CHAPTER 6

Documenting the Self

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This chapter, unlike many others in this volume, does not have an academic discipline or a field of knowledge as its object. The aim here is to trace the career of a concept—the self—and its discursive trajectories in independent India. This choice comes with a host of challenges. To begin with, the concept of the self is notoriously elusive, as it has a multitude of meanings and functions in different fields of knowledge. Its definition, relations with neighbouring concepts, and the enquiries enabled by it—all seem to show considerable variation. The difficulty is compounded by issues of vocabulary. The English word 'selfhood' is often employed as an equivalent to Latin *ipseity* and, in its modern usage, is strongly associated with the concept of the individual. In most languages in India, the words that denote the individual self are of modern provenance and not in frequent use in everyday discourse. Many of them draw on Sanskrit words or prefixes, for example, *atman* and *atma-*, but modern meanings and usages of these words are often not explicable in terms of their resonances in classical traditions. A word used for the individual in many modern Indian languages is the Sanskrit-derived *vyakti*, but its dominant sense is individual identity rather than reflective selfhood. Pre-modern philosophical traditions in India, with their diverse approaches and assumptions, do not provide a unified or consensual understanding of the concept of the self.[1] Is the self to be understood as the agent within us who performs actions? Or is it rather a witness who observes our actions and experiences? While both these notions of selfhood can be found in schools of classical Indian philosophy, there were also approaches that refuted them. The Buddhist thesis of the 'no-self' or *anatta* involves, according to Jonardon Ganeri, a denial of the 'authorship-view of the self', a 'rejection of the idea that a detached agent acts in the centre of a

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space of action, or that a detached witness watches from the centre of a space of experience' (Ganeri 2017: 10).

In everyday language in contemporary India, issues of selfhood are usually articulated not by invoking the concept by name, but through ways of speaking that position the subject in particular ways in relation to action, speech, and reflection. This also means that conceptual arguments in academic disciplines constitute only one of the several planes on which selfhood is thematized. Within academic discourse, the self is explored variously in philosophy, psychology, literary studies, sociology, anthropology, and religious studies, but no single discipline possesses it exclusively as an object of knowledge. In contemporary usage, the self appears in proximity with other concepts such as the subject, person, and identity, making it difficult to differentiate them with precision. Such overlaps may also indicate changes in the meaning of these concepts and protocols of their use.

Our discussion in this chapter is limited to the time period that begins with India's independence from colonial rule, but we are bound to be disappointed if we expect to see here the prominence of conceptions of a distinctive national self. What we find in the past decades is rather a move away from the notion of a unitary national self towards other categories of identity such as gender, caste, region, and religion. The invocation of the idea of an 'Indian' self gave way to thinking the concept in concrete societal, cultural, and political contexts. We also see a shift in the locus of the self from a longue durée civilizational ambit to a differentiated, historically evolving terrain of relationships. These shifts, however, ought to be understood in complex terms: the focus on identities in recent decades shows continuities with the earlier national frame in conceiving the subject in terms of agency, constraints, and rights. This raises the question: are there new ways of speaking or acting that express new conceptions of selfhood in India during this period?

Indian society was, for a long time, seen by post-Enlightenment Western scholarship in terms of several lacks—as with the sense of history, a well-developed conception of autonomous individual selfhood was also seen as historically absent in Indian culture. The relative absence of private experiences in autobiographical writing, when the latter emerged as a modern prose genre in the nineteenth century, was regarded as a sign of this (Arnold and Blackburn 2004: 2). Even when writing took the form of the narrative of an individual's life, it was argued, the real locus of selfhood was the person's caste, community, or family. The anthropologist McKim Marriott linked the lack of prominence of the individual in

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Indian thought to deeper cultural conceptions of personhood and agency, and suggested that

> persons—single actors—are not thought in South Asia to be 'individual', that is, indivisible, bounded units, as they are in much of Western social and psychological theory as well as in common sense. Instead, it appears that persons are generally thought by South Asians to be 'dividual' or divisible. (Marriott 1976: 111).

These arguments about the absence of the individual do not quite work if we include poetic forms where affective experiences find expression through individually inflected use of tropes from poetic traditions. Furthermore, a preconceived notion of private experience may not necessarily allow one to discern the space of the individual in the reflective registers of Indian autobiographies. In any case, the figure of the individual is unmistakably prominent in narratives of selfhood since the mid-twentieth century. A rich and varied body of life writing that does not shy away from private and intimate experiences, the elaboration of techniques that construct a domain of personal interiority in fictional narratives and cinema, the growth of a clearly individuated personal tone in non-fiction writing, and the explosion of the personal in digital social media—all this attests to the status of the individual as the primacy locus of explorations of selfhood. As we shall see later, this period also saw a reading of texts from the nineteenth and the early twentieth century to track longer histories of the figure and the voice of the individual.

