

## **Transnational Solidarity: The Dalit Panthers and the Black Panther Party**

*Tanya Syed '24*  
Phillips Exeter Academy  
New Hampshire, USA

### **Abstract**

The legacy of the Black Panther Party (BPP) is transnational yet the transnational character of the most influential black power organization of the late 1960s has traditionally been understudied. Most historical accounts of the Black Panther Party (BPP) focus on the BPP's impact and legacy within the United States. However, understanding the global impact of the Black Panther Party is essential to understanding its message of black nationalism and internationalism, community organizing, and the impact of capitalism on race relations whose influence upon various social issues was borderless. The Dalit Panthers of Mumbai is one of the most relevant examples of the far-reaching impact of the Black Panther Party's message of liberation that continues to echo and reverberate across all corners of the globe. Using primary sources and writings of notable figures such as Huey P. Newton, Malcolm X, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, W.E.B. Du Bois, Namdeo Dhasal, J.V. Pawar, and Elaine Brown alongside secondary sources, this paper examines the transnational connections between the Black Panthers and Dalit Panthers. It studies the historical background of Dalit African American solidarity, origins, ideology, and differences between Black and Dalit Panthers, militaristic defense alongside art and literature as means of resistance for the two movements, and the experiences of Dalit and Black women within the Panthers.

## Introduction

On the 26th anniversary of Indian Independence, 15th August 1973, a group of radical Dalit activists called the Dalit Panthers organized a march through the streets of Bombay celebrating “Kala Swatantra Din” or “Black Independence Day.”<sup>1</sup> Inspired by the Black Panther Party, the Dalit Panthers is a group of student activists from the lowest caste in Indian society. After reading about the Black Panthers in *Time* magazine, the Dalit Panthers chose their name, presenting themselves as a militant opposition against the caste-based violence of India’s self-proclaimed “democracy.”<sup>2</sup> The Dalit Panther Manifesto directly references the Black Panthers, stating “Even in America, a handful of reactionary whites are exploiting blacks. To meet the force of reaction and remove this exploitation, the Black Panther movement grew. From the Black Panthers, Black Power emerged . . . We claim a close relationship with this struggle.”<sup>3</sup>

Both Black Power and the Dalit Panther Party sought to spread their mission beyond the nation-state’s borders by pursuing integration with the global masses. Black student groups like the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) championed the idea of Black internationalism, arguing that “Black people of the world (darker races, black, yellow, brown, red, oppressed peoples) are all enslaved by the same forces.”<sup>4</sup> The Dalit Panthers called for “joining hands with the Dalits (oppressed) of the world which includes the oppressed and the exploited people in Cambodia, Vietnam, Africa, Latin America, Japan and in the USA (especially with the Blacks).”<sup>5</sup> From their inception, Indian and African American liberation movements have challenged boundaries of race, caste, and nationality. The global impact of the Black

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<sup>1</sup> Nico Slate., ed. “Black Power Beyond Borders: The Global Dimensions of the Black Power Movement.” *New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012*. Accessed May 1, 2023. ProQuest Ebook Central, 127.

<sup>2</sup> Diane Pien, Dalit Panther *Dalit Panther Movement (1972-1977)*. BlackPast.org. <https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/dalit-panther-movement-1972-1977/s>.

<sup>3</sup> Manifesto, Barbara Joshi, ed. “Untouchable! Voices of the Dalit Liberation Movement” (London: Zed Books, 1986), 145.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph E. Peniel “Dashikis and Democracy: Black Studies, Student Activism, and the Black Power Movement.” *The Journal of African American History* 88, no. 2 (2003): 182–203. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3559065>, 189.

<sup>5</sup> K. P. Singh, “Liberation Movements in Comparative Perspective: Dalit Indians and Black Americans,” in *Dalits in Modern India: Vision and Values, Second Edition*, S. M. Michael, ed. (New Delhi, Sage, 2007), 162–178.

Panther Party's message of liberation "by any means necessary"<sup>6</sup> continues to inspire activists across the globe.

### **Historical Background of Dalit and African-American Solidarity**

Transnational solidarity between Dalit and African-American activists predates the Black and Dalit Panthers by nearly a century. Using the writings of Christian missionaries in India, key abolitionist activists including Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, Horace Greeley, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Charles Sumner would mention caste in their writings and speeches to support their arguments against slavery.<sup>7</sup> Caste even appeared on the front cover of the first issue of *The Liberator*, the most widely circulated anti-slavery newspaper during the Civil War and the antebellum era.<sup>8</sup>

Many key Indian anti-caste leaders such as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Jyotirao Phule also found parallels between the systems of race in the United States and caste in India. Jyotirao Phule, a social reformer from the Mali sub-caste who came up with the Marathi word "Dalit" to describe members of lower castes,<sup>9</sup> first took an interest in the United States in the late 1840s, when Brahman nationalists gave him Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man*.<sup>10</sup> The Brahmans hoped the message Phule would take away from Paine's book would be that Indians of all castes must unite to throw off British rule. Instead, Phule realized the power of education in mobilizing the lower castes against centuries of tyranny. Phule's seminary critique of the caste system is titled *Gulamgiri*, which translates to slavery in English and compares the conditions of Black Americans and lower-caste Indians. He even dedicated the book to the people of the United States "as a token of admiration for their sublime disinterested and self-sacrificing [*sic*] devotion in the cause of Negro Slavery."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Daniel Pearlstein, "Chapter Two: Minds Stayed on Freedom: POLITICS and PEDAGOGY in the AFRICAN AMERICAN FREEDOM STRUGGLE." *Counterpoints* 237 (2005): 33–65. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42978674>, 48.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Sumner, "The Question of Caste," Charles Sumner: His Complete Works, Vol. 17" (New York: Negro University Press, 1969), 131-183.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Immerwahr, "Caste or Colony? Indianizing Race in the United States." *Modern Intellectual History*, 4, 2 (2007), pp. 275–301 (2007) Cambridge University Press, 277.

