

Introduction

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The annihilation of caste-based injustice is one of the most pressing challenges facing humanity. The caste system directly dehumanizes over 240 million Dalits worldwide and sustains a complex system of graded exclusions and highly skewed privileges that benefits a select few while harming more than one billion people within and outside of the caste system in South Asia. Caste, in its myriad forms, enables and sustains a dense web of systemic inequities tied to one's birth and endogamy. For millions of Dalits, the weight of the caste system is like a millstone around the neck, slowing grinding away at their future. Any meaningful engagement with a deeply entrenched and inter-generational caste-system must wrestle with fundamental questions such as what is caste and why does it persists. Most importantly, we need new narratives that can help us move beyond a casteist world.

Following debates on the persistence of caste-based discrimination, which was also the theme of the inaugural issue of *J-Caste*, this special issue on the ***Legacy of Gender and Caste Discrimination*** curates a set of multi-disciplinary research with a particular focus on Brahmanical patriarchy. It is also important to note that many of these authors are the first-generation of graduates in their communities, making their work even more noteworthy and important for expanding our discussions on caste.

This special issue consists of thirteen academic papers, a poem, an essay, a policy paper, and three book reviews. They underscore the central role of caste, as a distinct social category, in understanding the injustices and inequities experienced by Dalits, and in particular Dalit women.

Guest co-editor Sunaina Arya's Editorial Essay, "*Theorising Gender in South Asia: Dalit Feminist Perspective*," provides a powerful argument about how "patriarchy in South Asian context is inherently linked with caste." Arya argues that caste is essential for understanding the increasing violence against women and young girls and why we must interrogate arguments about *Savarna* feminists that ignore and undermine the lived experiences, aspirations and political agency of Dalit women in South Asia.

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The articles by Jyoti Diwakar, Tanvi Yadav, and Amit Thorat offer important contemporary context and analysis on why violence against Dalit women persists. In her article ‘*Sex as a Weapon to Settle Scores against Dalits-A Quotidian Phenomenon*’ Jyoti Diwakar draws on two recent case studies of sexual violence against Dalit women to discuss the impact of *Savarna* notions of caste purity and how caste controls gender norms in India. Similarly, Tanvi Yadav’s work on Dalit women as witches in “*Witch Hunting - A Form of Violence Against Dalit Women in India*” examines how witch hunting narratives are still one of the most common weapons for maintaining suppression of Dalit women in rural India. As Yadav argues, the impetus for sustaining the practice of witch hunting is a conspiracy of Brahmanical patriarchy that is designed to control women and sustain caste-hierarchies. Amit Thorat et al. article “*Persisting Prejudice: Measuring Attitudes and Outcomes by Caste and Gender in India*,” written in collaboration with a group of social scientists, analyzes a large phone survey that confirms the persistence of conservative gender and caste attitudes and highlights how caste-based attitudes shape issues of women’s work, mobility, inter-caste-marriage, and physical violence by married men.

The articles by Anurag Bhaskar and Poonam Singh engage with the intellectual arguments of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and Ram Manohar Lohia. Anurag Bhaskar’s article on “*Ambedkar, Lohia, and Segregations of Caste and Gender: Envisioning a Global Agenda for Social Justice*” makes compelling arguments about the need to go beyond male-dominated Dalit movements and upper caste-led feminist movements. Poonam Singh’s article, “*The Advent of Ambedkar in the Sphere of Indian Women Question*,” offers an important analysis of Ambedkar’s thoughts on how endogamy makes caste and gender inseparable. As Singh argues, this claim is crucial for understanding Dalit women’s situation in India today.

