

Religion as ‘unsettled’: Notes from Census and Anti-Caste Mobilizations

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Abstract: *This paper is an attempt to understand how religion as a category was creatively put to use within certain anti-caste mobilizations in recent and distant past. Such an exercise would begin by briefly historicizing the modern category called ‘religion’ which gained popular ground in India only with British Colonialism and its meticulous Decennial Census operations. Census Reports are scripts of how communities, jaatis, tribes identified themselves over decades, starting from the closing quarter of the 19th century to the early 20th century.¹ Religion emerged as an important category which enabled measured reconfiguration of tired jaati names for many castes in India. This paper would argue that such renamings or new namings were different from that of changing one’s jaati nomenclature. The religion-centric epistemological basis of the Census became a space of getting counted in radically different lists, giving an opportunity to build new identity bonds with people and communities beyond one’s immediate geography. This new but limited possibility always came at a heavy cost. Listing oneself in a religious scheme left the individual or the group with very few choices, as the lists only recognized a few organized religions. The clear majority of lower-castes formed the blanket category called ‘Hindu’ which could only be defined as ‘Non-Muslim or Non-Christian’. Indigenous faith practices were swamped in this national project of listing religions with a capital R. However, despite all attempts by the state - colonial or postcolonial - religion continues to be an unsettled category*



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¹ Listings in the colonial period were undertaken on an extensive scale, after 1806. The process gathered momentum in course of the censuses from 1881 to 1941. (NCBC, Annual Report 2012-13 p.1)

Introduction

It is important to mention at the very outset that ‘lower-castes’, known by a variety of politically relevant terms (*Dalits, Bahujans, Pasmanda* etc.) form the majority of the Indian subcontinent.² In fact, they can easily form the second most populous country of the world.

I think this numerical detail should inform and complicate our conversation on religion in India. Divided in numerous jaatis, religions, regions, languages and genders, ‘lower-castes’ make up at least 75% of the Indian population. In other words, they may be not less than one billion in population, i.e. nearly 32 times more than the present population of the U.S.A. A long legacy of anti-caste intellectuals has underlined the combined strength of the productive classes in India. Jotiba Phule’s coinage of *Shudra-Ati Shudra- Stree* against *Bhatji-Shetji* or Kanshi Ram’s political theorization of Bahujan which includes all backward communities and religious minorities are part of this legacy. In fact, Moon in his essay gives us a historical overview of how the term ‘Bahujan’ travelled through 20th century Maharashtra always attempting to build operational alliances between productive sections of the population (Moon, 2017).

It is indeed unfortunate and humiliating that we do not know the exact numbers. Nor do most of us know the literacy rates or land ownership details or religious status or sex ratios or health indicators of our respective communities and castes. This condition of enforced ignorance is a result of how the Indian State has collated and manipulated the Census Data. The last Census which marked caste-based details was in the year 1931. The independent Indian state only collected limited caste-based data for ‘Hindu-listed’ Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.³ Thus, denying the clear majority (of Non-Hindu SCs and other lower castes) any relevant data which they have collectively produced by responding to the Census Enumerator. This data has been hidden from public scrutiny in the name of national integration.⁴ We are still awaiting the caste-based data of the 2011 Census. The usefulness of this data is also under question as the Census authorities did not act on the recommendation of the National Backward Classes Commission to include the category OBC along with SC and ST during enumeration. As a result, calculating OBC population would mean a herculean task of categorizing jaatis based on individual household entries.

² The Mandal Commission Report or the Second National Backward Classes Commission Report in Annexure -1 (p.235) estimate that Other Backward Classes (Hindu and Non-Hindu) are 52% of the total population. The numbers of Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes was calculated at 22.5%. Thus, bringing the total number of the historically subordinated and excluded groups to nearly 75% of the total population. It should be noted that these estimates were based on the Caste Census of 1931. Mandal Commission had to work within the limits of data non-availability. Recent newspaper reports suggest that one possible reason for not declaring the socio-economic caste census data of 2011, is the increased numbers of OBCs beyond the estimate of 52%. (See <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/govt-veil-on-caste-census-208494>)

³ The Primary Caste Census Abstract Data on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes provide very little information on individuals castes and tribes. (<http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/PCA/SC.html>)

