The Fifth and Sixth Castes

Dalit Women
The Indian Caste System
Pre-Colonialism

- **Brahmins**—mainly teachers and intellectuals (Brahma's head)
- **Kshatriyas**—the soldiers and rulers (Brahma's arms)
- **Vaishyas**—traders, merchants (Thighs)
- **Shudras**—unskilled laborers (Brahma's feet and did all the menial jobs)

Source: Alamy

Dalits—those outside of the caste system and those in the lowest caste, who, historically, engaged in:

- “taking life for a living, a category that included, for example, fishermen,”
- killing or disposing of dead cattle or working with their hides for a living,
- pursuing activities that brought the participant into contact with emissions of the human body, such as feces, urine, sweat, and spittle, a category that included such occupational groups as sweepers and washermen, and
- eating the flesh of cattle or of domestic pigs and chickens” (“Untouchables”)
Until 1949, the untouchables were formally and legally

- restricted from entering many temples and schools
- forced into segregated housing/water wells
- restricted from participating in ....aspects of public life
- restricted from certain career fields
- forbidden from moving to a different caste (upward mobility)
- forbidden from inter-caste marriages
Roughly 170 million belong to scheduled caste
80 million belong to scheduled tribes

The Indian Constitution:
- Bans untouchability
- Provides special educational and vocational opportunities
- Grants special representation in parliament
- Penalizes attempts to prevent Scheduled caste members from enjoying equal rights ("Untouchable")
Sex workers

- Estimates range from 3 to 10 million sex workers/prostitutes in India
- 40% are under 18
- 20% are under 15
- 90% are between the ages of 15-35
Dalit—derived from Sanskrit, meaning “ground, suppressed crushed or broken to pieces”

- Modern Dalit literary movement began in the 1960s in Maharashtra and in the Marathi language—and later spread to other India languages
- Influenced by Dalit writers (especially Baburao Bagul) of previous generations and by the American Civil Rights and Black Panther/Nationalist movements
Dalit lit includes all literary forms

- The purpose of Dalit lit is to offer “criticism of the caste system and all kinds of discrimination,”
- “call for destroying social hierarchies,”
- challenge “the status quo,”
- “promote equality and human dignity,”
- “bring about social change.”
Characteristics

Darshini Dadawala and Maharaja Sayjirao, authors of "Dalit Literature—Concept, Origin and Features," assert that Dalit literature is characterized by:

- Realism
- Portrayal of discrimination and exploitation
- Criticism of silence of mainstream literature about social realities of Indian society.

In "Subaltern Experimental Writing: Dalit Literature in Dialogue with the World," the author, Nicole Thiara sees contemporary Dalit literature, particularly novels as:

"[violating] the conventions of mainstream literature...being rooted in local Indian realities, subaltern vernacular traditions..."
Dalit Women and Writers from the sixth caste

- *Karruku* by Bama Faustina Susairaj (1992)
Resources

- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?"