

## “I Can’t Breathe”: Perspectives on Emancipation from Caste

Laurence Simon

Yesterday, April 20, 2021, a jury in Minnesota convicted the former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin of murdering George Floyd, a Black American. Mr. Chauvin, who is white, had knelt on Mr. Floyd’s neck for more than nine minutes despite Mr. Floyd’s desperate appeals that “I can’t breathe.” Those words reignited a powerful social movement for racial justice in America and were echoed around the world by communities disadvantaged by their histories of persecution fed by illusions of superiority.

In the United States, racial inequality causes major disparities between African Americans and people of white ethnicities. These deprivations, despite progress, are seen today in economic assets, educational attainment, rates of incarceration, and health outcomes as in Covid-19. Yet Covid-19 did not create health disparities and differences in life expectancy. Those disparities are directly the result of racism.

Racism is declared to be a public health crisis wherein Black lives are more prone to life-limiting illness and premature death including police killings in which Black males are 2.5 times more likely to be killed by police.<sup>1</sup> “This problem is only exacerbated if we look at the global scale. White supremacy is the idea that there is a hierarchy inherent to the chain of human beings, with those who are white at the top and Black people at the bottom.”<sup>2</sup>

J-CASTE agrees, though we also see these deep divisions and resentments within societies of color. All forms of graded hierarchies continue to degrade the lives and well-being of those whose births deprive them of their full potential and human rights whether by race or gender, indigeneity, language, or culture. Like white privilege, there is caste privilege in high Brahmanical societies, and like white supremacy, caste supremacy is responsible when Dalits choose suicide over humiliation at universities or when high caste men gang rape Dalit girls in rural villages.

<sup>1</sup>**Risk of being killed by police use of force in the United States by age, race–ethnicity, and sex** Frank Edwards, Hedwig Lee, Michael Esposito Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences Aug 2019, 116 (34) 16793-16798; DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1821204116

<sup>2</sup>**Racism is the public health crisis.** Andrews, Kehinde. The Lancet, Volume 397, Issue 10282, April 10, 2021, 1342-1343

With an Editorial Advisory Board of thirty leading scholars in ten countries, and along with our Joint Editor-in-Chief Professor Emeritus Sukhadeo Thorat, J-CASTE continues its mission to advance scholarship in caste studies. This issue explores a wide range of papers written by specialists and introduces to the J-CASTE audience the two winners of the Bluestone Rising Scholar Medals and three chosen for ‘Honorable Mention’ for 2021.

**Rajesh Sampath’s article *A Commentary on Ambedkar’s Posthumously Published Philosophy of Hinduism - Part II*** continues his multi-part analysis of one of B.R. Ambedkar’s core texts. In part I Sampath walked the path Ambedkar took to arrive at his criteria for “justice” and “utility” which Sampath sees as shaping the modern conception of religion. In part II Sampath now dives further into Ambedkar’s concern that the dominant religious orientation of Indian society, Sampath says, “forecloses the possibility of individual equality, freedom, and dignity.” This installment prepares us for part III of his commentary which Sampath tells us “will examine Ambedkar’s actual engagement with the classics of Hinduism’s philosophy and thought in general. Ultimately, Ambedkar is undeterred in his original critique of the social and moral failures of the caste system, thereby intimating ambitious possibilities for its eventual eradication.”

**Ibrahim Sundiata’s *Caste, The Origins of Our Discontents: A Historical Reflection on Two Cultures*** contributes a critical analysis of Isabel Wilkerson’s book which attempts to compare the Indian caste system to the American idea of race. Given the attention her book has received, this is the second article J-CASTE has published on her book (see Susan Holcombe’s review archived in Vol. 1, No. 2 October 2020). Sundiata, as an Africanist and African Americanist historian, offers a lesson to the journalist by pointing to Gramsci’s “hegemonic ideology” and the nature of subalternity. “To think that antebellum slaves” Sundiata writes, “born on large plantations in the Deepest South, far from the nearest town, were any freer from hierarchical thinking than Dalits is a risky surmise.” From there, Sundiata launches into a *tour de force* that anchors the American and Indian trajectories for equality around the basic concepts of race and caste. “There is no American demand for the ‘abolition of race,’” he says, “equal to Ambedkar’s call for ‘the annihilation of caste.’”

**Snehashish Das’ *Fracturing the Historical Continuity on Truth: Jotiba Phule in the Quest for Personhood of Shudras*** follows nicely from Sundiata’s article. Das explores Phule’s quest for finding the essence/personhood of the *Shudra*. But the personhood of this precarious subject is never seen in history as a complete personhood. Das presents Phule’s attempts, he tells us, “to unveil the path towards achieving complete personhood which is embedded in reaffirming the lost or concealed truth – by discontinuing the historical flow of the social structure of caste and establishing a new subject rising out of crisis in social structure in history.”