<sup>9</sup> M. Nissar, Meena Kandasamy, "Ayyankali - Dalit Leader of Organic Protest," 8.

<sup>10</sup> Immerwahr, "Caste or Colony? Indianizing Race in the United States," 277.

<sup>11</sup> Jotirao Phule, *Slavery (in the Civilized British Government under the Cloak of Brahmanism)*, 2nd edn, trans. Maya Pandit (1911), in *Selected Writings of Jotirao Phule*, ed. G. P. Deshpande (Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2002), 25.

Phule's acquaintance and sponsor, the Maharaja of Baroda Sayajirao Gayakavade, shared his interest in the United States. When the Maharaja visited Chicago in 1893 for the Columbian Exposition, he brought professors and librarians back with him to Baroda where they prepared a US-centric curriculum in contrast to the British-centric one that most Indian students were studying at the time.<sup>12</sup> Thus, when Krishnarao Arjun Keluskar, a close friend and colleague of Phule's, introduced him to an extremely intelligent Mahar student named B. R. Ambedkar, the Maharaja decided to send him not to England, but to Columbia University in New York City to complete his higher education.<sup>13</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar's time at Columbia University from 1913-1916 coincided with the Harlem Renaissance, one of the most important movements in Black and American history. His proximity to the movement and his work with his Columbia professors such as John Dewey and James Shotwell had distinct impacts on his approach to caste.<sup>14</sup> Like Phule, his work repeatedly compared untouchability to slavery and he saw the two systems not just as assaults on human dignity but also as obstacles to functioning society. In *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), he writes that "An ideal society should be mobile, should be full of channels for conveying a change taking place in one part to other parts. There should be varied and free points of contact with other modes of association."<sup>15</sup> Thus, untouchability and racism hindered progress because they sentenced Dalits and African Americans to the bottom of the socio-economic pyramid with no options for social mobility.

Columbia was also where Dr. Ambedkar was introduced to the work of Black revolutionaries such as W.E.B. Du Bois, with whom he would later become close acquaintances.<sup>16</sup> His correspondence with W.E.B. Du Bois shows that leading intellectuals within the Dalit and African Americans understood the similar realities faced by the two groups. In a letter to Du Bois, Ambedkar writes, "There is so much similarity between the position of the Untouchables in India and of the position of the Blacks in America and that the study of the latter is not

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<sup>12</sup> Immerwahr, "Caste or Colony? Indianizing Race in the United States," 277.

<sup>13</sup> Immerwahr, "Caste or Colony? Indianizing Race in the United States," 278.

<sup>14</sup> Immerwahr, "Caste or Colony? Indianizing Race in the United States," 279.

<sup>15</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, *The Annihilation of Caste*, 2nd edn (Bombay: B. R. Kadrekar, 1937), 38, 41.

<sup>16</sup> S. D. Kapoor. "B. R. Ambedkar, W.E.B. Du Bois and the Process of Liberation." *Economic and Political Weekly* 38, no. 51/52 (2003): 5344-49. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4414430>.

only natural but necessary.”<sup>17</sup> Throughout his career, Dr. Ambedkar would continuously refer to American history – particularly the Civil War and Reformation Era – in his writings and speeches when making arguments for anti-caste movements in India.<sup>18</sup>

## Origins and Ideology of the Black Panther Party

With over 5,000 full-time members across 45 major US cities, the Black Panther Party was the largest Black revolutionary organization to have existed in the United States.<sup>19</sup> Founded in 1966 by Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton in Oakland, California, the Black Panther Party grew out of frustrations with the Civil Rights movement’s failure to improve the lives of Black Americans outside of the South.<sup>20</sup> Non-violent protests against segregation failed to adequately address issues of poverty and powerlessness that were the result of generations of systemic violence and discrimination against Black Americans. Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton first met in 1962, when they were both students at Merritt Junior College. Both Seale and Newton had been members of the Student Afro-American Association and Soul Students advisory, organizations that advocated for more African-American history courses and Black faculty.<sup>21</sup> However, the duo soon became dissatisfied with the organization’s non-violent methods, causing them to leave the college in 1965 to start their organization for Black Americans in the Oakland area.<sup>22</sup>

The biggest catalyst for the formation of the Black Panther Party was police violence and brutality. Members of the Black Panther Party

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<sup>17</sup> B. R. (Bhimrao Ramji) Ambedkar, “Letter from B. R. Ambedkar to W.E.B. Du Bois, ca. July 1946. W.E.B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312).” *Special Collections and University Archives*, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

<sup>18</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches*, Volume 17, Part III (Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Bombay: 1979-1993), 134.

<sup>19</sup> Albert Duncan, “Black Panther Party.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, August 14, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Black-Panther-Party>.