⁴ See [Http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Caste-data-held-back-due-to-social-upheaval-fears/articleshow/47931784.cms](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Caste-data-held-back-due-to-social-upheaval-fears/articleshow/47931784.cms)

In other words, I am trying to make two important points (a) Subordinate classes form a diverse, divided population who account for the majority in India and the Indian sub-continent (b) They have very little or no data about themselves or the powerful minorities which govern them. This lack of information has seriously affected mobilization and knowledge production. When we know very little about our communities our fights are faced with numerous difficulties. Often individual castes find themselves in numerous religions, but they may live and die without ever knowing the existence of the other religions in their 'jaatis.' For caste is conditioned by endogamy.⁵ If somebody converts to Islam or Christianity or Sikhism from a particular caste, they eventually form new castes, new endogamies.

Having said that, let me move on to the difficult exercise of understanding religion through mobilizations of the subordinated castes against established norms of the Brahmin Order. As mentioned earlier, the population denigrated by the caste system is huge in numbers, in such a situation how do we comprehend their movements? It is beyond the scope of this paper to attempt any exhaustive exercise. All I can do is cherry pick from the vast body of literature closer to my own context and languages.

Religion as a modern category

Before doing that, it is important to point out that religion as an achievable governmental category gains prominence in India only during the 19th century. Religion as a category emerges from protestant Christian epistemology within modern theology. One cannot take it as a natural social category which can be projected to our past. It has historically been a modern project which identifies a *community* with a set of common practices, shared spaces of worship, shared scriptures and shared notions of a universal God (Sweetman, 2003). The term 'Hindu' was essentially used as a marker to identify the 'non-religious' in that sense. 'Hindu' as a construction hardly fits within the definitions of religion. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in several writings has underlined the impossibility of calling 'Hindu' a religion.⁶

However, 19th and 20th century witnessed several processes - geared by an emerging national community of Brahmins and their allies - to shape this imaginary 'community' within the yardsticks of Western Christianity. These attempts, sacralized the 'Brahminical' and elevated the Brahmin's heritage as the heritage of the clear majority. Thus, it is not surprising when Lakshmi Narasu points out that Hindus are primarily 'Brahminists' (Narasu, 1922). For it is only by embracing this heritage that one becomes a 'Hindu'. This point was at least partially expanded in the Census Report of 1911 by evolving a criterion to define 'depressed classes'. Prior to 1911, animists, tribals and depressedes classes were all bunched under the category called Hindu. However,

⁵ Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in his exceptional essay 'Caste in India: Genesis and Mechanism' underlines how endogamy superimposed on gotra exogamy defines the mechanism of castes. Such a mechanism can operate effectively only when you have caste-s and not a single caste. Thus, conversion to new faith systems or lists of globally dominant religions has also meant an eventual separation from one's endogamy - a process of becoming a new jaati.

⁶ For example, in Annihilation of Caste Babasaheb enters into an ethical, moral and pragmatic discussion on what are the elemental features of a religion. He distinguishes organized abrahamic religions from Hinduism to prove his point.

after the intervention of Muslims in Madras Presidency in 1909, the demography of 'Hindu' was challenged, leading to new categories. As per the 1911 Census Report, certain yardsticks were put in place to identify 'Hindus' from *less* Hindus and *Non-Hindus*. They were as follows: (a) Deny the supremacy of the Brahmins (b) Do not receive the mantra from a Brahmin, or other recognised guru (c) Deny the authority of the Vedas (d) Do not worship the Hindu Gods; (e) Are not served by good Brahmins as family priests (f) Have no Brahmin priests at all (g) Are denied access to the interior of the Hindu temple (h) Cause pollution: by touch, or within a short distance (i) Bury their dead (j) Eat beef and do not show reverence to the cow.

