in real life, almost.

So, when I met someone in college who seemed very interested in me and kind to me, I began planning on the long term with him. In hindsight, I realize that we should have known that it wouldn't work out in the long term because he didn't want to get married. Excuses like "because my parents will never accept you" were evident and incoming while I had been wanting a commitment from him.

Two years into dating him, his family found a picture of me and started asking questions about me. What went on, is ultimately his report of what happened. When I showed him this essay, he claimed that this was all just a misunderstanding, that he had lied to me about his caste; but this is the truth of what he had me believe at the time. I believed this to be true because it reeks of the dominant caste's policing of love and boundaries.

His mother, who he told me was from a politically and financially dominant caste in Karnataka, called together

her brothers to talk about who this dark-skinned woman was.

I had met his mother as his friend earlier, and she had spoken to me nicely. So, she broadly knew who I was: she knew that I had a Christian name, and she tried to dig into my family a little more, but I don't usually talk about my family, so she didn't get much from me. From that, she made her own conclusions of who I was and what I meant to her son. If you're dark-skinned and Christian, any Indian will be able to guess and make their own conclusions on your caste heritage, no matter how well-dressed or well-spoken you are.

His family cornered him about this relationship. In his parents' presence, they warned him that he would have to end the relationship with me if he wanted to be included in the family. Couple of his cousins had already been excluded for marrying outside their community: they had lost all visitation rights and all inheritance rights. In essence, they had been excommunicated from the

extended family, and he told me that they had chosen to leave and that he did not talk to them either, even though I urged him to reconnect with them. In other family discussions, he told me, the community (caste) matchmaker was also asked to speak to this 'misguided' young man. He was told, I believe: "You tell us what kind of woman you want, and we will find her for you in our community. You want dark skin, big chest, big bottom, light skin, rich or poor, kind, beautiful, educated, we will find her from our community for you." He spoke to me about it incredulously, but I also got the feeling that he had considered it.

I found most interesting that he would defend these actions of his close family by saying that they are 'actually very nice people, not as bad as you think.'

Following the meeting with his community members (caste), he broke the relationship off for a couple of months. He then came back to me later saying that he had done it only to please his uncles. In later arguments with

him, he told me that he had never treated me differently because of caste, even though this was also a very distinctive caste experience. He would again attack me for my religious heritage and accuse me of wanting to convert him to Christianity, even though I knew he said he was atheist and therefore never spoke about religion to him. When I said that not all Christians are trying to convert you, he would tell me that someone had offered him money to convert. I laughed it off, but I wish I could have met this person who provides money for new converts; I have only heard of them in legends and never in person.

He had a challenging time deciding whether to leave or stay. I would admit that any young person should not have to choose between loved ones. He said that his family threatened that he would lose everything if he continued to stay with me. I imagine that he questioned whether the relationship was worth losing his inheritance over (his parents were wealthy and propertied, even though he would deny this. They incurred a wedding cost

for his sister for 43 lakh rupees after selling one of the pieces of land they had). Wondering if I was worth losing money and blood over put a strain on the relationship, and it ultimately led to its demise after four years of him blocking and unblocking me, breaking up and making up with me, sometimes within the space of one month, often within the space of three months.

I finally had to acknowledge the stress that the relationship was putting on me and ended it. Soon afterward, my stress levels drastically improved. Even then, he tried to get back with me in all the ways he had tried before, and even offered to pay for my therapy sessions which I took following the impact it had on my mental health. But I had decided to end it for good: it had impacted both of us too much and neither of us were happy together any longer.

At the same time, I acknowledge that this relationship helped me realize that caste in cities exists, despite not being very aware of the reasons for my previous experi-

ences with it. Caste doesn't go anywhere. The "veg-only" to-let board in front of housing is one of the most violent manifestations of this: if you eat meat, you are not worthy of housing, because a Brahmin owns the house, and you cannot enter. Though there is a myth that caste is only in villages, where exclusion and untouchability is practiced, untouchability is very much practiced in cities too.