<sup>20</sup> National Museum of African American History & Culture. “The Black Panther Party: Challenging Police and Promoting Social Change | National Museum of African American History and Culture.” *Smithsonian*. (July 23, 2019). <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/black-panther-party-challenging-police-and-promoting-social-change>.

<sup>21</sup> Jessica C. Harris, “Revolutionary Black Nationalism: The Black Panther Party.” *The Journal of Negro History* 86 no. 3 (2001): 409–21. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1562458>, 412.

<sup>22</sup> Dorothy Lazard, “The Afro-American Association: Forerunner to the Panthers.” *Oakland Public Library*. (November 5, 2020). Retrieved 2022-02-13. <https://oaklandlibrary.org/blogs/post/the-afro-american-association-forerunner-to-the-panthers/>.

regarded the police as the official representatives of the status quo wielding violence against Black Americans at the endorsement of the “establishment.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, in 1966 when a 16-year-old Black boy named Matthew Johnson was brutally shot in the back by a police officer in San Francisco, Seale and Newton decided to form an organization to “police the pigs” called the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense.<sup>24</sup>

The core tenets of the Black Panther Party’s mission are the beliefs that all people (including Black Americans) have the right to self-determination and that it is impossible for African Americans to achieve liberation within the existing socio-political systems of the United States. This is echoed in the *Black Panther Party’s Ten-Point Program* that demands the right to freedom and self-determination for Black Americans; full-employment or guaranteed income for all Black Americans; an end to robbery of the Black community by white capitalists; decent housing; education that teaches African-American history; the exemption of all Black men from military service; an immediate end to police brutality and the murder of black people at the hands of police officers; freedom for all black men held in federal, state, national and city prisons or jails; that all Black people be trial by a jury of peers from Black communities and lastly, land, bread, housing, justice and peace for all Black Americans.<sup>25</sup> The Black Panther Party believed that the current government of the United States and its subsidiary institutions were “illegitimate because they failed to meet the needs of the people; therefore, they had no right to exist.”<sup>26</sup> Huey P. Newton and other Panthers called for economic systems in which the production of goods and services is “based on the needs of people and does not function for profit-making purposes.”<sup>27</sup>

Because Black Panthers analyzed power on the axis of both race and class, they often had differences with other revolutionary student groups such as the Revolutionary Action Movement. The Black Panthers were opposed to what they described as “cultural nationalism.” Cultural

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<sup>23</sup> Harris, “Revolutionary Black Nationalism: The Black Panther Party,” 413.

<sup>24</sup> California African-American Museum Web Staff, “#black history: On October 15, 1966, Bobby Seale and Huey Newton form the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California” African-American Museum, Los Angeles CA. <https://caamuseum.org/learn/600state/black-history/blackhistory-on-october-15-1966-bobby-seale-and-huey-p-newton-form-the-black-panther-party-in-oakland-california>.

<sup>25</sup> Roland Martin, “Black Panther Ten-Point Program” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, September 22, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Black-Panther-Ten-Point-Program>.

<sup>26</sup> Huey P. Newton, “Panthers,” *Ebony Magazine*, (August, 1969), 107.

<sup>27</sup> Newton, “Panthers,” 108.

nationalism believed that all Black people throughout the world had a distinct culture. Cultural nationalists believed that before Black liberation could be achieved, all Black people in the United States needed to reassert their cultural heritage to unite as a community to successfully revolt against their oppressors.<sup>28</sup> The Panthers' key problem with cultural nationalism was its lack of distinction between racist and non-racist white Americans and the absence of class analysis within the Black community. Thus, they viewed it as an ineffective strategy for liberation. As Bobby Seale writes in *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton*, "The cultural nationalists say that a black man cannot be an enemy of the black people, while the Panthers believe that black capitalists are exploiters and oppressors. Although the Black Panther Party believes in black nationalism and black culture, it does not believe that either will lead to black liberation or the overthrow of the capitalist system and are therefore ineffective."<sup>29</sup>

The revolutionary nationalism of the Black Panther Party caused them to reject both the integrationist approach of the Civil Rights movement and the separatist approach of the cultural nationalists. The leaders of the Black Panther Party saw themselves as part of a worldwide, multi-racial, anti-capitalist movement, conceptualizing Black liberation as a struggle against both race and caste.<sup>30</sup> Black revolutionary nationalists such as Malcolm X described black liberation as "worldwide in both scope and nature."<sup>31</sup> Others like Stokely Carmichael put the transnational nature of oppression at the forefront of their activism, as seen by his opening speech as Chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC):

The colonies of the United States, and this includes the black ghettos within its borders, north and south, must be liberated. For a century, this nation has been like an octopus of exploitation, its tentacles stretching from Mississippi and Harlem to South America, the Middle East, southern Africa, and Vietnam; the form of exploitation varies from area to area but the essential result has been the same, a powerful few have been maintained

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<sup>28</sup> Harris, "Revolutionary Black Nationalism: The Black Panther Party," 410.

<sup>29</sup> Bobby Seale. *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton*. (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1991), 37.

<sup>30</sup> Alphonso Pinkney, *Red, Black and Green: Black Nationalism in the United States*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 13.

