

Laying the Ground for a Critical Psychology of Caste

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Abstract

The psychological underpinnings and processes of caste have remained obscure. This special issue of *Caste: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion* focusing on *Caste and Psychology* is an initial contribution that lays the ground for developing a critical psychology of caste. In this introductory article, I situate the special issue in the historical and contemporary context. I show that the historical roots of psychological approach to caste go deep. The revolutionary thinking and activism of Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar provided a useful foundation for a critical psychology of caste to flourish. Unfortunately, this foundation remained under-appreciated in the subsequent academic and social engagement on caste. Next, I review the contemporary research on the psychological dimension of caste and highlight emerging themes that illustrate contemporary approaches. I argue that there is need of a collective endeavor in the form of a new field of study, namely, 'critical psychology of caste', to integrate divergent perspectives and contributions addressing the psychological dimension of caste. The special issue is a small step in that direction.

Keywords

Caste, Race, Psychological Science, Dalit, Racism, Casteism, Decolonization, Ambedkar

Introduction

The caste system is one of the most complex and oppressive social orders existing on earth today. Expectedly, the scholarship on caste is vast and nuanced (for reviews, see Bapuji et al. 2024; Gupta 2005; Jodhka 2015; Mosse 2018). Despite the deeper insights offered by the extensive literature on caste, its psychological underpinnings and processes have remained obscure. Comparing caste with class in Great Britain and race in the United States, we find a theoretical and empirical vacuum concerning

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psychology. While there are scientific bodies of work addressing the psychology of class (Argyle 1994; Kraus & Stephens 2012; Manstead 2018) and the psychology of race (Richeson & Sommers 2016; Salter & Adams 2013), we are yet to turn our analytic gaze towards the psychology of caste. This special issue of *Caste: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion* focusing on *Caste and Psychology* is an initial contribution that lays the ground for developing a psychology of caste. The special issue takes a critical approach to address the relationship between caste and psychology and emphasizes the value of asking the right questions. Why must we take psychology seriously? Why must we ask the right questions in addressing the psychology of caste?

Psychology as a Form of Power

Psychology as a scientific discipline came into existence in the mid-19th century. Writing what came to be later known as the first textbook of psychology, pragmatist philosopher and psychologist William James (1890) defined psychology as “the science of mental life, both of its phenomena and of their conditions” (James 1890: 26). While James agreed that mental phenomena such as cognitions, desires, feelings, decisions, memory, and the like are the core focus of psychology, he challenged the positions of spiritualist and associationist approaches that abstracted mental phenomena from their context. James argued that mental phenomena do not exist in a vacuum, but there are social conditions (including the human brain and physiology) under which they arise, function, and direct human behavior. The scope of psychology was thus construed as broad and included the antecedent conditions of mental phenomena and their resultant consequences. James (1890) emphasized that the psychologist’s most interesting task is to engage in what he called “the quest of the conditions” (p.3). Over a century has passed since James’ seminal textbook. Psychology in the meantime has become a very influential, dynamic, and multifaceted science taught, researched, and practiced worldwide.

Notwithstanding many achievements, psychology has not adequately addressed the myriad social conditions and populations across the world. Psychology has postured itself to be representative of the whole of humanity. Still, most psychological theory and research emanates from a highly unrepresentative and psychologically peculiar sample of humanity located in the Euro-American context characterized as “WEIRD” (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic Henrich et al. 2010). As a result, there has been epistemic exclusion of experiences, theories, methods, and indigenous epistemologies of the Global South in Psychology. The most concerning aspect of psychology however relates to the way it has dealt with conditions of structural oppression and systemic inequity.

Recently, the American Psychological Association (APA), a powerful scientific and professional organization established in 1892 that dominates psychological teaching, research, and practice in every corner of the world, formally apologized for its role in supporting racial hierarchy and oppression of people of color (APA 2021). An act of apology is underpinned by a sense of moral failure and a feeling of

guilt. What moral failure led to APA's apology? Moral failure refers to psychologists promoting, perpetuating, and failing to challenge racism, racial discrimination, and human hierarchy. Psychology has a history of psychologists actively taking racist positions and using science to defend racism and the eugenic movement (Kamin 2012). Guthrie's (2004) book, *Even the Rat Was White*, provides an overview of historical developments in psychology that constructed Whiteness as a human norm while forming a priori assumption that African people are inferior. Psychologists offered solutions to human suffering, almost exclusively in terms of individual adjustment, leaving the social order conveniently unaffected (Fanon 1967; Richards 2012). There is still widespread denial, distancing, and hypocrisy in addressing racism in Psychology (Richards 2012). Durrheim (2024) draws attention to how White supremacy is maintained in psychology by "conversational silencing" in which the realities of racism and the operation of power are ignored under the guise of doing good science. Overall, psychology has worked as a technique for legitimizing racism and ignoring power inequalities and structural determinants of human oppression. In India, psychology has perpetuated the caste order and denigrated the Dalits and lower castes (Jogdand 2023). In this sense, psychology should be construed as a form of power that is used to control, influence, and coerce Dalit and Black/African people. However, power is a double-edged sword and can also be used to challenge oppression (Turner 2005).