When I went and met his mother as his friend at their home, I was not allowed to enter their kitchen, for example, though I was happy to help myself to some water. The sharp protests against me going there did not feel like civility towards a guest but rather a boundary-setting I must not cross. This boundary I was never able to cross legitimately.

Soon afterwards, a 'nice' Brahmin man, who on social media is very socialist, was interested in a 'relationship' with me. He was looking for 'something casual, until my parents find someone for me from our community'. I told

him I couldn't even be friends with him. He had said that we could never be together in the long term because "it would be too much of a culture shock, I couldn't do that to my parents." He was surprised when I was telling to leave me alone, that I expected better, but was not angry and shouting. He should not be. My decades taught me better: I deserved the world, not its boundaries.

WORK.

According to Ambedkar's understanding, caste is division of labour. If it constantly works to bind people's love and maintain endogamy, it naturally directly impacts labour and its functions. My work in the world of Indian journalism was also a discovery of how boundaries play up in the most inconspicuous ways. I worked with a newly established organization, which is iconic as it is women-led, and almost women-only organization that it is hard to admit that it is also perpetuating other forms of inequalities in the workplace.

I got interviewed and had to wait for a month before I could officially begin working there. Meanwhile, I spent time trying to know the people who worked there and what the management was like. To my delight and surprise, the organization's co-founder had given a talk available online on the need for diverse newsrooms and how that results in better journalism. There was a sense of possibility. No Boundaries. Was this the change of the decade?

I finally became part of this newsroom and was met with a 90% dominant or oppressor caste workforce: hardly diverse and the complete opposite of what was said in the Ted Talk. Even during a dinner out, we had a clear 'veg' and 'nonveg' side of the table, an indicator of caste, even though the tables were put together so we could all dine together.

This is not uncommon by any means.

The Oxfam report on Indian media diversity: 'Who tells

our stories matters'(pdf) showed that the leadership, panelists and anchors in the Indian journalism scene are overwhelmingly dominant or oppressor caste. I went into this organization while people were still thinking and talking about the Oxfam report. In my first week there, I was asked what my caste was, much to my surprise. I was told that this was only for the surveys. After I was hired, they hired two more women who were non-brahmin. The organization, while it was more than willing to talk about caste in its news reports, it was less than willing to accommodate a co-worker who was not from their caste. The same old toxic exclusions and differences I faced in school were here as well. Often, while they all went out for lunch, I would be given more work to sit and complete in the office.

I once got yelled at for 20 minutes for a missed full stop. My work was demeaned, I was called names, and I was told that the co-founders' 8-year-old son could write better than I could. After that incident, I spoke to her

and told her that it was not acceptable to call me names. Then, the overworking began.

I was put on both the 7 am and the 9 pm shift, plus the normal work duty on four out of six days in my work week. I felt like my day was never ending without any real break in between. I experienced burnout and could not write anymore. When I raised the issue with the team to allot me fewer stressful days like this, I was stonewalled. There were many humiliations which finally made me decide that I was better off without this job. It was a bold move to make in the middle of a pandemic and an economic downturn and I was lucky enough to get another gig soon after. But my departure was not of my own making—I was structurally denied a space I deserved to be in.

There were no conversations to try and retain the employee. I get the feeling that the organization is used to floating employees. Though I was sad to go, I felt the

organization was built around efficient people-disposal. I got a couple of phone calls from people I had barely interacted with, as farewell. I hadn't even gone to the office during my last days there, because of the pandemic. It felt bleak, and abrupt.

I am not the only person who had such problems at this workplace, and this is definitely not the only symptomatic media organization which has these issues. However, I still wanted the best for the organization because I genuinely believe in the kind of work they are doing. I wanted to meet the co-founder in person to give her constructive feedback. Some of them were working with a non-Brahmin coworker perhaps for the first time--I wanted to suggest a workshop similar to sensitization workshops on sexual harassment at the workplace. Instead, I found it extremely hard or impossible to get an audience of the co-founder. The meeting never happened.