**S. Gunasekaran’s *Documenting a Caste: The Chakkiliyars in Colonial and Missionary Documents in India*** adds to our knowledge of a group that had been described as untouchable within the untouchable castes. Gunasekaran tells us that the people of the Chakkiliyar community prefer to be called as *Arunthathiyar* – a recent construction attempting to depart from the stereotypically constructed characteristics associated with their caste. “While ‘chakkili’ signified the people who eat the flesh of dead cattle and engage in the so-called impure jobs, Arunthathiyar, derived from the name of the morning star, meant purity, pristine, and a revolutionary rising.” Even in

Sri Lanka where Chakkiliyars migrated to work in colonial era tea plantations, the word 'chakkili' still resounds as a derogatory Sinhala term. Gunasekaran's careful and detailed tracing of the group's identity through history richly adds to our understanding of the social-trap out of which Chakkiliyars continue to struggle.

**Shiv Shankar and Kanthi Swaroop's *Manual Scavenging in India: The Banality of an Everyday Crime*** documents the causes and conditions of the estimated 1.2 million people whose traditional occupation even today forces them into daily contact with raw excreta. Despite the Act of 2013 that prohibits such employment, the authors decry the criminal damage done to those still performing this inherited occupation decided at birth by caste.

Two articles analyze the media's role in the perpetuation of stereotypes about Dalits.

**Devanshu Sajlan's *Hate Speech against Dalits on Social Media: Would a Penny Sparrow be Prosecuted in India for Online Hate Speech?*** makes a powerful argument for strengthening Indian legal remedies and oversight for hate speech too often seen on social media. The author brings his legal experience as a civil judge to the analysis of this conundrum balancing free-speech standards against the social good, protecting the dignity of depressed classes.

**Pranjali Kureel's *Indian Media and Caste: of Politics, Portrayals and Beyond*** contends that the hegemony over the Indian media industry by dominant castes has powerfully inflicted "epistemic violence over the oppressed castes as it helps dominant discourses to prevail and shapes popular perceptions and culture." The article reviews journalism, cinema and television and concludes that the discourse bars an unbiased representation of Dalit women.

And in our Forum section **Deepak Kumar's *Journey with Rural Identity and Linguicism*** presents his own experience in doctoral studies in one of India's most prestigious universities. He recounts the challenges of an environment "overwhelmingly dominated by the upper caste, class, and English-speaking people." Kumar weaves into his analysis his own field research at his university involving students from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes who registered such feelings as inferiority, humiliation and even suicide ideation.

Five additional articles showcase the results of J-CASTE'S 2021 **Bluestone Rising Scholar competition**. The purpose of the competition is to encourage early career scholars around the world to pursue research into caste and other social exclusions. J-CASTE received numerous outstanding submissions from South Asia, Europe, and North America. Our jury, consisting of leading academics from South Asia, the UK, and the USA, deliberated together over a period of several weeks and in the end, awarded Bluestone Rising Scholar Medals to two authors and Honorable Mention to three others – all outstanding young scholars. The Bluestone Medal winners are:

**Anurag Bhaskar** for his paper '*Ambedkar's Constitution': A Radical Phenomenon in Anti-Caste Discourse?* Mr. Bhaskar is currently Assistant Professor at Jindal Global Law School, Sonapat, Haryana, India.

**Indulata Prasad** for her paper *Caste-ing Space: Mapping the Dynamics of Untouchability in Rural Bihar, India* Dr. Prasad is currently Assistant Professor, Women and Gender Studies, School of Social Transformation, Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, USA.

Both Bluestone Rising Scholars will participate in the Award Ceremony at Brandeis University at such time that the pandemic recedes, and we can safely gather.

In addition, three papers were awarded Honorable Mention. These are:

**Ankit Kawade's *Clearing of the Ground: Ambedkar's Method of Reading***  
Mr. Kawade is an M.Phil. candidate, Centre for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India.

**Subro Saha's *Caste, Reading-habits and the Incomplete Project of Indian Democracy***  
Mr. Saha is a Ph.D. Fellow (pursuing), Institute for Cultural Inquiry, Utrecht University, Netherlands.

**Meena Sawariya's *Caste and Counselling Psychology in India: Dalit Perspectives in Theory and Practice***  
Ms. Sawariya is pursuing her Ph.D. in Psychology, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University, Delhi, India.

As always, Professor Thorat and I are eager for our readers to send in comments and critiques of J-CASTE articles which spur dialogue and debate, and which might be shared publicly in a future issue. Please send them through Afia Adaboh, Senior Editorial Assistant at [jcastemanager@brandeis.edu](mailto:jcastemanager@brandeis.edu).

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Joint Editor-in-Chief