

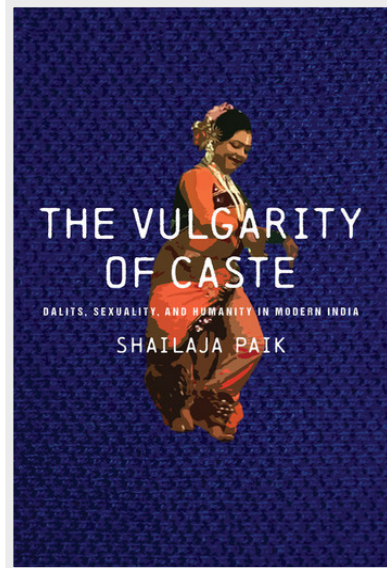
## ‘The Vulgarities of Caste: Dalits, Sexuality, and Humanity in Modern India’

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*“For ours is a battle not for wealth or for power. It is a battle for freedom.  
It is a battle for the reclamation of the human personality”.*

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, All-India Depressed Classes Conference, 1942

In his pursuit of social equality and Dalit liberation, the foremost intellectual of modern India, Dr. Ambedkar rejected endogamy, viewing it as the cornerstone of caste, and converted to Buddhism to affirm a shared humanity (*manuski*) and dignity for the untouchables. Engaging with Ambedkar’s ideas, renowned historian Shailaja Paik provides a deep and nuanced analysis of the intersections between caste, gender, and sexuality in her latest book *The Vulgarities of Caste: Dalits, Sexuality, and Humanity in Modern India*. Through rigorous historical research and a Dalit womanist-humanist lens, Paik critically engages with Ambedkar’s notion of *manuski* and examines how Dalit women are oppressed by the caste system that controls their bodies and stigmatizes their sexuality. Divided into three parts and six chapters, the volume not only critiques traditional Indian feminist discourses but also investigates the entrenched hierarchies that perpetuate the marginalization of Dalit women in Indian society.

The author examines and questions the historical foundations of caste-based sexual oppression faced by Dalit women, deeply rooted in the social fabric of post-colonial India. Focusing on the regional context of Maharashtra state, the author

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offers a critical analysis of the *Marathi* public sphere and the pride associated with the *Marathi* language and masculinity. Paik reinterprets modern Western concepts such as humanity, authenticity, and vulgarity, while introducing their vernacular counterparts: *manuski*, *asli* and *ashlil*. These terms capture the daily struggles of caste and gender oppression, while asserting the universal right to full human recognition.

Paik opens her analysis by focusing on *Tamasha*, a popular folk performance tradition in Maharashtra that emerged from the local Maharashtrian entertainment traditions: *Lavani* and *Pavada* which are central to the local pride, and the performance entails virile and patriotic *Marathi Manus* identity and creates a common cultural memory and an illusion of unity (p. 232). *Tamasha*, as the author defines it is “a social, political and ideological sexual-caste game born precisely from the interplay of the relationship of power and as such it produced and reproduced the relationship of caste...” (p. 48). *Tamasha* has several colloquial meanings: play, fun, humor, tantrum, nonsense, commotion, a show, spectacle, and a sort of theatrical entertainment. For centuries, Dalit women who performed *Tamasha* were denied basic dignity and humanity, ostracized from both Dalit and caste communities as deviant and vulgar. Since the medieval period, it has been a form of entertainment that elicits pleasure and *masti* (*a gamut of affect unleashing unruly masculine sexual energy*). Despite the ban by the colonial state in the 1940s, *Tamasha* performances continue in rural and urban Maharashtra. These performers, predominantly from lower castes, are stripped of their artistic identity and reduced to objects of sexual desire solely because of their caste status. The *Tamasha* stage serves as a site of compounded violence, where Dalit women face ongoing sexual exploitation, and their performances are viewed through a lens of vulgarity, reinforcing their dehumanization. Their performances, often bawdy and overtly sensual, offer them no respect or safety, leaving them vulnerable to sexual assault. Dalit women were coerced to provide sexual service to all men, especially the dominant caste-men. Despite being perceived as sex workers—an identity they neither choose nor inhabit—they are left with no alternative but to continue performing, as the caste system’s discrimination locks them out of other opportunities.

The ethnographic volume documents the everyday life of these women and shares various experiences of Dalit performers like Pavalabai Hivargaonkar, whose songs were appropriated by her Brahmin lover, Patthe Bapura. It illustrates how caste and gender hierarchies pervade even intimate relationships where the privileged Brahmin possess the “power of construction, destruction and reconstruction” (p. 74). Though both are in the same profession, Dalit women face heightened contempt and marginalization and are stigmatized as ‘vulgar’ and ‘promiscuous’, labels rarely applied to their upper-caste counterparts. This hypocrisy reveals the selective moralism embedded within caste structures. Brahmin men engaged in the same profession escape such denigration, further underscoring how caste and gender inequalities are intertwined to protect dominant caste privilege and control. The chapter also highlights how economic precarity intensifies the vulnerability of Dalit women.