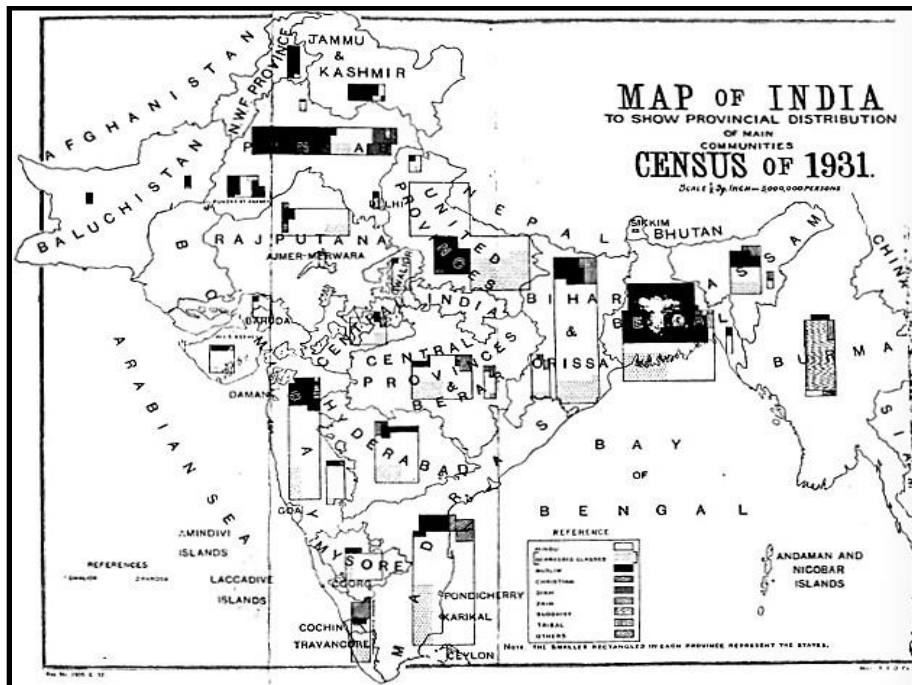
As you can see from the yardsticks that 'Brahmins' as a class overly determined what it means to be a Hindu. It is one's proximity to their literature, spaces, symbols, priest-craft and oralities that determine the degree of one's Hinduism. An undeniable adulation for this class is an explicit feature of what it means to be a Hindu. While, many scholars may try to argue for plural, diverse, conflicting versions of Hinduism. However, they fail to ask a central question - why do we need to call conflicting, plural and diverse faith practices of multiple nationalities within the boundary of Indian Nation-State with the same homogenizing name - Hindu? Is there an unfounded assumption the people do not have names for their faith systems? While the racializing impulse of the colonists stopped them from appreciating that faith systems of the non-brahmin populations, the brahmin class sensed a historical possibility in swelling the demography of their faith system. Thus, listing populations as Hindus was more of a name-calling activity. Populations were first enlisted as Hindus, the process of socializing them in the essentials of Hinduism predominantly begins with - what Aloysius points out as the National Varna Movement from the beginning of the 20th century.⁷ This movement continues even today at different levels - ranging from one's *jatakam* or horoscope to defending Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Padmavati*.

In short, what we find in the sub-continent's history are persistent efforts by the colonizers with the active support of the local elite -Brahmins and other allied castes to define and redefine the population based on fixed notions of religion and racial definitions of caste.⁸ The attempt was always to provide regional data which could be comparable at the national level, or even attempts to formulate a national caste system (based on the Varna Scheme) and religious classification. None of these attempts succeeded at the empirical level. Often it was noticed that only the top castes could be classified with near accuracy in different regions. On the other hand, the rest of the

⁷ Starting from late 19th century, many non-brahmin jaatis attempted enrollment in the National Varna Scheme by making several competing claims to the Chaturvarna system. These claims were often fought within the modern judicial system. For example, the Kayasthas who were denigrated as Shudras in Bengal Presidency approached the High Court of Patna to make claims to Kshatriya status. Similarly, the Bhumihars started making claims to Brahminhood. Their claim was principally accepted in 1911. One finds many such examples across the nation-state, across the non-brahmin jaati spectrum.

⁸ Herbert Risley as the Census Commissioner of 1901 makes possessive investments in tracing castes within a racial hierarchy. Informed by the racial sciences of 19th century Europe, Risley tries to explain rather justify caste inequalities in terms of racial supremacy. Hutton, the Census Commissioner of 1931 calls Risley's theorization and nose-index experiments as a 'nightmare.' However, his work of superimposing race on caste had many upper-caste takers. One finds, upper-caste reformists including Gandhi relying on racial explanation of Aryan brotherhood for better treatment from the colonists. The counter-myth of Mahatma Jotiba Phule on Aryan Invasion was a creative response to these tendencies in mid-19th century.

population tried several permutation-combinations with their identities. Every ten years, in the early 20th century, one finds successive attempts by various social groups to identify themselves positively within the established hegemonic ideology of Chaturvarna.



