The Criterion: An International Journal in English
Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed Open Access e-Journal
(ISSN: 0976-8165) Vol. 17, Issue-VIII, September 2026
Special Issue: World Literature
www.the-criterion.com

From Pastoral Margins to Intellectual Mainstream: An Analysis of Caste and Transformation in Kancha Ilaiah's *From a Shepherd Boy to an Intellectual: A Memoir*

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https://doi.org/10.66376/criterion.v17.n8.19

Abstract:

"Caste is Race in Ancient Times, Race is Caste in Modern Times, Untouchability is an Aryan Construct. They said God has not created Untouchables." (Ilahi 295) In order to comprehend the relationship between caste identification, cultural assertion, and intellectual conversion in India's hierarchical social structure, the current study critically reads Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd's memoir. Finding out how the book describes a Dalit-Bahujan resistance and self-fashioning that challenges Brahminical power and restores honour to pastoral labour is the goal of the study. This study aims to: (1) analyse the textual strategies used to celebrate pastoral socio-cultural values and document caste-based humiliation; (2) trace the protagonist's intellectual and educational journey as a site of ideological conflict and self-reconciliation; and (3) examine the memoir's theoretical critique of upper-caste nationalism and its proposal for a transformative dignity of labour. The article employs a qualitative technique and close-textual reading of the memoir in the context of subaltern autobiography and Dalit studies. The narrative presents a unique "Shudra/OBC truth" that regards the pastoral fringe as deserving of moral and intellectual respect. The Shepherd's story is a purposeful political endeavour that aims to redefine the boundaries of the Indian intellectual mainstream, challenge caste power, and provide marginalised populations a sense of self-respect.

Keywords: Brahminical hegemony, Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, Dalit-Bahujan studies, caste autobiography, the dignity of labour.

Article History: Submitted-29/04/2026, Revised-30/06/2026, Accepted-20/07/2026, Published-30/09/2026.
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Introduction:

"Caste is Race in Ancient Times, Race is Caste in Modern Times, and Untouchability is an Aryan Construct. They said God has not created Untouchables." (Ilahi 295) These first few lines of Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd's autobiography represent an epistemological uprising rather than just a preface. The narrative makes it very evident from the outset that it is not a conventional life tale, but rather that it is the ideal example of a political message delivered in the style of an autobiography. where direct confrontation, theory, history, and philosophy are closely linked to the individual. Author of the well-known book *Why I Am Not a Hindu* and an Emeritus Professor at the University of Hyderabad, Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd has long been a bold and controversial figure in Indian intellectual endeavours. He represents a unique and purposefully stated Bahujan-Shudra intellectual lineage that is neither easily accommodated within mainstream academic discourse nor reducible to the label of Dalit writer alone. According to him, his journey from the rural Kuruma caste in Telangana to the exclusive halls of Indian higher education is hardly a story of successful personal mobility. Instead, it is a collective indictment that demonstrates how caste shapes cognition, permeates the body, and controls the creation of knowledge itself.

From a Shepherd Boy to an Intellectual: A Memoir was published in 2019 during a period of extreme divisiveness in Indian public life, but its roots are in a particular act of caste animosity. Ilaiah's works were the target of organised attacks in 2015 by Brahmin groups in Telugu states, which even targeted his name. His caste was seen as undeserving of respect, and his name, "Ilaiah," which was drawn from the local deity Iloni Mallanna and given by his uneducated shepherd parents, was considered inappropriate. He purposefully added the word "Shepherd" to his name in response to this coordinated campaign of upper-caste disdain, turning a stigmatised occupation into a symbol of defiant self-fashioning. As he writes in the Preface, shepherding is "a most respected profession globally, both spiritually and socially"

(Illiah, Preface xi); the act of claiming it was therefore not an accommodation to the grammar of caste but a refusal of its terms. This study takes a close look at that rejection, analyzing how the memoir uses pastoral memory, ancestral knowledge, and marginalized education to create a counterhegemonic intellectual identity. In doing so, it seeks to demonstrate that Shepherd's narrative is not autobiography in the bourgeois individualist sense but a carefully crafted political manifesto, one that locates the pastoral margin not as a site of deprivation to be transcended but as a legitimate and even privileged source of moral and epistemological authority.