## **Intersectionality: The Triple Oppression of Dalit Women**

Mainstream feminist discourse in India has largely overlooked the caste-based oppression experienced by Dalit women. As Paik pointed out in her earlier studies, this oversight in feminist historiography has strategically neglected the existence of “caste communities” and masked the way how class, gender, and sexuality intersect with caste-based oppression, thus constructing a monolithic image of the “Indian woman” (2018, p. 2). Paik emphasizes the intersectional oppression Dalit women face, being marginalized by their caste, gender, and class. This triple oppression places them at the periphery of both feminist and Dalit movements. Mainstream feminist movements often neglect caste issues, while Dalit movements overlook gender inequality, leaving Dalit women to battle on multiple fronts. Paik critiques both movements for their failure to address the unique struggles of Dalit women, arguing that their experiences offer a more complete understanding of caste and gender oppression. This intersectionality of sex, gender, and caste forms what Paik terms the “sex-gender-caste” complex, a framework that highlights how caste hierarchies intersect with gender and sexuality to maintain power structures, a social mechanism that degrades dancers, singers, and *Tamasha* performers, branding them as prostitutes and vulgar simply due to their caste. This complex goes beyond social exclusion, incorporating sexual violence and economic control as tools to reinforce caste purity even in twenty-first century India.

The author masterfully captures the intersectionality of experiences of *Tamasha* artists, offering the narrative of Mangalatai Bansode, a renowned *Tamasha* performer. Bansode describes a deeply traumatic experience at the age of 16 when she was coerced by her village to dance in an ox cart as part of a local festival. Crowded alongside other women, she was paraded through the village, surrounded by a raucous mob of men who jeered, danced, and attempted to grope her, pulling at her saree. The terror of this experience, especially for someone so young, is intense, yet refusing to comply would have invited violence. This coercion, in the author’s words “rendered her both object of predatory desire and object of vilification as the embodiment of vulgarity” (p. 48). Bansode’s career, while marred by public humiliation and sexual violence, also served as a vehicle for economic survival and resistance, as she used her earnings to uplift her family. This interplay of exploitation and resilience lies at the heart of Paik’s powerful critique, as she exposes the systemic violence while also honoring the agency that some Dalit women assert in the face of it. *Tamasha* in the garb of nonsense and play became “performative of the paradoxical conditions of Dalit” (p. 13). For *Tamasha* performers, the art form is more than entertainment; it represents employment, social mobility, and caste-based rights. Yet, they are stigmatized for participating in the very performances that provide these opportunities.

## **Fear of Vulgarity (*ashlii*) and Authenticity (*asli*)**

Paik further delves into the idea of ‘vulgarity’, arguing that dominant castes maintain their power by labeling Dalit women’s performances as vulgar. *Tamasha*’s association

with vulgarity traps performers in a cycle where their livelihoods depend on performing for male audiences while being socially ostracized for it. Paik critiques the lack of attention to the disempowerment and caste-based violence these performers endure, arguing that scholars and policymakers have largely ignored their plight.

Paik underscores the limitations of existing scholarship in recognizing how culture, particularly *Tamasha*, became a pivotal arena in shaping Marathi identity within the newly formed state of Maharashtra (p. 234). The author argues that the new *Marathi manus* was created by the caste and cultural vigilantes who petitioned a ban on vulgar writings, art and film, and there was a visceral dislike for kissing on screen (p. 235). Over time, the illusion of *ashlil* and *asli* has evolved into a form of cultural politics, and *Tamasha* is now recognized as (*Loknatya*) people's theater (p. 287). Despite these changes, *Tamasha* still perpetuates patriarchy and the control of women in twenty-first-century globalized India, highlighting the ongoing influence of caste and gender dynamics.

*The Vulgarity of Caste* is a transformative work that illuminates the intricate and often contradictory lives of Dalit women in India. Paik's methodological brilliance, combining archival research with oral histories, marks a major scholarly contribution to Dalit and gender studies. As the normative politics of gender, caste, and sexuality continue to reshape Dalit identity, agency, and citizenship in modern India, this volume provides a profound critique of these dynamics. It delves into the political economy of caste, deviant sexuality, the pedagogy of *Tamasha*, and its generational capital, inviting scholars across diverse fields such as Ambedkar studies, caste studies, gender and sexuality, colonialism, folk music, performance, and art, to engage with its rich insights. While every state in India boasts its traditional dance and musical forms, such as *Swang* in Haryana, *Ghoomar* in Rajasthan, *Garba* in Gujarat, and *Bhangra* in Punjab, there remains a glaring absence of literature that explores the intersection of caste and gender within these cultural performances. Paik's work calls attention to this gap, urging a re-examination of the structures and violence of caste that have long shaped these performances.

## Reference

Paik, Shailaja (2018). The Rise of New Dalit Women in Indian Historiography, *History Compass*, 10 <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12491>