Census of India, 1931 (Part I) p.378

Some new ranks claimed by old castes.

<i>Old name,</i>	<i>1921 claims,</i>	<i>1931 claims,</i>
Kamiar ..	Khattriya ..	Brahman.
Sonar ..	{ Khattriya Rajput	{ Brahman. Vaishya.
Sutradar ..	Vaisya ..	Brahman.
Nai ..	Thakar ..	Brahman.
Nepit ..	Baidya ..	Brahman.
Rawant ..	Vaishya ..	Khattriya.
(Kamiar).		
Muchi ..	Baidya Kishi
Chamar ..	' ..	Guhlot Rajput.

Changing Varna Claims - Census of India, 1931 p. 431

Assertions of self-identity were evident with the category of religion as well. In parts of Chhattisgarh many Christians identified themselves as Satnami Christians, instead of Chamar Christians - by identifying themselves as 'Satnami Christian' they were laying equal claims to two religious expressions, movements which have a positive connotation in their lives.⁹ Now such self-identifications have very limited impact on how they were socially identified. Nor would it have any impact on their political or material conditions.

However, what one needs to recognize is that the methodology and research ethics of Census collection made it compulsory to record what individuals, families and people say about themselves. Such an exercise was unprecedented in the history of the sub-continent. For the first time, groups could self-identify themselves in the records of the Colonizer or in other words their self-description was not fully dependent on the Brahminical classes. This is not to say that the data was untouched by the Brahminical class (the bias of the high-caste enumerator always influenced data entry) or the racial overtones of the White Classifier. In spite of all the manipulations, it became necessary to record the ways through which people 'changed' and 'transformed' their self-identity. Though its impact would have been marginal or just symbolic. Other than empirically establishing the basic premise and integrity of caste-based hierarchies, it was difficult to 'fix' people especially the subjugated groups within the 'Chaturvarna Scheme' of 'Hindu' religion.

In such a situation how do we approach, the issue of religion within anti-caste discourse? One can say that the subordinate and excluded majority of the sub-continent resisted the schemes of the Brahmin's book in their own ways. This was done either through claims which aimed at higher status within the Varna Scheme or by totally rejecting this scheme. The modus operandi of resistance was informed by several regional factors and specific histories.

Census Reports provide a lot of information on how disturbed and discontent people were with 'fixed' identities/boundaries and provided first-hand records of creative resistance. What I am trying to arrive at is the fact that religion was/is understood as an achievable identity.

While this was /is not the case with 'jati'. Jati identity irrespective of its changed nomenclature remains ascriptive. As, Babasaheb points out, it is not possible for castes or jatis to remain singular, they operate as a system of graded inequality only in the plural sense. Thus, your 'ascriptive' jati identity is ensured by the commitment of other groups to the same ideology of birth (*Some close the doors, some find doors closed*). On the other hand, modern religion can theoretically exist beyond the ideology of birth and can exist singularly as well. In other words, jati could only be repackaged, while organized religion (defined and introduced significantly in the 19th century) was a new and modern possibility with real implications. Islam and Christianity provided an opportunity to at least symbolically identify with a global community beyond the confines of a local caste-valourised society. It also provided an opportunity to be legally identified as a Christian or Muslim subject. However, it goes without saying that most of our population never received an opportunity to recognize their faith systems within modern definitions and were swamped under the category called 'Hindu'.

⁹ Census Report, 1931 Part -1 p. 431

Possibilities of Religion?