<sup>31</sup> Malcolm X, "Message to the Grassroots." *BlackPast*. August 16, 2010. <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-american-history/1963-malcolm-x-message-grassroots/>.

and enriched at the expense of the poor and voiceless colored masses.<sup>32</sup>

Black Internationalism – the conjoining of race and class to resist imperialism and white supremacy – was central to the Black Panther Party’s philosophy and led the movement to openly ally itself with people across the world as they criticized caste in India, imperialism, and occupation in the Middle East and Vietnam and apartheid in South Africa.<sup>33</sup>

### **Origins and Ideology of Dalit Panthers**

The founder of the Dalit Panthers, Namdeo Dhasal, was born in a small hamlet outside the city of Pune in Maharashtra.<sup>34</sup> His family were Mahars, a subcaste of Dalits predominantly found in the state of Maharashtra who are also considered the original inhabitants of the state.<sup>35</sup> The caste system dictates that the Mahars’ occupation is handling the carcasses of dead animals, which is why when Dhasal was seven years old, his father moved to Mumbai to work as a butcher’s assistant, bringing his wife and son with him.<sup>36</sup>

A brilliant student, Dhasal was a vicarious reader and a talented writer. During his teenage years, he eloped with an upper-caste girl that he was seeing at the time, nearly causing a communal riot in his neighborhood in Mumbai. Disillusioned by Indian politics and society, he started self-educating himself on Marxist ideologies after high school by reading works like the Communist Manifesto, Das Kapital, and essays written by Indian socialists like Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar and Dr. Manohar Lohia.<sup>37</sup> After reading about the Black Panthers in *Time* Magazine, Dhasal was inspired to start a similar organization that

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<sup>32</sup> Stokely Carmichael, “What We Want,” *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. 7 (September 22, 1966), pp. 5-6, 8.

<sup>33</sup> Joseph E. Peniel “Dashikis and Democracy: Black Studies, Student Activism, and the Black Power Movement,” 189.

<sup>34</sup> Dilip Chitre, “Poet of the Underworld” *Outlook India*. (Mumbai) Published February 3, 2022. <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/poet-of-the-underworld/289178>.

<sup>35</sup> Meera Kosambi, “Intersections: Socio-cultural Trends in Maharashtra” (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2000), 121.

<sup>36</sup> Laurie Hovell, “NAMDEO DHASAL: POET AND PANTHER.” *Journal of South Asian Literature* 24, no. 2 (1989): 65–82. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40873091>, 66.

<sup>37</sup> Chitre, “Poet of the Underworld.”



combined the philosophies of Ambedkar and Marx with the militant self-defense of the Black Panthers to combat caste oppression.<sup>38</sup>

In its early stages, the Dalit Panther movement had no specific political ideology and vaguely drew from Buddhist and leftist writings. However, as the movement became better organized and more popular, like the Black Panthers, the Dalit Panthers went beyond the criticism of caste and placed a heavy emphasis on the lens of class.<sup>39</sup> Dalit Panthers believed that the complacency of India's democracy was inherently violent and like the Black Panthers, believed that lasting change could not be brought about through the existing socio-economic institutions of India. In their party manifesto, Dhasal and his co-founder, J.V. Pawar write:

Therefore, this Congress cannot bring about social change. Under pressure from the masses, it passed many laws but it could not implement them. Because the entire state machinery is dominated by feudal interests, the same hands who, for thousands of years, under religious sanctions, controlled all the wealth and power, today own most of the agricultural land, industry, economic resources, and all other instruments of power. Therefore, in spite of independence and the democratic set-ups, the problems of the Dalits remain unsolved.<sup>40</sup>

Both political organizations also viewed themselves as part of a global revolutionary movement and considered class consciousness as essential to the struggle against racism and casteism. In their Manifesto, the Dalit Panthers claimed a "close relationship" with the Black Panther Party's struggle and cited American imperialism along with the savarna system as the root cause of their suffering.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, they mention resistance movements in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Africa and refer to their allies as "all other sections of society that are suffering due to the economic and political oppression."<sup>42</sup> The demands and programs of the Dalit Panthers show influences from the Black Panthers' *Ten Point*

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<sup>38</sup> Pien, Dalit Panther *Dalit Panther Movement (1972-1977)*. BlackPast.org. <https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/dalit-panther-movement-1972-1977/>.

<sup>39</sup> Janet A. Contursi "Political Theology: Text and Practice in a Dalit Panther Community." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52, no. 2 (1993): 320–39. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2059650>, 326.

<sup>40</sup> Namdeo Dhasal and J.V. Pawar. *Dalit Panthers Manifesto* (Bombay, 1973), 1.

<sup>41</sup> Dhasal and Pawar, *Dalit Panthers Manifesto*, 5.

<sup>42</sup> Dhasal and Pawar, *Dalit Panthers Manifesto*, 6.