Some psychologists took a reflexive stand and criticized the racist practices and perspectives within the discipline. They made efforts to harness the power of psychology to mobilize social change. The doll studies by psychologists and civil rights activists Mamie and Kenneth Clark showed how racism and segregation affected Black children, leading to the landmark judgement of *Brown vs Board of Education* that ended racial segregation in US education (Adams et al. 2008). The psychological impact of societal inequality and oppression in the context of racism and colonialism was theorised (Fanon 1967; Martín-Baró 1994; Sartre 1948). Moscovici (1976) criticized the tendency among psychologists to naturalize the social order, delegitimize social change, and discourage resistance. Specifically, social psychologists have been at the forefront of examining societal inequality and oppression. They have addressed the issues of class, gender, racism, and/or colonialism and developed an influential body of theory and research examining group processes and intergroup relations in multiple contexts (Brown & Pehrson 2019). Social psychologists have contributed to a scientific understanding of prejudice, stereotypes, stigma, social identity, leadership, and emotions underpinning social stasis and change (Dixon et al. 2012; Haslam et al. 2013; Reicher 2012; Subasic et al. 2012). Over the last few decades, various critical, feminist, discursive, intersectional, and decolonial approaches have emerged that challenge mainstream Euro-American psychology's dominance while proposing new theoretical and methodological innovations (Adams et al. 2015; Reicher 2011).

Most contributions in this special issue take a cue from these developments in psychology and adopt critical vigilance in asking the right questions. Before we discuss

further details of the special issue, it is important to situate it in the historical context. In the next section, we will look at historical discourse on the psychology of caste.

Historical Roots of Critical Psychology of Caste

It is said that psychology has a long past but a short history. The history of psychology as a scientific discipline started from 1879 when Wilhelm Wundt established a psychological laboratory at University of Leipzig. However, the long past of psychology refers to the fact that discourses on mind, consciousness, cognition, emotion, thought and language have been around us for thousands of years (Hergenhahn & Henley 1997). In the same vein, while psychology as a discipline was invoked to study caste in the early 20th century, the discourse on the psychological dimension of caste goes back for thousands of years. The concern for the social mind enslaved by the Brahminical construction of the varna-caste-gender system has been an important aspect of ideological struggle for social equality in Indian history (Ambedkar 1987; Patil 1982). Buddha's liberatory message for humanity proclaimed the centrality of cultivating the social mind to end human suffering (Ambedkar 2011). Buddhist philosophers Dignaga and Dharmakirti developed radical cognitive theories prioritizing faculties of reason and direct experience. These theories uprooted the epistemological foundations of the caste order by negating eternal ontological status accorded to birth-based caste identity (Verma 2020). The classical Buddhist anti-caste text *Vajrasuchi* of Ashvaghosha interrogated 'what is Brahmin-ness?' and exposed the hollowness of Brahminical selfhood while negating legitimation of human inequality (Asvaghosha 1831). Buddhist philosophers also challenged the beliefs and attitudes emanating from the varna-caste order. A famous verse¹ in Dharmakirti's 7th century text *Pramāṇavārttika* refers to pride in high caste, the belief in the authority of the Vedas, desiring merit from bathing, and practising self-denial for the eradication of sins as inferential marks of stupidity (Sen 2020). Later, the Bhakti movement particularly Kabir, Guru Nanak, Ravidas, and Tukaram called out the Brahminical arrogance and interrogated the perceived reality constructed by the caste system while evoking the ideal of a casteless, classless society (Omvedt 2011).

Analysis of the Oppressor's Mind and Mental Slavery of the Oppressed

The depressed and downtrodden masses in India were freed from the physical (bodily) slavery of the Bhats as a result of the advent of the British raj here. But we are sorry to state that the benevolent British Government have not addressed themselves to the important task of providing education to the said masses. That is why the Shudras continue to be ignorant, and hence, their 'mental slavery' regarding the spurious religious tracts of the Bhats continues unabated. (Phule 1873/2008: 8)

¹ वेद प्रमाणं कस्य चित् कर्तृवादः स्नाने धर्मेच्छा जातिवादव लेपः। संतपरंभः पापहनाय चेति विनाशप्रज्ञानां पञ्च लिङ्गानि जाये॥

Jotirao Phule, a nineteenth century radical thinker and activist, developed the first-ever systematic psychological approach to understand and dismantle caste-based exploitation and tyranny of Brahmins. As the above quote from his revolutionary book ‘*Slavery*’ illustrates, Phule’s conceptualization of slavery and freedom included a critical psychological approach. Phule showed the connection between knowledge and power that underpinned the mental slavery in the caste system (Bagade 2023). He advocated the value of education in freeing the lower castes and women from the mental slavery of the caste system. He called education a “third eye” (Tritiya Ratna) - a metaphor for critical consciousness (cf. Freire 1996) among those exploited and oppressed for centuries. Importantly, Phule pioneered a dual psychological approach that included a focus on the oppressors as well as the oppressed. His work simultaneously exposed the cunning mind of the caste oppressors and the subjugated mind of the oppressed *shudra-atishudra* (lower castes and untouchables) and women. Tarabai Shinde, the first Indian feminist philosopher, pioneered the analysis of Brahminical patriarchy and subjugation of women. Her work exposed male hypocrisy and women’s mental anguish in Indian society. Jotirao Phule and Tarabai Shinde together provided a scientific basis to understand the mental slavery of people oppressed by caste and Brahminical patriarchy (Bagade 2019). On this foundation, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar further enriched and developed this critical psychological approach in the twentieth century.