This possibility of religion was and continues to be creatively put to test within anti-caste movements of several varieties. In the year 2015, after long periods of violence and struggles in Bhagana, Haryana; the protesting Dalit community embraced Islam. The caste violence erupted with the growing assertions of Dalits. They wanted to rename their chowk, junction after Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. After long struggles, they were convinced that embracing Islam would be a significant act of resistance against the Hindu Jats. But, the choice of Islam was criticised by many people. Some even argued that Buddhism should have been the right choice. While, healthy debates on the choice of faith can go on, what is important is the confirmation that religion is an achievable identity, an anti-caste strategy (Meghwanshi, 2015a) After conversion, people in the struggle chose names such as ‘Abdul Kalam Ambedkar.’¹⁰ What we find in such names is an important attempt to combine struggles and genealogies of dignity.

Similar struggles are found in other parts of the sub-continent as well, both in recent and distant past. The story of Pioneer Lucy needs special attention.

In 1827, (Kali who later took up the name Lucy) knocked at the doors of the CMS Mission Compound in Travancore, Kerala. This, young slave girl ran away from her French Master. She weighed the consequences of her act and decided that she should approach the Mission. We know very little about how she made this decision. I would not like to speculate either. The white missionary couple opened their door and were shocked to find a slave girl. She asked them to let her in. But the couple knew that her entry would create havoc among the Savarna Christians, the primary audience of CMS in early 19th century. However, a determined Kali convinced them. They allowed her to enter the compound. In a few days Kali convinced them to teach her how to read and write. They were hesitant in the beginning but had to agree at last. She learnt how to read and write. She started reading the bible. Next, she demanded entry into the Christian faith. The puzzled missionary couple were transfixed by the consequences of a slave's entry into the faith. But Kali succeeded, she embraced Christianity and changed her name to Lucy (Yesudasan, 2011).

T.M. Yesudasan recounts this incident from the CMS archives in his book 'Baliyadukalude Vamshavali'. He argues that probably Lucy is the first literate Dalit woman of Colonial India. Yesudasan calls ‘Kali’ entry – Matharohanam (or entry into a religion) and not conversion, for conversion pre-supposes our membership in a modern religion.

How do we understand Lucy's pioneering efforts? She had to *first convert* the white missionary couple to enter Christianity. She taught them fundamental lessons in democracy. Through her entry she opened new possibilities of their own faith, hitherto unknown to them. She helped them or guided them to realize the true meaning of their faith. Thus, lowered -caste entry into Christianity is an entry of emancipatory praxis for all Christians.

The upper-cloth movement in Travancore (mid- nineteenth century) led by Nadar men and women, yet again revealed the possibilities of a new religion. Nadar women fought for their bodily

¹⁰ See: <http://anvarat.blogspot.in/2015/08/blog-post.html>

autonomy by invoking principles of Christianity. The Travancore government was forced to accept that 'Christianity' directs its member to cover their body (Mani et al, 2013). In other words, the Hindu Travancore State could not interfere with the religious mandate of Nadar Christians, as it was beyond its purview. In this example, we find the anti-caste movement creatively allying Christianity in its struggle. And effectively, inspiring resistance among Non-Christian lower castes as well.

However, it should be noted that the ability of anti-caste movements to utilize religion as a strategy has been under severe attack majorly by the State and the Savarna hegemonies operating in every religion. The independent Indian State has always tried to permanently settle the boundaries of religion. This is done through several legal and policy instruments. Settling the boundaries of religion and maintaining the permanent minority status of non-Hindu religions clearly protects the interests of upper-castes across religion (Shobhana, 2016). Through an array of anti-conversion laws, anti-conversion commissions the state has played its part in protecting the legal fiction of the majority Hindu religion. The central target of the state, in all these efforts, has largely been Dalit-Bahujan –Adivasi individuals and groups who unsettle the permanence of organized religions. The process of 'becoming a Hindu' is in many ways state-sponsored. One can call it an ongoing process of forced conversion for most groups listed as 'Hindus.' Again, such state-sponsorship is not limited to RSS or right-wing politics alone. Even those who identify themselves as 'Anti-Hindutva' contribute to it in their own ways. For example, Apoorv Anand tries hard to distinguish Hindu from Hindutva. He qualifies Hinduism as a plural faith system which accommodates all forms of dissent. In a recent essay, he characterizes Kancha Illiah's political and social critique of Brahmanism as an example of dissent 'within' Hinduism. Thus, what he ultimately arrives at is an equal or more deceptive definition of 'Hindu.'¹¹ Like RSS, he assumes 'Hindu' to be a territory, a nation with 'internal' distinctions and differences of opinion, celebrating it with the help of terms such as 'diversity'. This is a hegemonic and suffocating conception. Thus, the logic of the territory is used by the State and its philosophers across the political spectrum to legitimise 'Hindu'. This it is not surprising that RSS ideologue Rakesh Sinha argues that RSS has pushed the discourse on religion forcing 'liberal' scholars to uphold Hinduism.¹²