The articles by Kalyani Kalyani, Prashant Ingole, Tushar Ghadage, and Amar Bahadur BK engages with complex questions involving voice, agency, awakening, and the power of religion and culture in dealing with caste-based oppression and indignities. In “*Tathagata Buddha Songs: Buddhism as Religion and Cultural-Resistance among Dalit Women Singers of Uttar Pradesh*,” Kalyani Kalyani provides insights into the power of music and how it has moved from the realm of aesthetic sensibility to a language of resistance against an oppressive social order. Similarly, Amar Bahadur BK’s article “*Speaking is Healing: Dalit Women Gain a Voice through a Charismatic Healing Movement in Nepal*,” provides distinct ethnographic insights and analysis on why voice -- the act of speaking in public with a microphone -- is important for Dalit *Sachchai* women in Nepal. The *Sachchai* is described as a charismatic healing movement where followers meet over readings of testimonial and Bible speeches. Tushar Ghadage’s paper “*Ambedkarites in Making: The Process of Awakening and Conversion to Buddhism among Non-Mahar Communities in Maharashtra*,” examines the politics of why Matang Dalit women convert to Buddhism. Prashant Ingole’s paper “*Intersecting Dalit and Cultural Studies: De-brahmanizing the Disciplinary Space*,” delves into anti-caste discourses and explores strategies for de-brahmanizing knowledge production from colonial and post-colonial perspectives.

The pieces from Thomas Crowley and Kristina Garalyte provide insights into how protests and commemorations produce new spaces for contestations and resistance of caste politics.

In *“Leisure, Festival, Revolution: Ambedkarite Productions of Space,”* Thomas Crowley examines protests and commemorations and how they have worked to produce a distinctly Ambedkarite space, one radically counterposed to hierarchical, Brahminical productions of space. In her article, *“Dalit Counterpublic and Social Space on Indian Campuses,”* Kristina Garalyte asserts that recent Dalit student activism on university campuses is indicative of a move towards counter-culture, which uses public space to negotiate contested social status.

Gaurav Pathania’s poem “Blackhole” in Hindi and English powerfully captures the inhuman practice of manual scavenging, cleaning of gutters, cleanings of roads, and cleaning of human excreta, all unclean jobs lacking in even basic safety measures and relegated to Dalit workers. The metaphor “Blackhole” used in this poem represents Dalit lifeworld.

The works by Aparna Vyas and Sarita Pariyar explore the power of storytelling and how the storyteller’s own lived experiences with caste discrimination and violence generate new and powerful narrative stories. Aparna Vyas’s paper *“Cultural Psychological Reading of Dalit Literature: A Case Study of Joothan by Om Prakash Valmiki,”* examines the autobiographical account of one of the most influential Hindi Dalit writers. Drawing on theoretical cultural psychology, Vyas analyzes the transformation of a Dalit boy (*Om Prakash*) subjected to caste-based atrocities into a notable writer, helps us understand the lasting impacts of childhood atrocities and how such knowledge can be used to resist and reshape discourses on caste. In *“A Touchable Woman’s Untouchable Daughter: Interplay of Caste and Gender in Nepal,”* Sarita Pariyar deftly deploys her own encounters with caste indignities. Pariyar narrates a powerful story of how gendered violence and atrocities are deeply intertwined and embedded in a society dominated by the Hindu code, drawing on the tragic consequences of her mother’s inter-caste marriage and the unresolved murder of Ajit Mijar. Her piece also questions the flawed democratic processes in Nepal and calls for a deeper interrogation into why caste continues to strip people of their humanity.

In our new Policy Arena section, Joseph Assan et al. offer an important assessment of the implementation of the free Midday Meal School feeding program in Lucknow, India. The study examined the program’s impact on educational access, performance, participation, and wellbeing. The research team sampled students and teachers from predominantly Dalit, Lower Caste, Ethnic, and Religious Minority households to ascertain whether the strategic program implementation protocols also ensured social inclusion and addressed various forms of discrimination commonly reported in the literature.

In light of the need to support new scholarships on caste and systemic inequities facing Dalit scholars, I am thankful to Professors Laurence Simon and Sukhadeo Thorat, Joint Editors-in-Chief of CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion, for inviting Sunaina Arya and I as guest co-editors for this special issue. The idea of promoting new narratives on caste from emerging scholars and leaders came through a multi-year conversation with a group of scholars and thinkers such as

Professor Sukhadeo Thorat, Shailaja Paik, Anupama Rao, Sarita Pariyar, Laurence Simon, Suraj Yengde, Pradip Pariyar, and included scholars from India, Nepal, and the U.S. We agreed that the insidious nature of caste, and the ways that the caste system manifests its impacts beyond South Asia, required new perspectives and global networks to counter its effects.