Caste, name and the politics of self-fashioning

The question of the name, its conferral, its endurance, its humiliation, and finally its reclamation, constitutes the inaugural drama of Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd's memoir and provides the hermeneutic key to his larger political project. Shepherd's given name is derived from an immanent and territorial sacred, in contrast to Brahminical naming customs that typically invoke Sanskritized deities, celestial bodies, or transcendent intellectual principles: Ilaiah is derived from Iloni Mallanna, a local deity thought to have lived in the village of Iloni near Warangal.

> One of the key aspects of Brahmin naming traditions is the inclusion of caste-specific surnames. These surnames not only distinguish Brahmins from other castes but also signify their high social standing. The names often consist of specific prefixes or suffixes that indicate the person's caste and family lineage. For example, surnames like 'Sharma', 'Mishra', and 'Upadhyay' are commonly used by Brahmins in different regions of India.
>
> In addition to caste-specific surnames, Brahmin names may also incorporate elements of traditional Hindu culture and mythology. Many Brahmins are named after gods, goddesses, or revered personalities from ancient Hindu texts. These names are not only considered auspicious but also reflect the family's religious beliefs and values. For instance, names like 'Shiva', 'Ganesha', and 'Krishna' are frequently given to Brahmin

> boys, while names like ‘Saraswati’, ‘Lakshmi’, and ‘Parvati’ are popular choices for Brahmin girls. (Namesflares Team 1)

His illiterate shepherd parents, as he records in the opening chapter, bestowed this name not out of any strategic calculation but from a simple and unmediated devotion. In this manner, the word encapsulates a full worldview, one based not on faraway, pan-Indian Brahminical gods, but on local, rooted deities who live near agricultural areas, speak their language, and belong to their area. Yet this very locative particularity, this refusal of Sanskritic abstraction, becomes within the social world of the university a liability, an occasion for ritual disparagement. Shepherd recounts with unsparing candour the psychic cost of bearing a “very, very local name that constantly gets humiliating reference but not reverence” (Illaih 13) while navigating the upper-caste habitus of Indian academia. In this hostile climate, his name, which formerly linked him to his ancestral faith and identity, has become a marker used to consider him as inferior. It becomes an ongoing reminder that his position in intellectual places is viewed as dubious and not fully accepted. The shame is not merely personal; it is structural, the subjective interiorisation of objective caste hierarchy.

In this state of perpetual humiliation, his contact with Isaiah Berlin takes on such profound significance. Shepherd remembers discovering Berlin’s work in the university library and experiencing a sudden, almost dizzying realization: he was a renowned scholar with unquestionable prestige, and his first name seemed identical to his own Isaiah-Ilaiah. The change from the sibilant to the lateral approximant shows the significant gap between Oxford philosophy and Telangana pastoralism, but this gap is suddenly bridged. Shepherd emphasizes that this discovery is not about Sanskritisation. This is the familiar social process where lower castes try to improve their status by adopting the rituals and family stories of the twice-born. This also aligns with the concept of ‘Brahminisation’ discussed by M.N. Srinivas in his works.

> M. N. Srinivas, in his study of the Coorg in Karnataka, found that some “lower castes,” in order to raise their social position in the caste hierarchy, adopted some customs and practices of Brahmins, and gave up some of their own. They imitated Brahmins in matters of dress, food and rituals. For M. N. Srinivas, they started imitating the Brahmin way of living in all possible ways. By doing this, within a generation or so, they could claim higher positions in the hierarchy of castes. In the beginning, M. N. Srinivas used the term “Brahminisation.” Thus, the term “Brahminisation” denotes the imitation of the Brahmin way of life. (Kumar 1)

He does not rename himself Ishwar or Iyyengar; he does not fabricate a Brahminical lineage. What the encounter with Berlin affords instead is something more radical and, in its way, more subversive: the internationalisation of self-worth. Other people, rather than those at the top of the caste order, provide the validation. The Brahminical standards, which previously deemed his name unfit, appear constrained and confined as it arises from a wider intellectual environment. An indirect but powerful analogy is provided by Berlin's Jewishness and his own position as a scholar from a minority European community negotiating the gentlemanly anti-Semitism of mid-century Oxford. It is not discovered that Ilaiah is capable of becoming Isaiah. The reason for this is that Isaiah was always Ilaiah. The local and the global are interconnected rather than distinct. There is a human connection between the philosopher's name and the shepherd's divinity.