Diversity of practices is the basic character of Bahujan faith systems. They are forcefully listed as 'Hindu' by the State and its professional philosophers. These practices have not received any recognition in official documents. Gods and Goddesses, prayers and rituals of a large section of Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasis continue to be streamlined by the Hindu Missions.

Again, those who have been 'listed' as Hindus are not a defeated people. You would find continuing legacies of resistance from multiple sites. Recently, the Jat Maha Sabha in Rajasthan passed a resolution against visiting 'Brahminical' pilgrim sites. They have also resolved to 'not touch the feet' of Brahmins. These social resolutions were combined with political resolutions of not 'voting' for National parties (irrespective of whether they field a Jat or not) and supporting

¹¹ See: indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/crisis-of-hinduism-4612205/ & <http://www.tribuneindia.com/news/comment/hinduism-at-risk-from-rss/389461.html>

¹² See: <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/rss-and-the-realm-of-ideas-5100522/>

political movements which aim at the solidarity of Muslims-Dalits and Farmers.¹³ While, the actual import of these resolutions need to be studied separately. Similarly, the recent controversies which erupted after Bharat Patankar and Gail Omvedt were stopped from entering the inner sanctorium of Ambabai Temple in Kolhapur has led to many debates around the settled boundaries of Hinduism and indigenous practices.¹⁴ What is important is the unsettling nature of differences with Brahmanism, though they continue to stay within the legal fiction of Hinduism.

Permanent reproduction of castes ensured through the mechanism of endogamy seems to inform and drive permanent notions of 'religion' as well. Through the mechanism of endogamy, every religion in this sub-continent tries to ensure its membership and continuous reproduction. Parsis and Knanaya Christians for example collapse the definitions of religion and caste into one central feature - endogamy. This unity in definition ensures that nobody can achieve membership in their spiritual lineage through conscious conversion. Only birth can ensure membership. While mechanisms of conversion have always existed in Christianity and Islam, it has not demolished pre-existing racial/caste/family ancestries to establish a common unity of faith. Far from demolishing apostolic and brahminical ancestry claims several Churches in Kerala actively promote its persistence and celebration. In the official histories of the Syrian Christian Churches we find a collusion of caste and faith genealogies. In other words, the journey of these Churches is characterised as journeys of a few 'original' Brahmin families. Thus, despite the evangelical missions of these communities in the 20th century, they continue to protect the rights of the Savarna Christians.

There is a need to conceive religion as provisional, changeable or even temporary. In other words, religion is one of the many achievable strategies to destabilize the tiring and permanent categories of caste and normative gender. This is not to say that the individual or family or group who embraces a new religion or rejects religion are solely motivated by anti-caste perspectives. On the contrary, I am arguing that any agential act against the settled boundaries of legal religion can disturb the neat boundaries of caste and gender. This strategic conception should be used time and again. We should enter, exit, disturb, and reject religion like Kausalya who witnessed her Dalit partner's death.¹⁵ The burden of maintaining the demographic integrity and formal membership of any legal religion should not be the concern of lower-castes or women. Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar in his Dadar speech in 1936 (one year after his declaration) writes - Religion is for human beings and not the other way around. One can reject all religions or embrace a religion or religions based on our own conditions. The demand of total submission and selflessness to a religion fails and betrays the spiritual-material struggles of the Bahujans. Such a formulation of religion would not only legitimize bahujan embrace of new religions but also bahujan rejection of organized religions of any form.

¹³ See: <http://www.shunyakal.com/historical-decision-of-jat-society/>

¹⁴ See: www.sarkarnama.in/kolhapur-bharat-patankar-ambabai-mandir-issue-19016

¹⁵ <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/yes-i-am-alone-but-ill-fight-it-out-a-year-after-her-husbands-caste-killing-kausalya-is-a-new-woman-4575336/>

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