Psychoanalysis, which is perhaps the most ambitious discourse of knowledge and clinical care that addresses the inner lives of individuals in modern times, had an early inception in India in the fascinating work of Girindrasekhar Bose, who proposed important modifications to Sigmund Freud's conceptual framework for addressing the differences of the Indian case (Bose 1921).[2] Ashis Nandy has argued, 'Bose's unique response to Freud's theories was shaped by the psychological contradictions that had arisen in Indian culture due to the colonial impact and by the cultural contradictions of psychoanalysis itself' (Nandy 1995: 83). As a therapeutic practice, psychoanalysis remained a relatively minor presence in life practices in India in much of the twentieth century. There has been a change in this situation, with the growth of an English-educated urban middle class in metropolitan cities and the rapid rise in the demand for psychoanalytic psychotherapy over the past two or three decades. However, even now, the clientele of psychoanalytic therapy remains limited to a very small social group in urban India. Psychoanalytic care is situated

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in a large and varied field in India shared by several other therapeutic practices, such as clinical psychiatry, clinical psychology, and various forms of psychotherapy and counselling that involve widely differing degrees of training and professionalization. In addition, several religious or 'spiritual' practices seek to heal or support individuals in emotional distress or need, and it is not uncommon to tap into diverse resources simultaneously for a cure. There have been interesting instances where practitioners of modern medicine have worked with religious institutions to find new forms of care that attempt to go beyond the distinction between the individual and community structures (Singh and Sharan 2023).

Apart from being therapeutic practices, psychoanalysis and clinical psychology have served as intellectual resources for understanding contemporary Indian societal life and selfhood. The most notable examples of such engagement are the writings of Sudhir Kakar and Ashis Nandy, both of whom have addressed questions of selfhood. Kakar explored the psychological formation of individuals in a range of psychoanalytical studies that inflected Western psychoanalytical thinking with Indian preoccupations, including those on prominent modern figures with a spiritual or mystical preoccupation, such as Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, and Mahatma Gandhi. He offered an account of individual psychic development, albeit in the case of a poetic genius, in his 'psychological biography' of Rabindranath Tagore (Kakar 2013). Kakar distinguished psychological biography from the more common project of historical biography in that the former is based on the assumption that 'the events which comprise his subject's formative experiences lie in the periods of his childhood and early youth and that a person's "psychological truth" is pre-eminently an outcome of his or her early relationships' (Kakar 2013: 4). In Kakar's account, 'the psychological origins of Rabindranath's "creative imagination" can be traced back to a traumatic separation from the mother' (Kakar 2013: 66). While this account seems consistent with Western psychoanalytical explanations, Kakar also linked creative imagination to a distinctively Indian notion—that of 'spiritual unconscious':

> In the Indian view, creative imagination has access to a transcendent, spiritual unconscious that lies in a deeper layer of the mind than the strata in which the cognitive, dynamic and other unconscious processes are located.… Analogous to the pleasure principle governing the Freudian dynamic unconscious, the spiritual unconscious can be said to be governed by the 'unity principle'. (Kakar 2013: 204)

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Kakar's studies of individual figures are based on the arguments he developed on the nature of psychic life in India, which, in turn, led to his search for an Indian psychoanalytic method, which may be construed both as a method for Indian psychoanalysis and as an Indian method for psychoanalysis in general. Fundamental to this is his idea of 'cultural unconscious', a dimension that may be distinguished from the universal and the individual aspects of the unconscious. Kakar's foregrounding of cultural distinctiveness entailed both a provincialization of Freudian unconscious as shaped by the specificities of early twentieth-century bourgeois family life in Europe and an attempt to identify the cultural coordinates of the unconscious in the Indian context. 'Here, we are not concerned so much with philosophical doctrines that are relevant only for religious and intellectual elites,' Kakar argued, 'but with the beliefs and attitudes—many of them not conscious—of a vast number of Indians that are reflected in their lives, their songs and their stories' (Kakar and Kakar 2009: 181).

Prominent elements in the Hindu world view, such as *moksha*, *dharma* and *karma*, are central to Kakar's account of the beliefs that permeate Indian life under its modern veneer. He sees their presence as pervasive, visible at diverse levels, including everyday familial moral practices, popular cinema, and television entertainment. In his early work, Kakar associated the major Hindu deities with aspects of the psychic world of Indians: for instance, the cult of Shiva in Hindu religion was seen as illustrating the narcissistic orientation of Indian men (Kakar 1981: 154). In using a unified Hindu world view as the template of intelligibility of psychic life in India, Kakar's work appears continuous with essentialist characterizations of Indian identity. 'Indian-ness is about similarities produced by an overarching Indic, pre-eminently Hindu civilization that has contributed the lion's share to what we would call the "cultural gene pool" of India's peoples' (Kakar and Kakar 2009: 4). Kakar's work does not submit this idea of a Hindu civilization to a genealogical critique, nor does it appear to examine the historical processes and conditions of its constitution. Selfhood in other religions in India is regarded as shaped within this Hindu world: an Indian Muslim is different from an Arab Muslim, Kakar says in an interview (PGX Clips 2020). The long-standing presence of non-Hindu religions in India does not seem to have any significant role in shaping modern Indian psychic life.