‘Psychology of Caste’ and Ambedkar’s Psychological Thinking

To my knowledge, the first formal invocation of the term ‘psychology of caste’ is found in historian and sociologist S.V. Ketkar’s (Ketkar 1909: 28) study of caste. Ketkar considered the psychological reasons for the existence of caste. He analyzed two critical aspects of the caste system, endogamy and hierarchy, to illustrate the psychological basis of strong attachment and feelings of superiority towards one’s caste (ingroup) and repulsive attitudes towards other castes (outgroup). After Ketkar’s invocation of ‘psychology of caste’ in 1909, it is in the scholarship and activism of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (revolutionary thinker, leader of the oppressed and a maker of modern India; hereafter Ambedkar), that we find the first full expression of ‘psychology of caste’ as a scientific and political engagement. Ambedkar engaged with the American functional school of psychology by William James and John Dewey (for details on American functionalism, see Buxton 1985; for Ambedkar’s engagement, see Stroud 2023) and group mind tradition in social psychology (Ambedkar 1989). Extending Phule’s critical psychological approach, Ambedkar saw social dominance of the Savarna Hindus and the mental slavery of the untouchables as inter-related. He therefore critically analyzed Hindu *shastras* (sacred texts) as the sources shaping social dominance-oriented consciousness among Hindu upper castes and simultaneously worked to unravel the cognitive and affective dimensions of dependency and inferiority among untouchables. Bagade (2019) makes a nuanced reading of Ambedkar’s theorization of caste slavery and highlights his psychological insights on development of caste consciousness. He shows that Ambedkar rejected Mahar Watan, a land grant and hereditary office that tied the Mahars (an untouchable

caste in Maharashtra) to menial jobs in the village economy, not only due to the inherent economic exploitation but also due to the damage to the self-respect that kept Mahars psychologically weakened (Bagade 2019: 45).

Ambedkar argued that dismantling the social and economic bases of caste and untouchability will not be enough; social and economic changes must be accompanied by efforts to change the consciousness of people: “Caste is a notion; it is a state of mind. The destruction of caste does not, therefore, mean the destruction of a physical barrier. It means a notional change” (Ambedkar 1936/2004: 60). Ambedkar examined the myriad beliefs and attitudes developed among people as a result of the peculiar nature of the caste system. He pointed out that graded inequality—an arrangement that ranks caste groups by unequally assigning economic, educational, and civic rights in a graded manner—has most pernicious social psychological consequences, mainly destroying the possibility of intra-caste and inter-caste solidarity and subsequent damages to societal wellbeing. Graded inequality creates an affective climate in which various castes harbor feelings that form “[an] ascending scale of hatred and descending scale of contempt” (Ambedkar 1987: 48). In addition, Ambedkar approached emotions as group-based performative entities critical to building solidarities and mobilizing collective action (Jogdand 2023). Ambedkar’s mobilization discourse is replete with his innovative usage of cognitive and affective categories. For instance, Ambedkar mobilized his followers to contest the “Hintva”, the amputated selfhood imposed by the caste system, by invoking and orienting a collective feeling of humiliation among them (Jogdand 2015; Reicher & Jogdand 2016). Ambedkar’s invocation and reinterpretation of Buddhism provided necessary social psychological resources to heal from the intergenerational psychological damage suffered by untouchables (Zelliot 2001) and reconstruct the world on the foundation of *Maitri* (loving-kindness) and *Karuna* (compassion) (Beltz & Jondhale 2004).

Closing Thoughts

The roots of critical psychology of caste go deep. The anti-caste thinking and activism of Phule and Ambedkar provided a useful foundation for a critical psychology of caste to flourish. Unfortunately, this foundation remained under-appreciated in the subsequent academic and social engagement on caste. Specifically, psychologists remained distanced from caste and ignored the anti-caste psychological thinking of Phule and Ambedkar (Jogdand 2023). As we shall see next, the interest and effort to address the psychological dimension of caste continued in various ways but there was limited growth of the ‘psychology of caste’ as an autonomous field of study.

Themes in Psychological Study of Caste: Contemporary Approaches

In the last seventy-five years, various scholarly efforts contributed to understanding the psychological dimension of caste in the dynamic socio-political environment. A systematic review is needed to take stock of important theoretical and empirical trends

and explore future directions. In the limited space of this article and at the risk of oversimplification, it may be useful to point out a few themes in the existing literature. Below, I highlight themes that illustrate contemporary approaches to psychological study of caste issues. In developing these themes, I was tempted to make a distinction between approaches from psychology and that from other disciplines. However, such a distinction felt spurious in terms of understanding the phenomenon. An interdisciplinary approach is necessary to address the complex nature of caste/casteism.

Dalit Selfhood

Dalit literature from 1960s onward started unravelling various psychological aspects of both oppressor and oppressed in the caste system and provided critical insights into development of selfhood in the caste society. An important contribution of Dalit literature to the psychology of caste was that it unraveled the ambivalent and cognitively dissonant nature of the Brahminical mind while also showcasing the social/psychological struggle of Dalit men and women against stigma, humiliation and loss of meaning (see Bama 2012; Kamble 2008; Naimishray 1995). Particularly, revolutionary Dalit writer Baburao Bagul's writing showcased the resistance and resilience of dignified Dalit self in the dehumanizing and humiliating casteist world (see Dāṅgale 1992; Satyanarayana 2019). Sukhadeo Thorat (1979) crafted one of the most insightful analysis of the development of Dalit selfhood. Using autobiographical insights, he analyzed the psychological damage suffered by Dalits and outlined the psychological process of rejecting a stigmatized caste identity and simultaneous formation of a new assertive, dignified and rational identity. The ethnographic work by Hardtmann (2009) has illustrated what Guru (2009b) calls as 'rejection of rejection' by Dalits through various coping strategies (e.g. Satyanarayanan & Lee 2023) as well as autonomous mobilizations for social change.