*Program* including access to education, healthcare, and housing; assured employment and daily wages for Dalits and land redistribution.<sup>43</sup>

### **Differences between the Black Panther Party and Dalit Panthers**

While the Dalit Panthers were inspired by and adopted policies and rhetoric from the Black Panther Party, it is important to note that the hierarchies and systems of oppression the two organizations are organizing against are different. This is visible when reading the Dalit Panther Party's Manifesto and The Black Panthers' *Ten-Point Program* side by side. In the United States, African Americans have internal differences along "vertical dimensions [such] as education, occupational status, income; the Dalits have more "horizontal differentiation – they speak different languages, belong to more identifiable subgroups (subcastes) and tend to be concentrated in rural areas, and increasingly, in urban outskirts."<sup>44</sup> Due to the lack of "horizontal differentiation" amongst African-American communities within the United States, the Black Panthers were able to advocate for ideas such as hosting a United Nations-supervised plebiscite for Black Americans.<sup>45</sup> Uniting all Dalits alongside other Scheduled Castes and Tribes in India would be impossible due to mere population numbers and diversity within the groups which is why the Dalit Panthers called for the implementation of socialist ideologies of land redistribution and increased wages for landless laborers within India as the majority of the population lived in rural areas.<sup>46</sup> Both the Dalit Panthers and Black Panthers discuss the issue of land relating to their communities in their manifestos yet their demands are distinctly different because while Dalits are the indigenous people of the Indian Subcontinent, African-Americans are descendants of enslaved people forcibly brought to the United States.

Additionally, while African-Americans see themselves as part of the "Third World," Dalits see themselves as subalterns or the others of the "Third World." The idea of the "Third World" was coined in 1952 by the French demographer, Alfred Sauvy who drew directly from French history by comparing it to the Third Estate.<sup>47</sup> In an article for *L'Observateur*, a French Magazine, he described these countries and

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<sup>43</sup> Dhasal and Pawar, *Dalit Panthers Manifesto*, 7, 8.

<sup>44</sup> Sidney Verba, Bashiruddin Ahmed, and Anil Bhat, "Caste, Race and Politics" Beverly Hills, California, Sage Publications, 1971, 34.

<sup>45</sup> BlackPast, B. (2018, April 05). (1966) *The Black Panther Party Ten-Point Program*. BlackPast.org. <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/primary-documents-african-american-history/black-panther-party-ten-point-program-1966/>.

<sup>46</sup> Dhasal and Pawar, "The Dalit Panther Manifesto" (Bombay, 1973), 6.

<sup>47</sup> Slate, "Black Power Beyond Borders: The Global Dimensions of the Black Power Movement," 128.

colonies as “ignored, exploited, scorned.”<sup>48</sup> One of the key discrepancies of the Third World in the context of caste and race is that it included all of India and ignored the glaring caste inequalities that shaped Indian society, which is why the Dalit Panthers use the word “Third Dalit World” in their manifesto to separate themselves from their oppressors and help translate their true position in the Indian and global socio-economic pyramid.

### **Militaristic Defense, Art, and Literature as Means of Resistance in the Black and Dalit Panthers**

The Black Panthers were believers in community empowerment and self-defense against illegal police brutality and other forms of state-sponsored violence, based on the constitutional right to bear arms and the legal right to self-defense.<sup>49</sup> The BPP (Black Panther Party) manifesto explicitly states that “all Black people should arm themselves for self-defense,” based on their Second Amendment Rights.<sup>50</sup> Yet their community empowerment initiatives went beyond their efforts to “police the pigs.” They also used community survival programs and mutual aid initiatives to give black people power over their own lives. These survival programs included the free breakfast program that fed over 20,000 children each day, as well as a free food program for families and the elderly. Additionally, they sponsored schools (like the Oakland Community School), set up free legal aid offices, conducted clothing distribution drives, as well as organized health clinics and sickle-cell testing centers in several cities.<sup>51</sup>

The Dalit Panthers adopted not only their name but also their approach to the problem of caste from the Black Panthers. Like race, centuries of untouchability, allowed upper-caste Hindus violently hoard resources, while simultaneously economically exploiting Dalits. The Dalit Panthers were amongst the first Dalit activist groups to recognize that a

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<sup>48</sup> Alfred Sauvy, “Document: Trois Mondes, Une Planète.” *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, no. 12 (1986): 81–83. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3768593>, 83.

<sup>49</sup> Curtis J. Austin, *Up Against the Wall: Violence in the Making and Unmaking of the Black Panther Party*. University of Arkansas Press, 2006. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1ffjh84>.

<sup>50</sup> BlackPast, (2018, April 05). *(1966) The Black Panther Party Ten-Point Program*. BlackPast.org. <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/primary-documents-african-american-history/black-panther-party-ten-point-program-1966/>.

<sup>51</sup> National Museum of African-American History and Culture, “The Black Panther Party: Challenging Police and Promoting Social Change” Nmaahc.si.edu. Smithsonian. July 23, 2019.

multidimensional approach involving both violent protest and a cultural revolution was needed to tackle the issue of caste in India.<sup>52</sup>

In addition to armed resistance, Black Power artists, such as Emory Douglas, and Dalit Poets, like Namdeo Dhasal, provided a visual language of resistance against the cultural hegemony that accompanies white and Brahman supremacy. As the Black Panther Party expanded from its roots in Oakland, so did its mission and community programs.<sup>53</sup> Around this time, Emory Douglas, Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party, became the Director of Art for the weekly newspaper called *The Black Panther*. In contrast to other organizations during the Civil Rights era that relied on simple slogans, Douglas created unforgettable visual imagery that depicted ordinary, working-class black men and women asserting themselves against white supremacy.<sup>54</sup>

Despite being historically excluded from art and intellectual spaces, Black Americans have always been key contributors to art and popular culture. Artists like Emory Douglas and Faith Ringgold, whose famous painting *American People Series #20: Die* holds the well-off American middle class accountable for their role in racial violence of the era by depicting an interracial group of professionals clad in business attire splattered in blood,<sup>55</sup> used their art to galvanize working-class African-Americans.

