

Freedom From Caste: New Beginnings in Transdisciplinary Scholarship

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The ten papers included in this special issue of *J-Caste* on ‘Freedom From Caste: Anti-Caste Thought, Politics and Culture’ are a culmination of a long process of selection. We received fifty-five abstracts to a call for papers issued in February 2021. We had invited academic papers focusing on the anti-caste thought of important theorists, thinkers and movements in South Asia. In recent scholarship, new critical works have engaged extensively with the writings of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), the most celebrated of anti-caste theorists but to a lesser extent with Periyar E.V. Ramasamy (1879–1973), the iconoclastic anti-caste leader from the state of Tamil Nadu and a central figure in Dravidian politics. Their precursor, Mahatma Jotirao Phule (1827–1890), one of the most prominent anti-caste leaders in the colonial period and founder of Satyashodak Samaj in the state of Maharashtra in India, along with his wife Savitribai Phule, has also increasingly become the subject of academic study. Our aim was to invite new scholarship bringing their thought into conversation with each other, and beyond, to develop a deeper understanding of radical humanism embedded in anti-caste thinking and thus to understand the meaning of freedom from caste in its fullest sense.

We were particularly interested in an exploration of lesser-known anti-caste thinkers especially from the ‘regions’, and marginalized communities in South Asia. Our leading questions were: How have anti-caste themes emerged in cinema, literature, and poetry, and how does anti-caste thought inform social and political movements and vice-versa? How have left, feminist and ecological movements dealt with caste? We

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sought critiques of the impact of religion on anti-caste discourse, its possibilities and limitations, including, but not limited to, discussions on conversions, Hindu reform movements, the neo-Buddhist movement, modern Sikhi, Islam and the Pasmada question, and the work of Christian missionaries. Contributors were encouraged to offer analyses of anti-caste thought from a range of perspectives of cultural theory, sociology, linguistics, history, political theory, area studies, or philosophy.

Following the life-lessons of iconic anti-caste thinkers, we hold that anti-caste thought or thought of how to end caste is as much a matter of practice, of changing the way we do things, as it is about theorising. In this special issue we were seeking linkages between thoughts encapsulated in texts and the manner in which these thoughts of bringing about the end of caste get enacted in practice.

We must also state why it is important now to pay attention to the thought of these people. There are two main reasons. Firstly, it is very easy to celebrate these thinkers as mere icons—indeed, various political formations seek to appropriate them—but we want to locate the importance of these thinkers in the social and historical context from which their thought arose. These people were exceptionally alive to the demands of their times and faced life-long struggles. Secondly, there is a danger of misappropriation and celebration coming from perspectives that may be fundamentally contrary to the core of these thinkers' works: for instance, it is not uncommon to witness right wing politicians, with antithetical views to the anti-caste thought of Ambedkar, trying to appropriate him. as Anand Teltumbde warned of the tactics of the Hindu Right two decades ago: 'Once it realised the difficulty in directly opposing Dr. Ambedkar, it adopted its proven strategy of cooptation' (Teltumbde, 2003, p.78). We have to remind ourselves of the thinking which grounds the actions, policies and principles of anti-casteism to resist the seduction of this insidious appropriation.

An ongoing further concern is one of positionality: always there in the background is the question of the standpoint of the political agent. A certain kind of identity politics has led sometimes to the odd conundrum that one wants to write about anti-casteism but a question mark is raised about one's privileged positionality and right to be speaking. We take caste as a problem which everyone has to deal with. We do not think that this responsibility is only of those who by birth status are made direct victims of casteism. Being born in a privileged background enjoins specific responsibilities towards dismantling caste: it's not an expression of privilege to fight against caste, it is a categorical duty (Jaoul and Dhanda, 2021).