Contrast these contributions with the psychological research in India that emphasized the deficient nature of Dalit selfhood. Rath and Sircar (1960) reported that lower-caste groups prefer terms that exhibit a sense of caste inferiority and self-abasement. Similarly, Anant's (1967) analysis of personality patterns along the caste hierarchy emphasized that untouchables have a 'deficient personality' (p. 393). Subsequently, Majeed and Ghosh (1989) suggested that Dalits feel inferior as they suffer from 'affective syndrome crisis'—a deep-seated, unresolved identity crisis. The failure of Indian psychologists to understand Dalit selfhood has roots in the deficiency model in Western/Eurocentric psychology that scientifically positioned white middle-class people as the norm in terms of intelligence, cognition, personality, self-concept and the like against which the psychology and culture of Black people was evaluated and interpreted as inherently inferior (Robinson 2013). As a result of borrowing assumptions from the deficiency model, this psychological analysis ignored Dalit agency and ultimately fed into the notion of caste-based inferiority.

Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis has a long history in India. Girindra Shekhar Bose, Chairman of the Calcutta University Department of Psychology in the 1920s, was closely associated with Sigmund Freud and became a pioneer of psychoanalysis in India. Despite having a good start, psychoanalysis in India could not make a sustained growth and remained distanced from mainstream psychological scholarship (Akhtar & Tummala-Narra 2005; Mishra 2021). However, some attempts to approach caste through psychoanalysis are noteworthy.

Radical Marxist thinker and activist Sharad Patil (2003) tried to integrate Sigmund Freud's concept of the unconscious mind with Marxism and the Buddhist philosophy of Vasubandhu, Dignaga and Dharmakirti. Patil proposed that the Indian social consciousness is split into 'caste conscious' (जात-जाणिव) and 'caste unconscious' (जात-नेणिव). Patil argued, in an unequivocal Freudian sense, that caste-related conscious behavior and conscious thinking is but a tip of the iceberg; all caste-related behavior and thought processes are motivated by the unconscious mind created by the caste system. While Patil invoked the concept of the unconscious mind, Dundes (1997) tried to explain caste and untouchability using Freudian psychosexual stages of development through the analyses of two Hindu folktales. For Dundes (1997), caste hierarchy, untouchability, and toilet training in Indian society are intimately connected with each other. He argued that certain toilet training practices creates what he calls as 'pollution complex' among upper castes. In other words, his rather potentially Dumontian argument is that, "fear of faeces...lies at the very heart of the Indic caste system" (Dundes 1997: 64). Sudhir Kakar (1978) addressed the development of caste consciousness in upper caste Hindu family.

Highlighting the dominance of upper caste Hindu themes in the Indian psychoanalysis, Davar (1999) argued that Indian psychoanalysis is essentially a Hindu psychoanalysis that works as a caste and patriarchal imposition on Hindu women and women of other castes and religions. Methodologically, I think an important limitation in psychoanalytic studies on caste has been to approach caste as some kind of intrapsychic issue to the exclusion of its intergroup and systemic properties. Dwivedi (2024; this issue. See below for more details) reviews the mainstream psychoanalytic engagement with caste and suggests an alternative approach. It remains to be seen whether psychoanalysis can revive itself and develop capacity to provide a scientifically and politically viable avenue to address the question of caste.

Habitus

Sociologists have used several terms to theorize the internalization of social structures in the individual mind. The taste, dispositions, embodied feelings, but most prominently Bourdieu's idea of "habitus" has been proposed to capture the psychological dimension of caste. Bourdieu has defined habitus in terms of 'dispositions': 'social in origin, acquired in infancy, embodied, durable, transposable, hierarchical and reproductive of the social context within which they originated. Dispositions frame subsequent

activity and homogenize individuals exposed to the same local social circumstances.’ (Bourdieu 1994). Taking a cue from Bourdieu, Gorringer and Rafanell (2007) proposed ‘caste habitus’ as a pivot between individual and society, between subjective and objective, between psychological and social while studying the embodiment, protest and change in caste experiences:

“one’s social position within a particular caste informs one’s ‘caste’ habitus. This habitus results in the internalization of specific embodied characteristics, which constitute hierarchical boundaries and, consequently, structure relationships with other castes.” (Gorringer & Rafanell 2007: 98)

Caste habitus does shed some light on reproduction of caste; however, as Gorringer and Rafanell point out, it does not adequately explain protest and resistance within caste system (p. 101) (see also Bourdieu 2017). Increasingly, researchers have been using the concept of habitus to conceptualize the psychological impact of caste identity in the Indian educational context (Khanal 2024; Malish & Ilavarasan 2016; Renukuntla & Mocherla 2023).