Kakar's idea of the Hindu world view, with its stress on concepts such as *moksha* and *dharma* and on deities and stories from mythology, shows a deeper foreclosure—that of any serious encounter with the question of caste. The role of caste—long histories of caste oppression, suffering, and

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stigma, as well as caste privilege and the constitution of an exclusive idea of the social through caste—in shaping Indian psychic life is not explored in his work. Kakar might not be an exception here, as questions of caste do not figure prominently in psychoanalytical theorizing of Indian society (Dwivedi 2024). This may, in part, be due to the limited social location of the patients of psychoanalytical practice in India: predominantly metropolitan, upper middle class, English speaking and often from Hindu upper castes. The disavowal of caste as pertaining to their own lives, common among these social groups, is perhaps mirrored in Kakar's own arguments about the Indian psyche: he defines its distinctiveness primarily through a contrast with the Western context where psychoanalysis originated. This facilitates the creation of a unified idea of Indian culture and psychic life, which evades the deep internal fissures of caste and religion and their implications for a psychoanalytical understanding of the selfhood in India. We shall return to issues of caste towards the end of this chapter.

In comparison with Kakar's writings, the work of Ashis Nandy, who has described himself as a political psychologist, has a strong investment in historical conflicts and tensions that underlie the constitution of the modern Indian self. Nandy too gives importance to India's past before colonialism and the continued life of its rhythms; however, unlike with Kakar, they are not accessed through the tropes or concepts from Hindu *sastra*s nor through deities such as Shiva or Krishna. Historical experiences of crisis and rupture, such as colonialism and the partition, are the primary coordinates of Nandy's analyses. His best-known work from the early eighties framed his core enquiry as a problem of selfhood, as announced in its title, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*. Nandy's approach to colonialism focused on 'a state of mind in the colonizers and the colonized', and treated 'the sphere of political psychology' rather than the 'political economy of colonization' as the principal site where the 'crudity and inanity of colonialism' stand revealed (Nandy 1983: 1–2). His political psychology draws on Franz Fanon's incisive insight into the centrality of violence in colonial subjectivation. For Nandy, it is the terrain of the self that reveals the raw ('crude', 'inane') dimension of the politics of colonialism, which remains inaccessible to an analysis of economic interests and calculations and of the organized deployment of power.

Selfhood, therefore, appears in Nandy's early work both as the site of colonial conflict and as the object at stake in it. Nandy's reading of figures such as Gandhi, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, or Ram Mohan Roy saw in them not a continuous iteration of a timeless Hindu world view but acts of self-fashioning that cannot be understood without reference to the

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difficult encounter with Western modernity under colonialism. Nandy extended this critique to the postcolonial period and to the Indian nation state's organization of power and knowledge. He linked older civilizational rhythms that have survived colonialism in altered forms with the energies of contemporary plebian resistance against the modern state and its logic of domination. Nandy's work presents an important attempt to treat political configurations as matters of selfhood, through an approach that straddles the distinction between the individual and the collective. This is made possible by his use of psychological terms such as 'personality', which go beyond the idea of the individual as a singular instance. His psychobiographical accounts of individuals draw on details from their personal lives to produce a mise en scène that reveals issues of self-definition in a shared situation. The life trajectories of Aurobindo and Gandhi, in their personal and emotional experiences and in the transformations in their vision and action, are read as responding to the psychology of colonialism and seeking the recovery of selfhood, albeit in new forms. Nandy views this process as drawing on a range of tropes, concepts, and symbols from traditions big and small—national, regional, or local. These include *varna* or caste typologies, the coding of gender identities, the texture of familial relationships and practices, idioms of devotion, and forms of interaction between communities. A new image of the self, in action and relationships, is forged in this process. Gandhi's valorization of non-violence and his feminization of the idiom of political action are different from simple iterations of tropes from tradition—Nandy sees both reaction and inventiveness in such responses to colonialism.

This is not solely a matter of colonialism: for Nandy, colonialism is the signal instance of modernity, and the ruptures it creates in selfhood continue beyond the period of colonial rule. Forms of religious life, community structures, and political institutions in independent India, and the way concepts such as nationalism and secularism function there, belong to this long afterlife. These contemporary forms exist in a state of tension and entanglement, not with a unified pre-modern indigenous conceptual universe or tropology but with rhythms of life that have survived over time, which resist being fully tamed or subordinated by modern social and political apparatuses. Nandy finds their continued and resistant self-affirmation in non-systematized spheres of social life and in seemingly unruly forces in Indian politics. The relationship between caste identities and politics figures in his work mainly in relation to this dynamic. For Nandy, the energies of popular, demotic life with their long histories, uncontained and sometimes provoked by elite modern structures and processes, hold the promise of a democratic future in countries such as India.

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This line of thinking encounters its biggest challenge in contemporary India, characterized by the authoritarian dominance of popular majoritarianism, mobilized through distinctively modern forms of political consolidation which, at the same time, reject elite idioms of modernization. It is doubtful if the long-standing rhythms of the popular domain, whose democratic potential is valorized in Nandy's work, can any longer serve as a space of promise—of resilience and resistance—against authoritarian forms of power in the present. Nandy's earlier writings on fascism and on 'authoritarian personality', a concept which he derived from Erich Fromm's psychoanalytical–political work, may need to be revisited in the light of contemporary idioms of religion, caste, and politics in India. Nandy had closely studied figures in Hindutva politics in the mid-twentieth century as well as communal violence in the context of the Ramjanmabhumi movement (Nandy et al. 1997; Nandy 2013). These powerful analyses raise the question: what would a political psychology of contemporary India, its present configurations of power, violence, and political affect—especially the pervasive deployment of masculine rage, resentment, and hatred—look like?