In 2018 I was Senior Director of the India China Institute at The New School, and in that capacity I was able to persuade my friend and long-term collaborator Toby Volkman at the Henry Luce Foundation to provide some modest support for a week-long workshop with over a dozen young scholars and leaders, as well as an international conference, focused on Dalit issues. That crucial support from the Luce Foundation helped galvanize and mobilize additional support from the India China Institute, Brandeis University, Barnard College, Columbia University, the University of Massachusetts, the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, the Samata Foundation, the University of Cincinnati, the International Ambedkar Mission, the Boston Study Group, and the Julien J. Studley Graduate Programs in International Affairs at The New School. Thanks to this amazing network, we were able to host a week-long workshop in New York City from October 21-24, 2019 titled “*Toward Equal Dignity and Equal Rights: Global Dalit Change-makers.*” The workshop was convened right before the Fifth Annual International Conference on *The Unfinished Legacy of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar*, “Dalits in Global Context: Rethinking Religion and Gender” (October 24-26, 2019), which was also held at The New School.

There was a large outpouring of interest in our call for papers for the conference, and we received over 360 abstracts from across the world. Out of that pool of abstracts, we invited 26 emerging scholars and activists and 12 established scholars and experts from South Asia, Europe, and the United States to join for a one-week intensive workshop prior to the conference. The papers featured in this special issue were initially presented by the authors at the Fifth Annual International Conference on *The Unfinished Legacy of B. R. Ambedkar*. We then invited select emerging scholars to incorporate conference feedback on their papers as well as insights from deliberations at the workshop and conference in New York. Sunaina Arya and I reviewed these draft papers, and with inputs from the larger editorial team of the Journal, they were sent out for additional double-blind peer-reviews. Some of the papers retain much of their original form from when they were presented at the conference, while others were significantly transformed into entirely new works, we believe for the better.

Because of the persistence of caste-based exclusions within academia, the pool of highly educated and promising scholars and activists committed to social justice, especially from the Dalit community, is unfortunately still small. Therefore, the evolving role of the new Global Dalit Change-Makers (GDCM) is exciting and promising. For example, Anurag Bhaskar, who writes regularly in major Indian newspapers and social media, is at the forefront of critically expanding policy debates on the intersection of gender, law, caste, and constitutional change in India. Sunaina Arya, a PhD candidate at Jawaharlal Nehru University, recently co-edited *Dalit Feminist Theory: A Reader* (Routledge, 2019), and is expanding scholarship and debate on feminism in India. Similarly, Sarita Pariyar, who is a writer and

leading Nepali public intellectual, is transforming debates on caste-questions by focusing on challenging narratives of gender, sexuality, and increasing violence against Dalit women in Nepal. Kalyani K. is a Ph.D. scholar from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, who is working on Dalit-Bahujan resistance in North India. She is exploring the cultural space of Dalit-Bahujan and its role in reclaiming the public-sphere. Similar to other marginalized peoples worldwide, Dalits have limited social assets, so this new GDCM global network has the chance to play an important role in helping advance debates on equal dignity, equal rights, and equal opportunities.

For scholars working on race, class, and gender issues in U.S. and European universities, intersectionality is arguably one of the most important theoretical frame for understanding the complex interplay of social identities and power relations. Scholars working on caste questions, especially from Dalit communities, are adding another perspective to intersectional studies with their inclusion of a caste-based analysis. This is another important lens to expand our understanding of intersectionality and diverse social identities, identities which are highly fluid and contested in South Asia. As we look towards a post Covid-19 pandemic world, questions about caste need to be re-examined and reframed, and the scholars featured in this special issue provide us valuable insights into how this can be done.

I am grateful to many, especially Kalyani Kalyani, Sarita Pariyar, Sunaina Arya, and Anurag Bhaskar for helping raise many important questions. For example, we discussed: how might we make caste a fundamental category of analysis for understanding and engaging with aspects of inequities that are central to feminism, gender, religion, and class? How should scholars grapple with questions surrounding agency, politics, and power among Dalits and other marginalized peoples? As I reflect on the process and final outcomes of this special issue, many questions emerged about how we might better encourage and support critical engagement with caste questions. How can we support new critical narratives on caste from multidisciplinary perspectives? How can we rethink the practices of who produces and controls knowledge about caste? How can we foster deeper and more robust intellectual debates and research through new networks such as the Global Dalit Change-Makers?