Lived Experience and Social Interactions

Some scholars have challenged the abstract theorization or idealization of caste and emphasized the value of a phenomenological approach to understand the social reality of caste and untouchability. This intervention is replete with psychological insights on Dalit experience and untouchability. Guru and Sarukkai’s work on the nature of experience, selfhood, and theory provide deeper insights into approaching the psychological dimension of caste (Guru & Sarukkai 2012). Guru and Sarukkai define the lived experience as lack of freedom conditioned by the hierarchical caste structure that pushes Dalits outside of boundaries and treats them as repositories of dirt. In an illuminating dialogue, Guru and Sarukkai debate the nature of untouchability. While Sarukkai explored the philosophical foundations of untouchability by analysing the phenomenology of “touch”, Guru considered the implicit presence of untouchability in constraining everyday social interactions. Drawing on both Indian and Western traditions, Sarukkai argued the importance of untouchability within the Brahmin tradition and explained how untouchability is an essential requirement of Brahminhood supplemented and outsourced to Dalits. While Sarukkai located the source of untouchability in the Brahmin self, Guru emphasized the implicit presence of untouchability in social interactions and proposed adoption of an archaeological method:

“Due to the compulsion of the modern conditions, untouchability both as practice and as consciousness, finds it difficult to remain on the surface of social interaction as was the case in the feudal past. Modernity forces it to slide further down to the bottom of the hierarchical mind.” (Guru & Sarukkai 2012: 203)

Guru and Sarukkai argue that the category of experience should be taken seriously to theorize social reality. They attempt to highlight psychological underpinnings of caste and untouchability through embodied experiences, and develop an analysis that navigates the boundaries of mental/material, mind/body, individual/social. The phenomenological approach does not limit itself to the individual but foregrounds the lived experience of oppressed collectives such as Dalits.

Guru's (2009a) ground-breaking work on theorizing humiliation by foregrounding Dalit experience addressed the normative and psychological bases of social interaction in the caste context. Importantly, caste-based humiliation was conceptualized as a psychological rather than a physical injury that involves disrespecting and demeaning Dalits and lower castes, damaging their self-respect, attacking their human dignity, and causing them moral hurt and pain. This influential work has not only made interventions into the fields of political and moral theory, but also provided a direction for developing a social psychological conceptualisation of humiliation (Jogdand, Khan & Reicher 2020).

Guru and Sarukkai (2019) further examine the nature of the 'everyday social' focusing on embodiment of the social through the perceptual capacities of sight, touch, sound, taste, and smell. They map the margins, intersections, and complexities of the 'everyday social' in Indian society by juxtaposing it with the mind, self, experience, and the action of the individual and the collective. While discussing the social ontology of social self, Guru and Sarukkai (2019: 119) draw upon the developments in psychology and evaluate the categories of collective mind and collective self. They discuss the possibilities of the group mind, the 'we-self', and how it might relate to the individual, while also locating the cognitive, affective, and behavioral contours of the social self of caste. Guru and Sarukkai's analysis transcends the boundaries of conventional sociology, metaphysics, and phenomenology while developing psychological foundations for a liberatory politics of the oppressed in the caste system. A key contribution of Guru and Sarukkai's work has been to highlight the importance of theorization and methodological innovation required to understand lived experience and social interaction in the caste society. The psychological grounding of this work has influenced the research on uncovering patterns of stigma, discrimination, and exclusion in the caste context.

Collective Victimization: Patterns of Experience and Response

Violence against Dalit and Adivasi communities remains an immutable feature of Indian society (Kabiraj 2023; Sharma 2015; Teltumbde 2011). Various extensive scale surveys have confirmed the continued practice of untouchability in India (Shah et al. 2006; Thorat & Joshi 2020). Social exclusion and discrimination have been noted as persistent issues affecting Dalits, Adivasis, and Muslims in India (Thorat & Neuman 2012). Dalits are stigmatized due to their association with "dirty work" that includes tasks such as cleaning and manual scavenging (Jodhka 2016) and entrenched beliefs about their relative "meritlessness" compared to upper castes in intellectual domains (Nambissan 2007; Subramanian 2019; Thomas 2020). Addressing the negative impact

of caste-based inequality, violence, and oppression on Dalits, Adivasis and women in various societal, economic and organizational settings is a significant concern among many scholars. Many studies directly or indirectly include a focus on addressing the psychological impact of caste identity by invoking constructs such as stigma, social identity, exclusion, and discrimination. This is one of the thriving areas of research and has helped uncover various patterns of experience of and response to stigma, discrimination and exclusion across multiple domains. I discuss few representative attempts below.

Jaspal's (2011) study discussed the identity processes underpinning caste-based stigma and social exclusion. Replicating the stereotype threat effect (i.e., fear or anxiety regarding confirming negative stereotype of ingroup; Steele & Aronson 1995) in the caste context, Hoff and Pandey (2006) showed that caste identity constitutes a stigma for Dalit school children; mere public revelation of caste identity (compared to the condition when caste identity is not revealed) in an exam situation lowered cognitive task performance of Dalit school children. In the context of higher education, Deshpande (2016) showed that despite competent academic performance, Dalit students experience the stigma of being beneficiaries of affirmative action (caste-based quota policy). In the context of the urban labour market, Thorat and colleagues (2012) have shown that caste identity matters and shapes the patterns of discrimination and exclusion faced by Dalits and Muslims. Pal (2015) has identified patterns of exclusion and violence affecting mental health of Dalits. Some studies highlighted the experiences of invisibility, neglect and precarity experienced by Dalit workers in the cleaning profession (e.g., Rabelo & Mahalingam 2019). Jogdand (2015; 2023) has examined the impact of caste-based humiliation using a social psychological approach.

