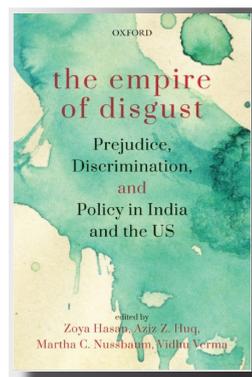


**Title: *The Empire of Disgust: Prejudice, Discrimination, and Policy in India and the US***

**Author: Z. Hasan, A. Huq, M. Nussbaum, & V. Verma, (Eds.) (2018)**



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This timely anthology of essays edited by Hasan, Huq, Nussbaum, and Verma breaks new ground for several reasons. For one, the rise of right-wing, authoritarian, majoritarian politics in Western and Eastern ‘secular, constitutional, legal’, democracies necessitates sensitive, nuanced multidisciplinary and multidimensional approaches in comparative studies. Understanding one social and national context could be helpful in illuminating unseen gaps or blind spots in another system. As the volume states from the outset all societies in one way or another ‘exclude and stigmatize’ minorities. Given this enduring dynamic in modern democratic societies, it behoves researchers, who examine questions of discrimination, marginalization, exclusion, stigmatization, and prejudice to create analytic and theoretical spaces whereby humanists, for example ethicists and philosophers of justice and rights, can collaborate with social scientists, legal scholars, and applied social policy analysts. The book achieves this great feat.

The current historical and political present in the U.S. and India reveals that over the last few years right-wing political parties’ ascendance to power has meant the erosion of certain basic, liberal, democratic values such as equality and equal protection under the law. Minority groups of different intersectional identities have faced great repression and violence in everyday life; but this is compounded by subtle changes in law and policy that seem to justify their exclusion and

stigmatization. Having stated the obvious, for some the matter goes beyond current politics and the nature of authoritarian, right-wing populist appeal in electoral systems.

The text by illustrious scholars in India and the U.S. tries to introduce a novel and philosophically rich framework of analysis that reveals a ‘rhetoric of disgust’ to understand how in fact current social realities of exclusion and degradation of minorities operate. Some groups are castigated as ‘animal-like’ in which their ‘full human’ dignity is deprived. This critical addition of the category of ‘disgust’ sheds new light on traditional research in law and social policy to examine modalities of social exclusion and therefore, ways to craft sound recommendations to mitigate or eliminate them. In some senses we must go beyond the twentieth century theories of ideology and hegemony, which operate by traditional dichotomies of the ideal and material realms, or theory vs. practice. We need deeper investigations into the reasons why social dynamics result in material practices perpetuated by real mechanics of violence against minorities based on social-psychological bodily manifestations of the pure and the impure. Caste in India and race in the United States are two examples of this non-dialectical, synthetically complex phenomenon encapsulated in the term ‘disgust.’

Great predecessors that examined this dominion of ‘disgust’ can open doors for future research, another great virtue of this collaborative, anthologized endeavour. The work as a whole is inspired by the legacy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the great Dalit (formerly known as ‘untouchable’) visionary leader who examined one of the most horrendous forms of exclusion, stigmatization, marginalization, oppression and therefore ‘disgust,’ namely the Hindu caste system in India and South Asia more broadly. One can say his unique achievement in the twentieth century context (compared to other national contexts of his time) was the attempt to inspire a social movement to eradicate such an internal, cultural, and civilizational system of tyrannical majoritarian ‘disgust.’ What makes Ambedkar stand out in his time was the fact that he pioneered his efforts during decolonization from an external imperial oppressor, in this case the British Empire. All the while, he chaired the drafting of a secular, legal, democratic constitution of a newly liberated Eastern society in the Global South, namely India, that attempted to take on its seemingly indestructible system of caste. In other words he was fighting two oppressions at the same time—one internal, the other external. The volume takes up his cause by venturing into realms he was not able to traverse.

Taking it one step further, a comparative analysis is needed to see how differing dynamics of stigma, exclusion, and ‘disgust’ occur in different contemporary and historical contexts. Therefore, we must see how differing remedies in law and policy recommendation will be required, perhaps experimentally, to tackle the complexity of minority control and degradation. The volume states from the beginning itself that it does not intend to be ‘reductionist’ whereby all phenomena of ‘prejudice and discrimination’ can be explained by an epiphenomenal category or meta-concept known as ‘disgust.’ In comparative studies, other factors such as ‘imagined violence, competitive envy, and unconscious group bias’ also have to be explored and from myriad perspectives to avoid the fallacy of attempting to discover one ‘determinate emotional origin.’ Different disciplines have to be marshalled, not just one, say

sociology on structures and actions, humanistic, critical, or post-modern theories on 'discourse' analysis, or social psychologists on group behaviours and mindsets. One gets the sense that new ground is being broken in trying to understand 'disgust' with empirical data with the aim of eradicating it, at least in the US and Indian contexts.

Martha Nussbaum, who is renowned for her pioneering works on justice, rights, and the capabilities approach, offers a framing orientation for the anthology. Drawing from the psychologist Rozin, Nussbaum starts off with the idea of 'primary disgust' in which all humans across societies and time are rooted not so much in outright fear of real danger but inherent discomfort that all humans have about other human body's excretions, smells, and ultimate decay. This seems obvious enough but then she takes it one step further with her own powerful notion of 'projective disgust.' Given this 'cultural universality' of human discomfort with human 'animality' in general and natural functions, say excretion and death, humans, unlike animals, go further. Majorities in societies create distinctions between themselves and some minority group which they have to characterize as 'quasi-animals,' minorities that are often 'powerless,' because those majorities cannot deal with the 'primary disgust' of their own 'animality.' And this happens in the heart of the allegedly most peaceful, secular, and liberally sound democracies.

Nussbaum's brilliant insight provides explanatory power to complement how others research and analyze various forms of marginalization, exclusion, discrimination, and prejudice when they occur in societies with majorities and minorities, such as the US and India. When majorities institute this distinction by 'projecting, irrationally, smelliness, hyper-animality, and hyper-sexuality' onto other minority groups, the majority creates an illusory distance from its own 'animality' and 'mortality.'

From this incredibly profound insight, comparative contexts begin to open up, such as antisemitism in twentieth century Europe, the plight of African-Americans from slavery to the present in the US, the millennial-long struggle of Dalits/outsidere in the Hindu caste system, and Muslims where they are minorities, for example in Europe, the US, and India. Every aspect of law and social policy, including voting, education, housing, and health access, is infected so to speak by the way majorities treat their minorities. Without going into further details about the conclusions of each contributor's chapter, this critical and timely volume is highly recommended for academics, practitioners, policymakers, activists, leaders of social movements, and elected officials. We must translate theory into practice to reform democracies with majoritarian systems that continue to demonize and therefore prejudicially discriminate against minority groups given the underlying phenomenon of 'disgust.'