Just as the Black Panthers and Black Power artists led to the cultural resurgence and pride in the word “Black,” the Dalit Panthers and Dalit poets also encouraged Dalits to embrace language and aspects of their identity that had long been used to degrade them. The Dalit Panthers were the first to embrace the word “Dalit” according to its literal definition in Marathi meaning “broken.” The Panthers and many Dalit authors inspired by them encouraged young Dalits to embrace their own “brokenness” and see their oppression as a source of strength and

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<sup>52</sup> Karen Escalona, “India’s Dalit Panthers – the Black Panther Party: History and Theory.” <https://wp.nyu.edu/gallatin-bpparchive2021/international-branches/indias-dalit-panthers/>.

<sup>53</sup> Mary Duncan. “Emory Douglas and the Art of the Black Panther Party.” *Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men* 5, no. 1 (2016). 117-135, <https://doi.org/10.2979/spectrum.5.1.06>. 119.

<sup>54</sup> Susan, David C Driskell, Edmund B Gaither, Linda Goode-Bryant, Jae Jarrell, Wadsworth Jarrell, Samella S Lewis, Tate Modern (Gallery), Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, and Brooklyn Museum. 2017. *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*. Edited by Mark Godfrey and Whitley Zoé. London: Tate Publishing.

<sup>55</sup> Faith Ringgold, “American People Series #20: Die” *Museum of Modern Art*, New York City.

pride, just like Black Americans.<sup>56</sup> The popularity of the word “Dalit” and the N-word stems from the ability of oppressed groups to “appropriate” and therefore undermine derogatory terms of abuse.

Many Dalit authors have used race as a mirror to both galvanize Dalits and confront the complacency of the upper castes in India. Daya Pawar, a poet and active member of the Dalit Panther Party, wrote “You Wrote from Los Angeles” and challenged the caste-privileged Indian diaspora who were enraged by the racism they encountered in the United States.<sup>57</sup> Published in 1978, the poem begins by quoting unnamed upper-caste Indians outraged by their experiences with racism. Pawar attacks their hypocrisy, demanding how upper-caste Indians could complain about racism while perpetuating the injustice of caste.

Dr. Janardan Waghmare, a lower caste Indian political activist and Member of the Rajya Sabha, writes about the similarities between Dalit and Black Literature movements in the Marathi Dalit literature journal *Asmitadarsh*, “The Negro should not change the color of his hide, nor the Untouchable his caste even though for a long time both were caught in the whirlwind of self-denigration and self-hatred.”<sup>58</sup> Because the caste system dictates one’s occupation, Dalits have been historically segregated from mainstream culture and academic circles, and forced into professions such as leatherwork and manual scavenging. Thus, Dalit literature in and of itself is fundamentally an act of resistance and rebellion.

While most contemporary Dalit Literature is heavily inspired by African-American authors, Dalit literature has not risen to the international stage of Black literature, partially because most of it is not written in English, but rather in native Indian languages. Another reason is that caste is not discussed as heavily on an international scale as race is because the Indian government blocks discussions of caste in international bodies dedicated to fighting issues surrounding forms of racial discrimination. An example of this is the Conference on Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance held in South Africa, in 2001. Indian representatives blocked any moves by academics and Dalit activists to include the topic of caste because that meant acknowledging that casteism was a similar form of intolerance as

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<sup>56</sup> Slate, “Black Power Beyond Borders: The Global Dimensions of the Black Power Movement” 138.

<sup>57</sup> Daya Pawar, “You Wrote from Los Angeles,” in Sanjay Paswan and Pramanshi Jaideva, eds. *Encyclopedia of Dalits in India*, vol. 11, *Literature* (Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2002), 45.

<sup>58</sup> Slate, “Black Power Beyond Borders: The Global Dimensions of the Black Power Movement,” 139.

racism.<sup>59</sup> If caste was included in the discussions, the Indian government would be confronted for their failure to act on caste repression, and this would disrupt the moral high ground the Indian government takes at international forums on the issues of race or apartheid.<sup>60</sup>

### **Experiences of Women in the Black Panther Party and Dalit Panthers**

The Black Panther Party and the Dalit Panthers are revered today as revolutionaries whose rich legacy continues to inspire young radicals fighting race and caste oppression, but the women of these movements paint a much darker picture. The daughter of an upper-caste Hindu and a Muslim, Malika Amar Sheikh was a Maharashtrian writer and activist who married Namdeo Dhasal, the founder of the Dalit Panther Party when she was only seventeen years old.<sup>61</sup> In her memoir titled *I Want to Destroy Myself*, she exposes not just the personal but also the political hypocrisy of Namdeo Dhasal and the Dalit Panthers. Like many others, Shaikh was mesmerized by Dhasal's charisma and the raw, explicit power of his rhetoric and poetry. The romance of the moment swept her off her feet and she passionately agreed to marry Dhasal, despite staunch opposition from her family.<sup>62</sup>

From the start of their relationship, Malika Amar Shaikh is a victim of the deep-rooted violence and misogyny rampant that is within the movement and larger Indian society. Dhasal forcibly had sex with her before marriage, physically abused her on multiple occasions, passed on a sexually transmitted disease which he acquired in one of his visits to a sex worker in Kamathipura and even separated their son from her in a fit of rage for many months.<sup>63</sup>

Amar Sheikh exposes Namdeo Dhasal's ideological hypocrisy through his abuse of her and his parenting decisions. Not only did

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<sup>59</sup> Shiv Visvanathan. "The Race for Caste: Prolegomena to the Durban Conference." *Economic and Political Weekly* 36, no. 27 (2001): 2512–16. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4410826>, 2512.