Researchers often make eclectic choices for using psychological theories and methods in their studies, suggesting that there is no clear pattern of conceptualization and operationalization of psychological constructs in the caste context. It is however worth noting that scholars are increasingly invoking novel social psychological constructs such as 'microaggression' (Rathod 2017, 2022) to shed light on psychological processes underpinning caste-based stigma, exclusion, and discrimination in the higher education context. Notably, Bhoi and Gorringer's (2023) edited volume, *Caste in Everyday Life*, takes the psychological approach seriously to understand everyday workings of caste and brings together contributions that interrogate the experience of and response to caste-based stigma, discrimination and exclusion in multiple settings and among various communities. Corroborating the pattern discussed earlier in the context of Dalit selfhood, many studies—including the ones in Bhoi and Gorringer's volume—provide empirical support to the position that Dalits (especially Dalit women) do not passively accept their devaluation and victimization but engage in 'identity struggles' to negotiate the conditions of stigma and precarity (e.g., Mendonca et al. 2024), contest the meanings of discrimination (e.g., Deshmukh et al. 2024) and develop intersectional solidarity with other oppressed groups to challenge the ongoing victimization (see Nair & Vollhardt 2020).

Health, Wellbeing, and Clinic

Caste identity is a significant stressor affecting health and wellbeing of Dalits (Jadhav et al. 2016; Jogdand 2017). Recent scholarship has identified caste-based health disparities (Acharya 2022) in the Indian population. Dalits and Adivasi (Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe) experience poor health and wellbeing (Ramaiah 2015; Thapa et al. 2021) and have poor access to healthcare (Baru et al. 2010). Dalits and Adivasis also experience relatively poor mental health compared to the higher caste Hindus (Gupta & Coffey 2020). Dalit students in Indian higher education establishments face increasing risk of self-harm and suicide (Pathania et al. 2023; Sukumar 2022). These trends suggest the need for interventions that help address individual suffering but also underpinning socio-structural factors. Although there has been increasing interest in addressing the health impact of caste, class and gender across multiple domains (Baru et al. 2010; Chowdhury et al. 2022; Johri & Anand 2022; Khubchandani et al. 2018; Komanapalli & Rao 2021; Kowal & Afshar 2015; Mahapatro et al. 2021; Patel et al. 2018; Shaikh et al. 2018; The Lancet 2014; Uddin et al. 2020), there are issues within the disciplines of psychology and psychiatry that dampen the efforts for developing meaningful solutions to the impending health crisis in India.

Sushrut Jadhav, a clinical psychiatrist and medical anthropologist and one of the foremost voices in the psy-fields who has raised the question of caste, attributes this failure to the deep-seated caste bias in theoretical discourses and practices in clinical psychology, psychiatry and mental healthcare settings in India. Jadhav has shown that clinical practices in India have not taken the ecological context of mental health seriously (Jadhav et al. 2015) and, as a consequence, have not adequately developed a culturally valid orientation and diagnostic assessment criteria to address the suffering experienced by Dalits and lower castes (Bayetti et al. 2017; Jadhav 2004; Jain & Jadhav 2008). Relevantly, Sawariya (2021) has identified various issues within the counselling psychology training and practice that excludes caste from its consideration. Sawariya shows that clinical settings are often unaffordable and inaccessible to Dalits and the therapeutic alliance (i.e., an affective relationship between counsellor and client throughout the counselling process) in the clinic is dominated by the caste structure. Clearly, the priority is not just to address the concerns of the health and wellbeing and improving the access to healthcare but also to address caste blindness of theory, method and practices in the fields of clinical and counselling psychology and psychiatry.

Beliefs and Attitudes

An important aspect of research on beliefs and attitudes is that these studies shift the analytic focus on the oppressors in the caste context. As noted earlier, researchers have given most attention to examining the experience and impact of caste among those oppressed by the caste system. However, it is equally important to examine the cognition and motivation of the upper castes who oppress others. As a result, despite

the critical importance of the caste-related beliefs and attitudes persistent in the caste system, there has been relatively limited research addressing these issues.

Scholars have focused on various beliefs and attitudes that underpin, mediate, and (re) produce caste in everyday life. Ramaswami Mahalingam, cultural psychologist and one of the pioneering researchers on the cultural psychology of caste, has developed insights into essentialist beliefs and attitudes regarding caste identity. Essentialism refers to the psychological belief that there are essential and immutable differences between social groups. Using a novel experimental paradigm of brain transfer across caste (Brahmin/Dalit), gender (male/female) and class (rich/poor), Mahalingam (2003) showed that essentialist beliefs of caste differences are pervasive across Indian society but these beliefs are generally informed by power and social location, such that Brahmins are more likely than Dalits to endorse essentialist beliefs of caste differences as those beliefs validate the higher status of the Brahmins. The essentialist caste beliefs are entrenched in Indian society and shape the way Indian children are socialized. Dunham and colleagues (2014) found that by the age of ten most Indian children become aware of caste identity and develop an implicit preference for high-caste groups. The caste system shapes Indian children's beliefs about intellectual ability, motivation, and achievement in life (Srinivasan et al. 2016). By the age of five to nine years, Indian children develop caste-related biases and mistrust/ignore Dalits, who are perceived to be dirty (Rottman et al. 2020). Baby Ziliya and Manjaly (2020) experimentally proved that upper castes still dehumanize Dalits as emphasized in the Hindu sacred literature. Cotterill and colleagues (2014) examined the Hindu beliefs of Karma underlying the legitimation and persistence of the caste system (for a critique, see Jogdand et al. 2016). Blanchar and Eidelman (2013) showed that the belief in longevity of the caste system makes it seem more legitimate and defensible.