It is not always through propositional statements or conceptual arguments that figures of the self enter the discursive domain. Acts of language may implicitly contain them. The philosopher Ramchandra Gandhi examined how religious ideas, including those that relate to selfhood, such as the 'soul', may be understood outside the framework of religious belief. Drawing on his own work on the presuppositions of communication, Gandhi took the act of addressing as the ground on which religious ideas, such as the soul, may be available to those outside it. Gandhi's argument about how we regard ourselves or others as souls is based on what he calls 'non-referential, non-descriptive, non-predicative, thinking'. He explains this as follows: 'In thinking the thought "I" I perform an act of imaginatively adopting an audience-stance.… When I am addressed by somebody, a speaker, I am *uniquely picked out, I am non-referentially identified, I am called forth*' (Gandhi 2019: 51, emphasis original). For Gandhi, '[t]he thought "I" is a sort of incomplete version of the thought "I am called", "I am uniquely picked out", etc.' The truncated thought 'I' may create the impression of 'an autonomous self, existing in isolation from other possible selves' (Gandhi 2019: 56). However,

> [i]t would be a mistake simply to say that one is a soul, a non-predicative entity. The notion of a soul gets a foothold in our life because, in an act of addressing—in an act of establishing communicative contact with another—we have to imagine that our addressee is a unique but bare particular, we have to identify him non-referentially, non-predicatively. (Gandhi 2019: 56)

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Gandhi's aim was to show how concepts such as the soul, which are seen as embedded in religious discourses but have permeated ordinary language without carrying their theological tag with them, are available for a person without belief in religion. The issue of such availability is historically a modern problem as it is based on a capacity not only to differentiate religious and non-religious domains in terms of belief but also to use concepts from one domain in another and identify such instances of transfer. Religious concepts were seen by Gandhi as having their ground in acts of address in a communicative context, rather than religious doctrine or practice.

Taking Gandhi's attention to acts of communication as a point of departure, we may note the importance of language as a vital space where selfhood is configured. Languages display marks of how we shape our relationships to ourselves and to others through utterances. Figures of autonomous and relational selfhood appear in language through diverse ways of using pronouns, forms of address, verb forms that indicate how the speaker is positioned in relation to actions, and linguistic elements that create the affective locus where selves appear. This plane of relationships between subjects and acts of speaking resists reduction to propositional articulations of conceptions of selfhood. Genres of literary writing such as fictional forms and poetry offer a rich archive for the study of selfhood in its entanglement with language. Studies of literary texts, over the past three decades, have engaged the relationship between forms of subjectivity and modes of narration. These enquiries, however, are not confined to the disciplinary boundaries of literary studies, and some significant attempts have come from the engagement in social sciences with cultural–historical questions regarding the experience of 'modernity' in India.

Sudipta Kaviraj, for instance, has brought to bear intellectual historical enquiry into changes in conceptions of selfhood, intimate relationships, and emotions such as love into productive encounters with close, textured readings of literary texts. A fascinating example of this is his study of Rabindranath Tagore's contribution to the development of a language of modern subjectivity in Bangla literature. Kaviraj suggests that '[b]efore Rabindranath, Bengalis were … "self-less"'. His literary art is the first to delineate a problem of modern subjectivity for poetry to explore' (Kaviraj 2014: 188). Modern subjectivity is here understood as comprising features such as individuality, mentalism, and interiority. These features are not specific to India. Kaviraj argues that the new idea of the self in Tagore's poetry 'could not have arisen without an encounter with modern western notions of subjectivity', but 'what he eventually places inside this self is significantly different from the solutions favoured by aesthetic individualism of the

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western variety' (Kaviraj 2014: 189). Kaviraj takes what he calls 'the modern western' conception of the choosing, autonomous subject as a starting point, and notes its unavailability in traditional Indian society. A new concept of the self began taking shape through language practices in nineteenth-century Bengal: '[t]he conceptual representation of an individual's life which the individual could return to in thought and constantly revise' (Kaviraj 2014: 196). This was achieved through 'the translation of autonomy into interiority', the latter signifying an expansive mental universe distinct from the external world (Kaviraj 2014: 197).

When Kaviraj views Tagore's poetry as articulating this new notion of interiority, he does not treat this primarily as a matter of thematic representation; it is rather the innovations in the use of the first-person pronoun *ami* that indicate the space of the self. Kaviraj notes that neither the Bengali pronoun *ami* nor the Sanskrit-derived prefix *atma-* was used in a substantive sense to refer to the self before Tagore. In Tagore's hands, the word *ami*, which referred to the grammatical I, 'shifts and complicates its meaning, and comes to mean the self, or the philosophical-psychological "I"' (Kaviraj 2014: 201). Kaviraj explains this change as taking place primarily at the level of language but also as effecting an alteration in the concept of the subject.