The 2015 attacks by Brahmin groups in the Telugu states stimulate a purposeful and strategic defiance, if the contact with Berlin is an accidental and redemptive affirmation. He might have felt more ashamed or wanted to hide as a result of the well-thought-out attempt to offend him, the derogatory remarks made about his name, and the public disdain for his caste identity. Rather, it elicits the opposite response. Shepherd adds the word "Shepherd" to his name as a polemical reclamation of the very category they had used as a stigma, rather than as a compromise to the abusers' demand for caste definition. The reasoning is fully explained in the preamble. He claims that shepherding is “a highly respected profession worldwide, both

spiritually and socially." (Illiah Preface xi). There are both factual and value-driven components to this claim. It evokes pastoral imagery from many religious traditions, including the shepherds of Bethlehem, the cowherd of Krishna, and the pastoralist prophets of Abraham. The goal of this depiction is to improve the occupation's inferior standing in the Brahminical hierarchy. Shepherd embraces, raises, and re-signifies his caste heritage as a source of social and spiritual capital rather than guilt. This action is undoubtedly different from the conventional form of caste pride politics, though. He does not identify with the larger OBC or Shudra identities, nor does he pick his Jati name, "Kuruma." Instead, he selects the English term "occupational descriptor," which denotes a form of labour as opposed to an ascriptive status. "Shepherd" is not a caste-based surname. It is a political surname, an identity he chooses and earns, not one he inherited. This difference is really important. While caste surnames position a person within a rigorous system of purity and impurity, identifying oneself by vocation emphasizes the importance of economic labor over ritual rank.

> Manu suggests that Brahmin's name should connote auspiciousness, Kshatriya's power, Vaishya's wealth and Shudra's name should connote contempt (Ambedkar, 2013, p. 46). The second part of a Brahmin's name shall be a word implying happiness, of a Kshatriya's a word implying protection, of a Vaisya's a term expressive of thriving and of a Shudra's an expression denoting service. It 'determines a person's attitude towards men and things' (Ambedkar, 2013, pp. 45–46). And Manu ordained the Shudra to have a contemptible name (Ambedkar, 2013, p. 46) and 'Manu will not allow a Shudra the comfort of having a sounding name'8 (Anjaiah & Rao, 2005, p. 17) (qtd. in Parmar 3)

The shepherd is not who he is by birth; he is who he does, who he chooses to become. This is not, therefore, an act of identity politics in the conventional sense, the demand that a stigmatised identity be recognised and respected. It is, rather, a rejection of the entire logic of caste identity, which links labor to birth and dignity with descent. Kancha Ilaiah turns his professional legacy into a political commitment by adopting the name Shepherd. The name that

was once a site of humiliation becomes, through this act of deliberate self-fashioning, the emblem of a counter-hegemonic intellectual project, one that seeks not merely to enter the Indian mainstream but to fundamentally alter its course.