An important aspect of studying the psychological aspects of beliefs and attitudes is to focus on prejudice and stereotypes in the society. Thorat and colleagues (2016) show prejudice as a factor underlying the persistent denial of reservations to Dalits. Using a nationally representative dataset, Amit Thorat and colleagues (2020) confirmed the prevalence of regressive caste and gender attitudes among Indians. While the concepts of prejudice and stereotypes are popular in caste-related discourse, the scientific studies examining caste-based prejudice and stereotypes are surprisingly rare. After some attention to the topic of caste-based prejudice and stereotypes for few decades after Indian independence, Indian psychologists (even those who built their international career by studying this topic) distanced themselves from it (see, this issue, Sharma & Jogdand 2024). This should have been a thriving area of research given the availability of complementary theories and methodological advancement.

Closing Thoughts

Where are we going with all these strands of research addressing the psychological dimension of caste? Three observations could be made here.

First, what is researched as part of the psychological study of caste is exceedingly eclectic and solitary. There are some insightful studies that develop theory; some make

useful empirical contributions. However, such studies shine alone and are not further developed into programmatic strands of research. As a result, a theoretical confusion and empirical vacuum prevails regarding psychology of caste.

Second, it is not too difficult to bring divergent theoretical notions and empirical findings together into a harmony and set up an agenda for future research. However, this is only possible when psychological study of caste is done as a collective action rather than an individual intellectual project. Given the enormous complexity of the caste system, a community of scholars with sustained commitment is needed to make a meaningful academic and policy impact.

Third, as the breadth of contributions outlined in earlier sections signifies, it is possible to imagine a 'critical psychology of caste' as an interdisciplinary and autonomous field of study that investigates the dialectics between caste society and the individual mind. The problems for critical psychology of caste are genuine, and they could be addressed not just by importing theories and methods from adjoining fields but also by developing new theories and methods from Dalit perspective.

Current Issue

This special issue is the first collective and systematic attempt to undertake a psychological study of caste issues. Most contributors of the special issue are young scholars. Barring a few, most of them were writing their first academic article. They have broken several barriers within the discipline to ask the right questions and develop meaningful answers. What is common among all contributions is the awareness of the power relationship constituted by psychology as a form of knowledge. In this sense, all contributions take a critical stance towards psychological constructs while utilizing their potential to unravel the complex issues in the caste system. They invoke multiple psychological theories and/or approaches ranging from psychoanalysis to social identity approach in social psychology and use both qualitative and quantitative methods. The contributions develop new theoretical insights and contribute new empirical findings enriching existing knowledge base.

Sharma and Jogdand develop a social psychological approach to caste prejudice. They show the limitations of existing theory and research on caste prejudice that limits its scope to personality and individual differences, rendering the analysis reductive and depoliticized. Inspired by the social identity approach in social psychology (Reicher, Spears & Haslam 2010), they develop a group-level psychological conceptualization of caste prejudice and show its utility using a correlational study examining the contemporary expression of casteism, namely the denial of caste-based reservations and endorsement of blatant caste discrimination. A key empirical finding in their study is that glorification of caste identity rather than mere psychological attachment to caste, was found to be strongly linked to caste prejudice. Through innovative theoretical approach and empirical contribution, Sharma and Jogdand prepare the ground for a systematic programme of study in the causes, correlates, consequences, and reduction of caste prejudice.

Divya Dwivedi re-introduces psychoanalysis to study caste and shows its utility to address somewhat oppositional dimensions of ‘the psychomachia of caste in contemporary life’ among Dalits and ‘the denial or *Verneinung* of caste by the upper castes’. She interrogates psychoanalysis in India both as a theory of clinic and of the civilization and warns that psychoanalysis could become a retrogressive and universalizing theory of society and politics unless a contextually specific sociogenesis of psychopathologies could be developed. Relatedly, she shows how psychoanalysis in India became a tool for further evasion and *Verneinung* of caste. Moving beyond the traditional usage of Freudian conceptual categories, she proposes a sociogenetic psychoanalysis of caste or what could be called in Fanonian lexicon as sociodiagnostics (Fanon 1967) aimed at radical social transformation.

G.C. Pal reviews existing research on caste and highlights how this work overlooks the psychological complexities underpinning caste based oppression. He reflects on Dr. Ambedkar’s psychological exposition of the caste system and shows its relevance to understand the persistence of the caste system. He then explicates ‘identity threat’ as a psychological process involved in the persistence of caste discrimination and violence in contemporary India using various social psychological frameworks.

Bianca Cherechès juxtaposes Dalit psychological suffering with the existing psychological theorization of trauma and recovery. Through a critical reading of Meena Kandasamy’s novel *The Gypsy Goddess*, recounting the 1968 Kilvenmani caste atrocity, she highlights multiple and insidious ways the somatic trauma of caste oppression affects the mental wellbeing of Dalits. She interrogates the universal validity of the trauma paradigm dominant in the fields of psychiatry and clinical psychology especially the relevance of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) while exposing its limitation to explain the Dalit psychological suffering and resistance. Bianca Cherechès argues for expanding the theoretical scope of trauma and recovery as well as mental healthcare practices to include collective victimhood experienced by historically oppressed groups such as Dalits.