HOPE.

I think it's important that these experiences didn't make me bitter. There's strength in expecting good from a world that is systematically made to cause harm to you. These experiences are my decades, but they are a part of caste's thousand year's persistence. these experiences happened without me signing up for it. And I'm still only 24 years old.

Our communities have suffered, and my experience is part of this collective harm. Our parents tried to do the good thing and raised us beyond the boundaries of caste. But those who benefit from it swim in caste and breathe through its suffocating gills. Dominant caste people's parents didn't do the same--their children are still casteist.

There is no more anger in my heart about these things. I only want things to be better, I want to build a better

world, and I don't necessarily want to be associated with people who don't believe in the same things, whose words whether in person or on social media, don't match their actions. I think that we can build a world more loving, with no distinctions of caste, and community, and instead focus on kindness and our goodness and humane worth. We need only reminders of our collective strength, not our aukaats, or our boundaries.

While I was writing this essay, I came across this poem, and I couldn't stop thinking about it. This is how we press onward.

Poem by Yogesh Maitreya on the occasion of Ambedkar's
64th death anniversary, used with permission.

Ambedkar
when your children died
one after the other
but you overcame that grief
like a soldier
marching ahead, so fearlessly
the definition of love
in our life has been changed
forever
now we don't mourn for lovers
now we dare to love
in the battlefield of grief.

Ruminations

Prerna Subramanian

This is a collaborative piece that has been a labour of love throughout the pandemic. It has allowed us to rethink alliances, understand different ways of forging connections when the world has been stricken by authoritarianism and a healthcare crisis. It has been a process of understanding how we are negotiating with the dominant logics that contain our locations, our movement, our best potentials, our liberation. When the language of distancing became routine, this project was an intimate one.

Liberation. The idea to think through *aukaat* came from its repeated use in our pop culture as a denial of total liberation, as a begging for inclusion in a perennially unequal society. What is our struggle: equality in an inequitable world or total transformation, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore would say: Change EVERYTHING. *Aukaat* has been a colloquial reminder in the Indian subcontinent

of upper caste Hindu cultural and economic domination, wherein people have to fit in, negotiate whether or not they're respectable or ideal enough to deserve this world. With all the three pieces, there's a call to rethink the politics of deserving a space in this world which isn't good enough for us in the first place. In a system where profit over need becomes the defining logic, people with barely enough are conditioned to learn the language of sufficiency. Be happy with what you got. Be grateful. This is enough. What more can you ask for? For getting more you need to prove you deserve it, that you have earned it.

Who are we answering to? Who is taking these tests? Who made the rules? Who has doused the imagination of an alternative, alterable world? Who indeed profits from how things are? We have sought to think through this.

Learning. As any project or collaboration, we have strove to think through each other. This might be a completed zine but as a project of learning, it is an unfinished

project just like knowledge isn't about mastery. It is about knowing newly as we move on. Thus, there might always be room for change. A room for discord. A sentence that doesn't quite sound correct. Even *aukaat* as a word itself could be homogenising to think through. English can be a rude reminder of the manufactured impossibility to "reach" the world otherwise. Identities can't be contained and yet here they are in a flippable zine. But the way out of this circuitous thought process is to know that not knowing, and learning with each other is at the heart of this project. And as people read this, their thoughts will become an organic part of the zine. As our task of radically transforming the world is unfinished, so is our articulation of it.

However, even as all of us are learning, a lot of us are trying to survive with the most precarious systems alienating them. We have to be mindful about the inequality of time in our hands, and learn and critique while also holding each other, taking care of each other and

standing up for each other. We have to catch up with the crisis. We have to make accountability exigent for our survival. Thus, we hope to form new alliances and connections with those who read, critique and care for this work. Indeed, you too become a collaborator as you read this.

In solidarity.