> The unproblematic quality of the pronoun as it was seen traditionally is thus fractured, and replaced by something that is less homogeneous, and containing a multiplicity of relations inside itself, between itself as the subject of experience and the narrator, between the narrator and the critic, between present and past selves. The direction of the solidly integral 'I' which is required for even asking this question is wholly new, and to do this the literary language of Bengali is hardly equipped or practised. Tagore has to make words do unaccustomed things.… (Kaviraj 2014: 206)

Through a detailed reading of a Tagore poem, Kaviraj shows how a deft use of the first-person pronoun invokes distinctive ideas of the subject's implication in self-perception, remembrance, reflection, and narration. He traces a movement from a bounded conception of the individual self to an expansive world of relationality. This is accomplished through a resignification of tropes and metaphysical ideas from tradition.

Kaviraj's study demonstrates important methodological moves required by a historiography of selfhood that cuts across different planes of analysis. First, there is the plane of ideas of the self, comprising conceptions of selfhood from philosophy or social theory. Second, there is the level of

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historical semantics where one may identify changes in the meanings of concepts and words during specific periods in history. Third, there are narrative configurations that articulate concepts of selfhood through distinctions between the levels of events or action and narration. And finally, there is the level of the poetic text, where the first-person pronoun is used in unorthodox ways, the new departures arising from unusual conjunctions or proximities with other words and from insertion into syntactic arrangements that are not customary. Innovations at the last level are seen here as creating new relationships on the part of the subject with experience and language. Some important questions arise regarding the relationship between different levels. Is it possible to translate figures of selfhood which arise from new ways of using language into structural features of narration and, even more importantly, to philosophic or social-theoretic concepts of selfhood? In other words, can a history of enunciatory practices be translated into a conceptual history of the self? These questions are not limited to the field of literature. They concern the specificity of different domains of life and discourse in constituting and articulating selfhood. The challenge is to understand these levels in their singularity and mutual relationship and to recognize the limits of translatability between them.

The studies we considered earlier have the individual self as their focus. A key aim was to understand how resources inherited from tradition, consciously or otherwise, were altered or given fresh meanings since the nineteenth century. If the individual has been the most prominent site for enquiries into modern selfhood, the category of the social presents a contrasting but equally important location. The distinctive forms assumed by social stratification in India, especially on account of caste, have been a major preoccupation for Indian social sciences. The concept of the self is often used in scholarly writing in relation to religious or caste communities—for example, the Hindu self, the Brahmin self, or the Dalit self. We also find its use in the plural in the context of social groupings such as 'middle-class Indian selves'. We saw that possible acts of reflection and narration were crucial for the use of selfhood in the individual context; would these be the defining features in the case of social selves too?

Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai engage the concept of the 'social self' in their study of the 'everyday social' in India by taking what they call the 'we-consciousness' as a point of departure:

> How is it that individuals invoke concepts like 'We' to describe certain kinds of processes and experiences? Is the use of 'We' similar to the use of

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> 'I' when describing experiences? Is the idea of the social to be discovered in the ways by which the we-consciousness arises and is sustained? Is the first experiential mode of the social available in the origin of this experience? (Guru and Sarukkai 2019: 109)

Guru and Sarukkai argue that the experience of 'belongingness'—which forms an important component of both I-experience and we-experience—is a vital marker of the everyday social and forms the core of the social self. Not all collectives develop a sense of the 'we': flashmobs or audiences in cinemas or crowds in railway stations are too transitory and unstable 'to accrue memories, identity and narratives around the "We"' (Guru and Sarukkai 2019: 113). There are important similarities between the pronouns 'I' and 'we' in that both are referential and context dependent. However, unlike the 'I', the reference of the 'we' depends on the intention of the speaker: while the 'I' is invariably a part of the 'we', the others who are included within the latter's reference can vary depending on what the speaker means in a particular context.[3] Guru and Sarukkai highlight the use of the word 'we' in speech acts, where an individual uses it to speak *on behalf of* a group which includes others in addition to oneself. This does not mean that the speaker represents the views of everyone in the intended group or even the majority, but the speaker 'feels that she can speak on behalf of others … with whom she forms a we-self' (Guru and Sarukkai 2019: 122).

The relations that constitute the social self are made complex when experiences of ownership and agency felt by subjects are undermined by heteronomous arrangements in the economic space, as, for instance, in the logic of the market. Furthermore, a political definition of the social in a narrowly defined idiom, such as that of the nation, can invalidate other articulations of the social. The biggest challenge to social selfhood, Guru and Sarukkai point out, is to be found in the differentiation of the social on the basis of caste, and the varied practices of exclusion and stigmatization, as seen in the practice of untouchability and its extension from bodies to spaces. They argue that the private and domestic space in contemporary India, both in urban and rural locations, performs a crucial role in sustaining these practices even when they are proscribed in public spaces. This feature of the private space, which serves to offer social protection for the upper castes, has found public extension in gated communities built around caste and class (Guru and Sarukkai 2019: 126–129).