The "goat brain" experience is one of Shepherd's memoir's most emotional and profound moments. Even while it appears to be a little, personal story from everyday life, it indicates a completely different method of learning and comprehending the world, one that questions prevalent, upper-caste beliefs. The grandfather's imperative, "Son eat . . . eat. We can eat only on such occasions" (Illaih 24), is delivered against the backdrop of feudal expropriation, the memory of half the herd being surrendered to the Zagirdar-Dora, the parasitic landlord whose very birth to a Muslim Nawab is rendered obscene through the grandfather's profane genealogy: "That bastard . . . was born to a Muslim Nawab . . . They suck our blood and eat our brains." (Illaih 24). The invocation of the Nawab is not, it should be stated, communitarian; it is structural. The Zagirdar-Dora is the confluence of three extractive hierarchies, feudal, caste and colonial which all leach on the productive labour of herding communities who in turn are deprived by them from enjoying its fruit. The grandfather's answer isn't revolution, at least not yet; it is ingestion. "My grandson, eat this goat brain, your brain will grow. You are going to school . . . where the brain . . . brain but not the body , is important." (Illaih 24). The logic is simultaneously material and symbolic. Protein nourishes cognition, but the act of eating the goat's brain also figures the incorporation of pastoral knowledge into the educational journey that awaits the boy. That the school is a place where bodily labour is devalued and cerebral labour monopolised by the twice-born: this indeed is what the grandfather, with a clarity that predates (and foresees) Ambedkar's most mordant sociological observations, has already divined. He can't dismantle that structure, but he can provide his grandson with the cognitive and nutritional capital to help him navigate it. The goat brain episode is thus a condensed allegory of intergenerational anti-caste consciousness: the

wisdom of the pasture, orally transmitted across generations, prepares the shepherd child to enter and eventually subvert the Brahminical classroom.

This episode sheds light on a more sweeping assertion that the memoir makes with cumulative force: that pastoral work is a kind of knowledge in itself, and the meadow can be a school. Shepherd does not romanticise shepherding's privations, the predation, the seasonal migrations, the chronic uncertainty; but he argues that these very imperatives give rise a unique epistemic cast. The shepherd who reads the land for grazing potential, who interprets animal behaviour as symptom or warning, who navigates by stars and the collective memory of water sources, who distinguishes the predator's approach from the straying of the flock: this figure is not an intellectual in the formal academic sense, but neither is he cognitively impoverished. The knowledge he possesses is practical, embodied, and transmissible, but it has been methodically delegitimized by Brahminical pedagogy, which prioritizes the textual over the experiential, Sanskritic over vernacular, conceptual over tangible. The subtle but clear message of the memoir is that delegitimisation is an essential part of the caste system rather than a result of it. In addition to controlling ceremonial status, the twice-born castes also controlled what was seen as wisdom in order to secure their dominance. They made the intellectual labour of the productive castes invisible, inaudible, and unintelligible by encoding their epistemic preferences in sacred texts, educational institutions, and even the language of acceptable conversation. Thus, Shepherd's resurgence of pastoral epistemology is a direct political act, recovering cognitive space that had been appropriated through centuries of symbolic violence.

However, the internalisation of caste hierarchy guarantees that the downtrodden cooperate in their own subjugation, although unintentionally. This method is explained clinically in Shepherd's preface: "caste hegemony gets into the bloodstream of people born into those castes. So also caste inferiority gets into the bloodstream of the oppressed castes." (Illiah,

preface xii). The bloodstream metaphor is purposefully employed. It shows that caste is a deeply embedded social ill that permeates both biological heredity and regular social reproduction, rather than merely an ideology that can be disproved by argument or persuasiveness. Shepherd notes that a lot of shepherding communities "do not have any sense of being humiliated, disrespected and even abused. They still do not abuse the abuser." (Illaih, Preface xi) This absence of conscious humiliation is not evidence of dignity; it is evidence of the success of hegemonic indoctrination. Those who do not know they are oppressed cannot resist their oppression. " Caste is the monster that crosses your path. You cannot have political reform, you cannot have economic reform, unless you kill this monster". (Ambedkar 43-44) It is here that Shepherd's project discloses its deepest ambition: "A sense of self-respect needs to be injected into their being through various modes of writing." (Illaih, Preface xi). The medical metaphor is significant. If caste inferiority circulates through the bloodstream, the antidote must also enter the circulatory system. Shepherd believes that writing is more than merely a form of one's own reflection. It functions more as a form of healing and protection. His memoir is not only a story of his life, but also a tool to restore dignity to a community that has long been denied the ability to defend itself from Brahminical hostility and humiliation. Each chapter, each anecdote, each theoretical proposition is a micro-injection of dignity. The shepherd intellectual writes not to commemorate his own extraordinary journey, but to instill his hard-earned dignity in the larger community of his people.