Mukherjee, Agarwal, Tandon and Meena undertake a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006 2019) of narratives of Dalit victimization and Dalit resistance in educational spaces. Building on the current social psychological theory and research into collective victimhood (Vollhardt 2020), they show how Dalit individuals make sense of their victimization and cope with and resist casteism. Mukherjee, Agarwal, Tandon and Meena highlight experiencing microaggression, deficit intergroup contact, caste stereotypes and upper caste disgust as some of the ways through which caste order victimizes Dalits. However, they underscore that such victimization is rarely accepted by Dalits. They highlight several aspects of Dalit resistance and resilience that include acts such as seeking higher education, reclaiming classroom space, endorsing affirmative action, confronting oppressors, and building solidarity and self-respect within the community.

Fatima, Zafar and Thangal provide a methodological guide to undertake psychological research on caste issues in light of the conformity bias (Moscovici 1976) prevalent in the existing research (for review, see Jogdand et al. 2016). They discuss

barriers both within and beyond discipline that obstruct asking the right questions and undertaking a rigorous enquiry into issues of caste and casteism. Fatima, Zafar and Thangal argue for taking a value position while conducting psychological research on caste and caution that theoretical naivety or a lack of critical stance can result in blaming the victims of oppressive systems. They suggest a culturally and contextually sensitive approach while navigating conceptualization and operationalization in empirical studies examining the nature and implications of caste/casteism.

Vikas Kumar Choudhary considers aspects of memory and collective remembering embedded in caste politics in India. He highlights that construction and access to memories is shaped by the power relations embedded in the caste system. Using ethnographic notes from the sites of important Dalit monuments in Uttar Pradesh, he argues that the collective memory of Indian society is based on caste ideology and places Dalits as subservient to upper caste politics. In response, the Dalit movement attempts to consolidate collective memory by creating anti-caste counter-memories to challenge the Hindutva meta-narratives and appropriation of Dalit icons.

Jidugu Kavya Harshitha focuses on the complex links between caste, language and colorism in India. She analyses the Dalit experiences of caste discrimination and colorism using linguistic registers and the concept of indexicality. She demonstrates how linguistic expressions reinforce caste hierarchies by assigning unequal social value to darkness and fairness among Dalit and 'savarna' upper castes. She uncovers a pattern of attributions where caste identity shapes the meaning of skin tone. Jidugu Kavya Harshitha shows that 'savarna' upper castes with fair skin are seen as a beauty ideal but those with dark skin tones are also perceived as socially acceptable due to linguistic references to royalty and goddesses. In contrast, Dalits with darker skin tones are dehumanized and perceived as impure and those with lighter skin tones are seen as arrogant, undeserving, and deceitful.

Shweta Ahire presents a counter-intuitive finding of Dalits themselves rejecting caste-based reservations in the private sector. She explores the motivation underpinning this rejection using a mixed method approach in a sample of predominantly young, middle-class, well-educated or employed Dalit-Buddhists in Mumbai, India. Shweta Ahire highlights the perils of stigmatized caste identity that Dalits have to navigate in their everyday life and shows that the rejection of caste-based reservation is rooted in the internalized caste stigma that leads one to distance oneself from the ingroup. She emphasizes need for further research into internalized oppression among Dalits.

Angel Sophan engages in conversation with the individuals/groups who define themselves as upper castes and invites them to consider how food reflects the psychology of caste oppression in India. She explores the history of food practices and shows how control of food choices are part of discrimination and social exclusion of Dalits and Adivasi communities even today. Using the 'psyche of the oppressor' framework (Sophan & Nair 2023), she invites the upper caste reader to critically consider the Brahminical imposition of vegetarianism in Indian food culture and resultant stigmatization of individual and communities as impure.

In addition, the current issue contains two selected papers from the Sixth International Conference on the Unfinished Legacy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar – “The American Question: Ambedkar, Columbia University, and the “Spirit of Rebellion” by Scott R. Stroud and “Buddhist Roots of Ambedkar’s Judicial Philosophy” by Christopher Queen.

In the forum section of the current issue, we have a special article from Justice P. S. Narasimha, Supreme Court of India, entitled “Justice for the Marginalized in a Constitutional Democracy” and an article on “*Poothapattu*: Sobs of a Broken People, Fragmented Ethos, and the Lost Land” by Anilkumar Payyappilly Vijayan, followed by Gaurav Pathania’s bilingual (Hindi and English) poem, “My Pen, My Words”.

Finally, in the book review section, Maria Zafar reviews Rupert Brown’s biography of Henri Tajfel - one of the most influential social psychologists and author of the social identity theory.

Concluding Thoughts

The special issue brings psychology in communion with caste. It defines new problems for enquiry and re-analyses the old problems in the new light. The necessity of psychological study of caste is stressed throughout the special issue. Yet we must also reflect on the limitations of psychological explanation. Having experienced the Nazi Holocaust as a Polish Jew, Henri Tajfel wanted to explain how the Holocaust was psychologically possible. He arrived at the conclusion that the ‘explanations’ of social conflict and social injustice cannot be mainly or primarily psychological. The ‘psychological’ is but a part of a complex puzzle. However, he also believed that a psychological inquiry is necessary and could lead to new solutions. While psychological explanation may be limited, “at the same time, a *modest* contribution can be made to ... the unravelling of a tangled web of issues.” (Tajfel 1981: 7; emphasis original). A critical psychology of caste can, therefore, certainly play its part in the unravelling (and annihilation) of the tangled cobweb of the caste system.

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