Aniket Jaaware has argued that such segmentation of social life, which is not unique to India, poses questions about the usefulness of the very concept of society. As Guru and Sarukkai did in their earlier work, *The*

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Cracked Mirror, Jaaware takes the phenomenology of touch as a starting point for interrogating and deconstructing what are seen as 'practices of caste', and questions the assumption that there is 'a society'.

> That a large number of people display regularities in daily conduct and behavior and relationships does not necessarily mean that they belong to the same society, does not allow us to conclude that there *is* a society, or that there *are*, in fact, social institutions.
>
> What can be found is *sociability*. It is (has to be) invented: Every moment of interacting with those people we do not know we have to find that moment's sociability. (Jaaware 2019: 171, emphases original)

This position raises significant problems for the very concept of the social self. Unsurprisingly, Jaaware does not use it; what he offers instead is the open and contingent space of sociability, which can be reproduced and made better. Sociability's moorings have their origins in the constitutive dependence of the solitary human infant on care and altruistic touch (Jaaware 2019: 31–34, 74).

We have so far looked at examinations of selfhood in academic texts and arguments. It is, however, in narrative genres that issues of selfhood have found even more significant and complex elaborations. Autobiographies, novels, and other genres of fictional narration, and films—which unfortunately cannot be taken up for discussion in this chapter—offer a rich and variegated archive of attempts to think through issues of selfhood in independent India. Unlike scholarly and public discursive writing, these narrative genres engage issues of selfhood through the actions and thoughts of real or imaginary persons in various situations and relationships. Kaviraj's reading of the Tagore poem revealed a concentrated instance of narrativity in the poem's movement from a bounded to an unbounded conception of the self. The novel and the short story, in their presentation of fictive lives and characters, and autobiographical and biographical writing, in telling the lives of individuals from the past and the present, seem to 'stage' rather than analyse or discuss the self.

Autobiographies constitute the genre of literary narration that is most explicitly grounded in a self-relationship. As Philippe Lejeune pointed out, the generic protocols of the autobiographical text presuppose the identity of the author, protagonist, and narrator (Lejeune 1989: 4). Autobiographical writing is understood as a practice in which an individual, through an act of self-narration, reflects on remembered events, actions, and feelings from the past. The experience of the self, however, does not pre-exist its expression in life narration; it is fashioned in the process of autobiographical composition,

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which involves entangled acts in language. There has been significant interest in the development of practices of self-narration in India among literary, cultural, and intellectual historians over the past four decades. This was spearheaded by enquiries into women's history and the lineages of women's writing, and into the lives of figures who were prominent in social reform initiatives in the colonial period. Much of this scholarship also engages with the forms of selfhood that find expression in these texts. Tanika Sarkar's study of the first Bengali autobiography *Amar Jiban* by Rassundari, who learned the Bengali alphabet in secret to narrate her life story, Kathryn Hansen's work on autobiographies of Indian theatre artists, Tridip Suhrud's analysis of life writings by three Gujarati thinkers, and Sudipta Kaviraj's study of Shibnath Sastri's *Atmacharit* are a few notable examples (Sarkar 1999; Kaviraj 2014). These studies form part of a large body of scholarly writing on the formation of idioms of modern selfhood prior to India's independence and the trajectories of individuation they reveal in relation to community, religion, and the nation.[4] Studies have also moved beyond autobiographical texts to examine the lives of people as sites where issues of selfhood can be explored. Several of Ashis Nandy's essays, as noted earlier, have used the lives of individual figures—ranging from Gandhi and Savarkar to Brahmabandhab Upadhyay and Sreenivasa Ramanujan—as a sort of lens through which the complex intermeshing between cultural and political history and individual selves is viewed. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's *Real and Imagined Women* advanced a new method of examining figures of selfhood by stepping outside the distinction between fiction and history to study representations of the lives and deaths of women in post-colonial India (Rajan 1993).

The most significant challenge to dominant idioms of narrating selfhood in recent times has arguably come from Dalit writing. The reception of Dalit literature has often given primacy to autobiography, which, as a form of truth-telling, is seen as possessing a paradigmatic status in relation to other genres. We shall focus only on one specific dimension of the articulation of selfhood in Dalit writing here. The life stories told in Dalit autobiographies often take the form of a narrative of struggle, which moves from situations of oppression to events of self-affirmation. Given the linkage between modern autobiographical genres and the autonomous individual, these texts can be read as stories of struggle aimed at the achievement of dignified, sovereign selfhood. However, Dalit self-narratives have derived their striking public impact less from their narrative structure than from accounts of painful experiences of caste iniquity that put the self in crisis. Well-known autobiographies such

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as Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Akarmashi* (*Outcaste*), Omprakash Valmiki's *Jhoothan*, and Daya Pawar's *Baluta* demonstrate this, especially in their early chapters (Limbale 2003; Valmiki 2008; Pawar 2015). The impact of experiences of caste oppression appears to be exceeded by the narrative of the growth of the self. This tension between the affective intensities and narrative organization in many Dalit autobiographies is central to their distinctive articulation of selfhood.