<sup>60</sup> Kumar, "Discrimination and Resistance: A Comparative Study of Black Movements in the US and Dalit Movements in India." 234.

<sup>61</sup> Vrinda Nabar, "Review: I Want to Destroy Myself: A Memoir by Malika Amar Shaikh" *Hindustan Times* (Mumbai). February 2, 2018. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/books/review-i-want-to-destroy-myself-a-memoir-by-malika-amar-shaikh/story-P8va6ubvoVtkfQA22oKAZO.html>.

<sup>62</sup> Suyashi Smridhi, "Book Review: I Want to Destroy Myself By Malika Amar Shaikh," *Feminism In India*, April 2nd, 2019. <https://feminisminindia.com/2019/04/02/i-want-to-destroy-myself-malika-amar-shaikh/>.

<sup>63</sup> Nabar, "Review: I Want to Destroy Myself: A Memoir by Malika Amar Shaikh."

Dhasal not contribute to household expenses, he forced Amar Shaikh to pawn off her jewelry to maintain his lavish lifestyle which included indulging in expensive liquor and cigars in posh hotels across Bombay and party worker trips to brothels in red light districts.<sup>64</sup> Yet, he attacked her desire for a decent home as no more than “bourgeois dreams.”<sup>65</sup> Being the daughter of an inter-faith marriage and having grown up in a communist environment, Amar Shaikh was certain about how she wanted to raise her child – without religion, caste, and rituals like the naming ceremony. Dhasal’s hypocrisy is visible once again as he decides to install a statue of Buddha on their child’s birthday, even though the Panthers reject Hindu rituals of idol worship.<sup>66</sup> Amar Shaikh’s abuse at the hands of her husband takes place against the background of the 1975 Emergency, imposed by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi after she was convicted by the Allahabad High Court of electoral malpractices and debarred from holding any elected post.<sup>67</sup> Dhasal was an open supporter of the Emergency, hoping that in doing so the Gandhi government would drop all court cases against the Panthers even though the Emergency era was marked with unprecedented state incarceration, stifling of dissent, and harsh government crackdown on civil liberties.<sup>68</sup>

Like Malika Amar Shaikh, Elaine Brown, the first and only woman to serve as Chairman of the Black Panther Party, faced rampant sexism and threats of violence during her time in the movement. Born and brought up in North Philadelphia, a predominantly black, overpoliced, and impoverished neighborhood, Elaine Brown attended a predominantly white experimental elementary school.<sup>69</sup> Brown grew up between two worlds: the comfortable bubble of her wealthy, white elementary school, and the harsh realities of systemic racism in her neighborhood. Following high school Brown enrolled at Temple University but left the campus for Los Angeles, California before the end of her first year. In Los Angeles, she started working as a cocktail waitress at a Hollywood nightclub where she made acquaintances with Jay Richard Kennedy, a record executive to whom Brown credits part of

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<sup>64</sup> Smridhi, “Book Review: I Want to Destroy Myself by Malika Amar Shaikh,”

<sup>65</sup> Nabar, “Review: I Want to Destroy Myself: A Memoir by Malika Amar Shaikh”

<sup>66</sup> Mihir Chitre, “Interview: Malika Amar Sheikh” *Hindustan Times (Mumbai)* Published July 4, 2020. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/books/interview-malika-amar-shaikh/story-mFFW3ttjyate3wR49tIM.html>.

<sup>67</sup> Himanshu Jha. “India’s Authoritarian Turn: Understanding the Emergency (1975–1977) and Its Afterlife.” *Pacificaffairs.ubc.ca* 96 (1). <https://doi.org/10.5509/2023961119>.

<sup>68</sup> Chitre, “Interview: Malika Amar Sheikh.”

<sup>69</sup> P Walton, (2007, November 24). *Elaine Brown (1943- )*. BlackPast.org. <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/people-african-american-history/brown-elaine-1943/>.

her political education. Alongside her increased interest in the Civil Rights Movement and police brutality in Los Angeles, her experiences giving piano lessons in Watts, a predominantly Afro-Latinx neighborhood that is one of the most impoverished areas in the city, served as her social awakening.<sup>70</sup> In her memoir, *Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story*, Elaine is moved when she was teaching piano to young Black girls at the Jordan Downs Housing Project in Watts and sees parts of her racial trauma in the girls. She writes:

I saw the poverty of our lives, the poverty of little black girls who live on the same planet where people like me drank expensive bottles of champagne that clouded the mind with bubbles that obliterated them; us; where men, powerful men, made big decisions about their own lives and footnotes about the lives of them, us, pushed us back, back into nothing little corners on the outskirts of life.<sup>71</sup>