Reclaiming nationalism: fair representation and the dignity of labour

If Brahminical nationalism is the problem, Shepherd's counter-nationalism is the solution. The seventh chapter advances a definition so deceptively simple that its radicalism might escape notice: "Nationalism is giving every section a fair representation in powerful institutions." (Illaih 236). The formulation displaces patriotism from the register of affect, love of land, pride in civilisation, reverence for ancestors, into the register of institutional design.

Nationalism is more than simply an emotion or sentiment within someone; it is manifested through behaviors and how authority is distributed in society. If a country keeps all essential institutions and power in the hands of a single caste, regardless of how old or "great" that caste is, it is not true nationalism. It is just hegemony by that caste. Shepherd's nationalism is therefore not territorial but democratic, not nostalgic but aspirational, not culturalist but constitutional. It is also, in the most precise sense, Ambedkarite. Ambedkar's political practice is typified by a quest for fair representation in legislative chambers, on university campuses, in government bureaucracies and court houses, rather than by any definite program or ideology. From the Round Table Conferences to the drafting of the Constitution, this demand was the guiding principle. The point of departure for Shepherd's contribution is to take this demand out of the realm of formal politics and into the domain of the production of knowledge: representation in "powerful institutions" should be understood to mean not just representation on high but also representation at those institutions where talent is parenthesized, where expertise certified, and as Francis Wheen so wittily concurs with us in *Grand Tour* that Awkward questions tend to be evaded rather than answered. The memoir is itself an intervention in that struggle: it seeks representation for the pastoral episteme in the curriculum of Indian intellectual life.

This institutional transformation cannot be accomplished merely through formal representation; it requires a fundamental revaluation of labour itself. "A serious change will come about only when every institution teaches children a massive dose of dignity of labour," is Shepherd's typically straightforward recommendation. (Illaih 236). The term "massive dose" brings us back to the medical metaphor of inoculation; dignity of labour is a medication to be provided in concentrated, recurrent, systemic applications rather than a value to be instilled by sporadic moral education. Every institution, including schools, colleges, and universities, as well as families, religious groups, media outlets, and business offices, is referred to as an

organization. Just as the curriculum of contempt has been for millennia, the curriculum of dignity must be global and continuous.

Thus, Shepherd's educational concept is very different from the Gandhian appreciation of manual effort that came before it. Gandhi's Sarvodaya and Nai Talim ideas placed a strong emphasis on the value and importance of work, but they stayed within a framework that did not really challenge the varna hierarchy. According to this paradigm, the Brahmin was still thought to be in charge of intellectual growth, while the Shudra was still connected to menial work. Both were supposed to embrace their assigned duties as morally and spiritually significant. Such accommodations are not allowed by Shepherd's Samata, equality. Dignity of labour is a universal duty and right, not a consolation prize for those compelled to physical employment. The Shudra must learn to think with his intellect, and the Brahmin must learn to work with his hands. These changes must take place simultaneously and institutionally. Similar kind of intellectual and ideological clash can be found in the debate between Gandhi and Ambedkar in a play written by Premanand Gajvee;

> Gandhi: The varna system has worked for the welfare of human beings in binding them to ancestral trades and establishing that no work is low or high.
>
> Ambedkar: Gandhiji, sir, do not take offence if I mention your caste since I am out to break the system itself. You are a vaishya by birth, ancestrally a grocer. When it came to choosing your profession, you set aside the weighing scales, and picked up your law books and became a barrister. You never practised your ancestors' business. If you insist that people should practise the trades of their forefathers, you are suggesting that the sons of pimps should be pimps and the daughters of prostitutes, prostitutes. (Gajvee 119)