We saw earlier that ownership of an I-experience is crucial for selfhood. The experience of caste oppression renders such ownership difficult or impossible, and this is foregrounded most clearly in accounts of humiliation. It is not accidental that the 1990s saw, against the background of Dalit literary and political assertions, a renewed interest in humiliation as a political affect. The pioneering collection of essays *Humiliation: Claims and Contexts* edited by Gopal Guru is a signal instance of this new line of enquiry (Guru 2009). Liberal humanist approaches have often framed the problem of humiliation in moral terms, as a denial of the inherent worth and self-respect of the human subject. While moral convictions about one's self-worth may explain the righteous indignation felt by the subject, they do not account for the helplessness, fear, and loss of the sense of self that characterize intense experiences of humiliation. B. R. Ambedkar's autobiographical fragments in 'Waiting for Visa' show the predominance of the feeling of fear and helplessness, more than indignation (Ambedkar 1993: 661–691). Ashis Nandy saw humiliation as a two-way exchange: 'Unless the humiliated collaborate, by feeling humiliated, you cannot humiliate them, however hard you try' (Nandy 2011: 42). Collaboration may not be a matter of consciousness, but may be a name for a deep inner vulnerability that is put to play in situations of humiliation. Why is the denial of dignity internally felt with such tearing force, even when the subject is rationally convinced that it does not merit degrading treatment? To respond to this question, we may need to focus on the affective configuration of the individual subject that is produced in instances of humiliation. Key issues here are the nature of the affect experienced in humiliation and its impact on selfhood.

At the heart of individual experiences of humiliation is an intense feeling of isolation, of being trapped in oneself, arising from the severance of social bonds. At the same time, the other is central to the theatre of humiliation not only as the hostile perpetrator but also as the space of oppressive exposure. Stigmatization and shaming are crucial elements in the affective locus of humiliation, as they involve a positioning of the victim as constitutively deficient, whose very being is felt as lacking before the

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gaze of the other. A closer look at the affect of shame may throw some light on the subject's first-person account of humiliation. In situations of shame, the subject is unable to remove itself from a state of oppressive exposure; it is also unable to own its experience and narrativize it from a stable position. Philosophical discussions have assigned a deeper, ontological significance to shame in relation to human subjectivity. Emmanuel Levinas stressed the link between shame and nakedness, to our inability to 'make others forget our basic nudity'; he suggested that what shows up in shame is 'the nakedness of an existence incapable of hiding itself' (Levinas 2003: 64). In shame, the subject is unable to inhabit its exposed body and is equally unable to disidentify with it and escape it. Giorgio Agamben extended Levinas's analysis to argue that in shame, 'it is as if our consciousness collapsed, and seeking to flee in all directions, were simultaneously summoned by an irrefutable order to be present at its own defacement' (Agamben 1999: 106). Jacques Lacan's later work, it has been argued, regards shame as 'an index pointing to the ontological lack at the heart of the human being'(Green and Vanheule 2024).[5]

It is impossible not to be struck by the similarities between the analytic description of shame offered by these thinkers and the structure of affective experience in humiliation. Practices of stigmatizing humiliation frequently involve the production of shame through enforced nakedness through stripping and parading naked, especially for women and Dalits. These similarities notwithstanding, the differences between shame and humiliation as concepts are widely recognized. First, while humiliation is a transitive act performed by an agent on a human subject, shame is considered intransitive, felt by a subject without external causation. The usage of shame as a verb, as in 'shaming'—which can also mean humiliation—may complicate this distinction. Second, while humiliation is seen as producing anger directed at the external tormentor, shame results in feelings of depression and a lower estimation of oneself. A sharply contrastive distinction between humiliation and shame may, however, weaken our ability to understand the debilitating nature of humiliation. A stripped subject in a ritual of humiliation cowers, trying to remove its body from the field of oppressive visibility, exactly as in Levinas's description of shame. The destructive force of humiliation works by making it impossible for the victim to maintain the distinction between one's self-perception as a person with self-worth and one's forced degradation before others. Self-demeaning acts, such as the forced eating of excreta, which instil disgust towards one's body and self, find a place in the repertoire of humiliation because of their potential for destroying the victim's sense of selfhood. Acts of humiliation may be

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seen as invoking the affective force of shame by directing themselves to the subject's constitutive lack, its primordial sense of defencelessness. It may be seen as producing a perverse double of shame in the subject: an inexorable wound of degradation, a nightmare of entrapment from which no new relationality can arise. These links also allow us to see why there is a tension between the orientations of plot and affect in narratives of humiliation. The movement from the position of the victim to sovereign selfhood does not repair or serve as recompense to the force of the initial injury; it is as if shame outlives the event and reproduces itself in retelling and reception. It is not accidental that Dalit narratives have been met with unease in the literary public sphere. This sense of unease points to an affect that cannot be translated without difficulty into compassion, indignation, or conscious avowal of solidarity.