Not long after this encounter, Brown began writing for the radical Black Congress Newspaper, *Harambee*, and following the assassination of Martin Luther King Junior, she attended the first meeting of the Los Angeles Chapter of the Black Panther Party.<sup>72</sup> During her time as a member of the Los Angeles chapter of the Black Panther Party, Elaine Brown helped establish the party's first Free Breakfast for Children program outside of Oakland alongside other key initiatives such as the free Busing to Prisons Program, Free Legal Aid Program, and the Liberation School.<sup>73</sup> By 1971, Brown became editor of the party paper, *The Black Panther*, and was soon elected as Minister of Information and became the first female member of the Panther Central Committee.<sup>74</sup> In 1974, when Huey Newton, the founder of the Black Panther Party fled to Cuba to escape charges of murder and assault, he appointed Elaine Brown as Chairman of the Black Panthers, making Brown the first and last woman to ever lead the Panthers.<sup>75</sup>

Brown cites the unprecedented levels of sexism and abuse she experienced during her tenure as Chairman of the BPP as the reason she

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<sup>70</sup> Elaine Brown, "A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story." 1st ed. New York: Pantheon Books, 1992, 99.

<sup>71</sup> Brown, "A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story," 100.

<sup>72</sup> Brown, "A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story," 134.

<sup>73</sup> Walton, *Elaine Brown (1943- )*.

<sup>74</sup> Walton, *Elaine Brown (1943- )*.

<sup>75</sup> Michael Segalov, "Activist Elaine Brown: 'You Must Be Willing to Die for What You Believe In.'" 2022. The Guardian. March 27, 2022.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/27/activist-elaine-brown-you-must-be-willing-to-die-for-what-you-believe-in>.



officially left the Black Panther Party in 1977. Even though Panther membership was almost two-thirds female by the end of the 1960s<sup>76</sup> and women served as the backbone of many key Panther community initiatives such as the Free Breakfast and Free Legal Aid programs, Brown says their involvement was considered “irrelevant” at best.<sup>77</sup> Black Panther women such as Brown who asserted themselves were considered “pariahs; eroding black manhood and hindering the process of the black race.”<sup>78</sup> Even though the Panthers lacked intersectionality when fighting for Black liberation, Elaine Brown doesn’t fail to credit the organization that sparked a permanent fire of change within her. “The legacy of the Party I believe is solid,” she gushes. “I don’t think there was any greater. ... We were the greatest effort ever made by Black people for Black liberation.”<sup>79</sup>

## Conclusion

Last year marked the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Dalit Panther Party. This occasion was celebrated during the first international conference of the Black Panthers and Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra, attended by J.V. Pawar, the co-founder of the Dalit Panthers, and members of the famed Illinois Chapter of the Black Panther Party such as Henry “Poison” Gaddis and Michael D. McCarty. Not only was the conference two days of in-depth discussion about similarities between race and caste, but it was also a moment of cross-continental solidarity. Black Panthers proudly joined the chants of “*Jai Bhim*,” the most popular slogan of the anti-caste movement in India, and Dalit activists in turn were overhead saying “Power to the people!” and singing Bob Marley.<sup>80</sup> At the conference, J.V. Pawar reminded attendees that the Panthers were not just an organization but a movement, and though not much has changed in the past fifty years, continued solidarity

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<sup>76</sup> Salamishah Tillet. “The Panthers’ Revolutionary Feminism.” *The New York Times*, October 2, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/04/movies/the-panthers-revolutionary-feminism.html>.

<sup>77</sup> Brown, “A Taste of Power: A Black Woman’s Story,” 357.

<sup>78</sup> Brown, “A Taste of Power: A Black Woman’s Story,” 357.

<sup>79</sup> “Elaine Brown: A Black Panther’s Journey in Breaking New Ground.” NBC Boston. February 1, 2021. <https://www.nbcboston.com/news/national-international/elaine-brown-a-black-panthers-journey-in-breaking-new-ground/2290001/>.

<sup>80</sup> Suraj Yendge, “The Dalit Panthers was an ideology and a sight of the Dalit response to injustice.” *The Indian Express*. (Mumbai) May 29th, 2022. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/dalit-panthers-black-panthers-maharashtra-br-ambedkar-7941737/>.

is the path towards change lest the world forgets the atrocities faced by the Dalits.<sup>81</sup>

The impact of the Black Panther Party goes beyond the connection between the Dalit Panthers and Black Panthers. When visiting a museum dedicated to B.R. Ambedkar in Aurangabad, Maharashtra, British journalist Edward Luce found that half of the books in the museum's library were about the Black Panthers. The museum curator told Luce, "We feel a lot of kinship with what blacks suffered in America before the civil rights movement and what blacks suffered in South Africa under apartheid."<sup>82</sup>

In the choice of their name and message, the Dalit Panthers joined the Black Panthers in what they viewed as a global struggle against caste and oppression in all forms. By analyzing the Dalit Panthers side by side with the Black Panthers, we can better understand how the global impact of the Black Panther Party was fueled by their core values of the right to self-determination and unity of all oppressed people against imperialist socio-economic structures. Translational solidarity in the context of the Black Panther Party and Dalit Panthers goes beyond the recognition of parallel experiences under racism and casteism but shared values and ideals that extend beyond the borders of any individual state.

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<sup>81</sup> Santoshi Mishra, "Dalit Panthers: With rusty arms and burning flags, they fought for their rights" *The National Herald*. (Mumbai) 6th December, 2022. <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/opinion/dalit-panthers-with-rusty-arms-and-burning-flags-they-fought-for-their-rights>.

<sup>82</sup> Slate, "Black Power Beyond Borders: The Global Dimensions of the Black Power Movement," 139.

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