The universalism of Shepherd’s project is crucial to its political ambition. When he insists that shepherding is “a most respected profession globally, both spiritually and socially,” he is not merely defending his occupational inheritance against Brahminical disparagement; he

is claiming for the pastoral the status of the universal. The local god Iloni Mallanna, the unique customs of Kuruma animal husbandry, and the distinct flavor of goat brain on a Telangana child's tongue are not simply provincial peculiarities to be overcome on the route to global legitimacy. They are themselves the universal, though a universal that has been suppressed and denied by a particularism that falsely claims universality for itself. Shepherd's climb from the fringes to the forefront is not about conforming to or behaving like the upper castes. Instead, the goal is to uncover the system from within. He does not attempt to become a Brahmin, doesn't modify his name to sound Sanskritized, and does not deny his shepherd heritage or pastoral identity. He brings the pasture with him into the university, and in doing so he transforms both the pasture and the university. The shepherd intellectual is not an oxymoron but a new moral archetype, the figure in whom productive labour and cognitive labour are finally reconciled. His existence demonstrates that the separation of hand and brain, body and mind, manual and mental was never natural or necessary; it was merely the effect of caste power. The memoir's last assertion is that this authority can be shattered, that the lamb can not only survive the wolves but also reclaim the pasture on radically different terms. Not assimilation, but conversion; not adaptability, but emancipation; not memoir, but manifesto.

Conclusion:

The argument that has been pursued through these pages can now be stated with the clarity it deserves. Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd's *From a Shepherd Boy to an Intellectual* is not, in any conventional generic sense, an autobiography. It's like a manifesto written in the first narration: a political argument disguised as lives of their own narrative. Through his memories, the writer opposes a dominant force and uses his insights to help the greater battle for his community's independence and prosperity. The memoir's signal achievement is its demonstration that personal humiliation, meticulously excavated and rigorously analysed, can be transformed into collective political consciousness; that the pastoral origin so long

stigmatised as the antithesis of intellect is in fact a legitimate and generative epistemology; that the name abused by Brahmins can be reclaimed as a banner of defiance; that labour degraded by caste can be dignified through writing; and that the nation appropriated by upper-caste nationalism can be reimagined as a democratic community of equal representatives and equally dignified producers. Each of these modifications is carried out rather than asserted; the book embodies the self-respect it tries to instill in its readers.

The broader implications for the study of Indian life-writing and anti-caste thought are substantial. Shepherd's work goes beyond the typical scope of Dalit memoir. It incorporates the distinctive past and political battles of OBC-Shudra groups, prompting readers to reconsider the definition of "Dalit autobiography" in general. It challenges the enduring upper-caste monopoly over intellectual production, not through the negative labour of critique alone but through the positive labour of constructing an alternative canon, an alternative pedagogy, an alternative conception of truth. It clearly demonstrates that, since Ambedkar began writing, oppressed populations have used writing as a political tool rather than for beauty or amusement. It is more than just personal self-expression; it is a tool for the community to safeguard itself, resist injustice, and fight back together. Shepherd's method is his message: the writer who injects self-respect into the bloodstream of his people is not merely describing liberation but enacting it.

Let us return, finally, to the epigraph with which this inquiry began. "Caste is Race in Ancient Times, Race is Caste in Modern Times, Untouchability is an Aryan Construct. They said God has not created Untouchables." (Illaih 295). The deity Iloni Mallanna, whose name the shepherd boy was given, is himself an untouchable god, a local, vernacular, non-Sanskritic presence who dwells among pastoralists and speaks their language. The memoir's fundamental goal is that the way society has labeled it as "low" or shameful, his local god, his caste-marked name, his shepherding profession, and his community's knowledge, can really serve as the

foundation for constructing a new India. A really nationalist India would be one in which a shepherd boy would not have to abandon his identity and background to attend university, because the university would eventually come to cherish and respect the meadow's wisdom and existence as something unique and permanent. That India has not yet arrived. But the memoir, in its courage, its lucidity, and its relentless refusal of the terms that have been offered to it, brings India slightly closer to realisation. It is, in the most precise sense, a manifesto for the nation that might yet be.

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