The affective structures of the subject revealed in Dalit autobiographies bring to centre stage an aspect of selfhood that may have ramifications for self-narration in general. This can be described as a problem of inhabitation. Our earlier discussion of selfhood in individual and social contexts saw it as internal, as intrinsic to the subject, characterized by the I-experience of ownership and belonging. Humiliation contradicts this picture and presents an I that cannot be assumed. Selfhood is figured in terms of an impossibility: the narration of the subject's movement towards the attainment of sovereignty serves as a prop to stage intense experiences of un-inhabitation. Such instabilities may not be unique to Dalit autobiographies and may appear to varying degrees in other texts. Even in seemingly more stable autobiographies, conflicting normative frames are at times present in the form of consciously avowed convictions on one hand and emotional orientations that are grounded in the subject's habitus on the other. Their unresolved overlap is manifested in the narrative in moments with a perceptible affective tenor, for instance, of unease, embarrassment, or regret. It is as if templates of selfhood, which authorize the coherence of retrospection and self-narration, are not fully inhabited by the writing subject, and this lack of fit makes its presence felt in instances that are not entirely tamed by narration.[6] This can take the form of opposing inclinations, as during the period of social reform or forms of political activism which are in conflict with familial and community embeddedness. This can also appear when certain ideal or normative figurations of selfhood—such as found in ideals of womanhood or masculinity—are not fully available for inhabitation by the subject.

We shall end this chapter by invoking the thematization of instances of difficult inhabitation in fictional narration. Powerful examples of this are

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found in Baburao Bagul's short stories. Through a reading of Bagul's story 'Mother', Susie Tharu showed how the Dalit widow protagonist is unable to inhabit figures of widow selfhood valorized by reformist and feminist critiques of traditional Brahmanical injunctions regarding widowhood. Tharu's reading of the story was an intervention in feminist discussions of agency and desire: what happens when you introduce forms of selfhood produced by caste oppression into this scene? At issue is not the possibility of an alternative model of widowhood, but the impossibility of inhabiting a legible template. The story ends with the protagonist, a Dalit construction worker, frozen in a situation of misunderstandings and conflicting feelings, immobilized by the lustful embrace of the contractor and the urge to follow her fleeing son, who too is stuck between fragility and a morally censorious masculinity.

Aniket Jaaware finds in such narrative moments in Bagul's work a configuration of ethical destitution: '[m]any of Bagul's narratives end at what is often called the double bind. The ethical complexity is of such a nature that the author renders the reader impoverished in ethics—just as the characters are impoverished in ethical action' (Jaaware 2019: 146). Jaaware saw the political work of Baghul's literary fiction as grounded in such moments of ethical destitution, where no identifiable literary or political templates are available for inhabitation by the subject. The literary work does not offer figures of new, desirable selfhood but evacuates them, creating a space of destitution, and thus clearing the ground for a new political work. 'It is in this un-decidable destitute ethical place that a rupture into politics is made possible,' writes Jaaware (Jaaware 2012: 32).

Other Dalit writers, for instance, C. Ayyappan, who wrote in Malayalam, invented new literary figurations to invoke the experience of difficult inhabitation. Many of Ayyappan's stories track the fearful fragility that surrounds Dalit subjects who have found precarious accommodation in Kerala's middle class. Ayyappan wrote some striking stories in the first-person voice, where the spirits of Dalits who committed suicide explain to the possessed persons why they have come to inhabit their bodies. These powerful 'auto-thanatographic' accounts, where the narration of life and of death converge, offer an intense staging of the difficulty of inhabiting one's body and interiority (Ayyappan 2018).[7] The trope of possession ruptures the putative coherence of the self to let in forces from the past and from the surroundings. Kalpana Ram's anthropological work suggests that spirit possession may be considered as a mode of witnessing, not in the sense of neutrally or critically observing events but of rendering the subject a

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bearer of dimensions of the past that do not find accommodation in social memory (Ram 2013: 88). Ayyappan's stories configure the permeable space of possession as the locus of Dalit testimony where suppressed histories of caste slavery and humiliation find their voice in the split subject.

This chapter has been concerned with some scenes from the history of discursive engagement with questions of the self in India over the past three quarters of a century. One might see in the discussions presented here fragments of a political history of subjectivities. The subject, as we know, is a point of inseparability, a relation of double bind, between sovereignty and subjection. If selfhood is defined as the subject's capacity for reflexive relationship, the discussions above suggest that its spaces are to be conceived not in terms of supervening coherence or sovereign consolidation but through inescapable instabilities and contradictions. The scenes discussed here do not offer us coherent concepts of the self, let alone a continuous conceptual history, be it through propositional elaboration or through images that can be translated into clear semantic content. They reveal a problem field instead, where one may chart the forces and intensities that traverse the space of the self in contemporary India.

Notes

1. See, for instance, Ganeri (2016).
2. See also Hiltebeitel (2018).
3. Some languages like Malayalam have two distinct first-personal pronouns to denote the first-person plural: while the word 'nammal' refers to a group that includes both the speaker and the addressee, the word 'njangal' indicates a group to which the speaker belongs but not the addressee.
4. Some examples include Chakravarti (1998), Bhattacharya (1998), Suhrud (2009), and Parekh (1989).
5. Lacan's most detailed engagement with shame is in his Seminar XII, 1969–1970. See Justin Clemens and Russell Grigg (2006), especially Alain-Miller (2006).
6. For a discussion of such moments in autobiographical texts in Malayalam, see Kumar (2016).
7. See also Kumar (2013).

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