The papers that finally made it to publication following a rigorous process of blind review offer a rich variety of perspectives, covering a range of themes, and making bold, thought-provoking and theoretically rich analyses of anti-caste thought. Prior to submissions to *J-Caste* for blind-review, some of the contributors made paper presentations in a 2-day conference on 'Anti-Caste Thought: Theory, Politics and Culture' convened by the guest editors at the University of Wolverhampton on 29–30 October 2021, (a full recording of the conference proceedings in nine videos

is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLNjCggSu2jhnumvtqYf-t-Zd9F1tq0u1P>). The conference was a part of the project *Freedom from Caste: The Political Thought of Periyar E.V. Ramasamy in a Global Context*, funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 895514. Here contributors had the benefit of expert comments from the chairs of panels. To the conference contributors who could not be included in our special issue, we suggest making submission to future issues of *J-Caste*.

In naming 'Anti-Caste Thought' as the subject of our conference we took something important for granted: that anti-caste thought was a distinct body of knowledge worth examining intellectually. For too long we have been held back by recurrent discussions about the meaning of the 'term' caste, and its usefulness in capturing group identifications that are evidently at work on many levels in the lives of South Asians. In the UK, we have faced trenchant opposition to including caste within the scope of race as a protected characteristic in the Equality Act 2010. In public debates on this topic, we are accused of colonial consciousness, of self-hatred, and worse, of instigating hatred against Hindus, just because we raise the caste question. The language of anti-colonialism has also been weaponised to shield the interests of a misplaced nativism (Dhanda 2015).

By foregrounding anti-caste thought, we wanted to offer a secure platform for discussion amongst those who are willing to engage in serious reflection about the limits and possibilities of anti-caste thought. We wanted critical readings of the great and the good—our friends, our own heroes and heroines, our idols—because we know that to offer such readings we need to read diligently and with attachment.

The quest for freedom from caste is not new. Several religious movements in South Asia have envisioned a society without casteism, but their method of challenging caste was mainly in the domain of the spiritual. It was with the onset of colonial modernity that caste began to be seen as a secular problem and several movements and leaders arose to challenge it. They imagined freedom from caste not just as an escape from spiritual restrictions and religiously sanctioned hierarchy, but as a way of articulating new forms of social life unshackled from the 'graded inequality' of caste, through novel means of political consolidation and mobilization.

The path to freedom from caste was conceptualised differently by iconic anti-caste thinkers. For Phule, a united front of the oppressed castes, reclaiming their histories, welcoming modern education and opposing upper-caste domination was a step towards freedom from caste. For Periyar, the founder of the Self-Respect movement, a rationalist ought to have no attachment to nation, state, god, religion or language, and in a humanism guided by rationalism, he found the possibility of freedom from caste. Babasaheb Ambedkar devised robust civil and political rights for the protection of the caste-oppressed, enshrined in the Constitution of independent India, and sought freedom from caste in nothing short of the 'annihilation' of caste, which he personally espoused through righteous living by the twenty-two vows of his Navayana Buddhism.

These three anti-caste thinkers are known well in their regions and beyond. Phule is seen as an important Dalit-Bahujan thinker in India (Omvedt, 2008). With the rise of global Dalit activism in the 21st Century and a corresponding academic interest in Dalit politics, history and culture, scholarship on Ambedkar's extensive writings has reached new heights (Omvedt, 1994; Jaffrelot, 2005; Yengde and Teltumbde, 2018). A five-volume collection of essays *B.R. Ambedkar: The Quest for Justice (5 Vols., OUP, 2021)* was featured in a book panel we hosted with the editor Aakash Singh Rathore, in discussion with Kancha Ilaiah, Kanchana Mahadevan and Mathew Baxter at the Wolverhampton October conference. While Periyar is a household name in Tamil Nadu and is routinely commemorated by Dravidian and Dalit parties, the complex nature of his thoughts has only just begun to reach a wider audience. Recent scholarship (Anandhi et al., 2020; Baxter, 2019; Kalaiyarasan and Vijayabaskar, 2021; Manoharan, 2020, 2022; Venkatachalapathy, 2017) has pushed the boundaries of existing work on Periyar and has sought to place him in global conversations on identity, political economy, secularism, socialism and social justice. This special issue on 'Freedom from Caste' contributes to this growing literature.

This special issue is divided into three sections—anti-caste thought, politics and culture. In addition to the selected papers for these three sections, an independent article on caste-based discrimination among the Nepali diaspora in the San Francisco Bay Area, USA by Prem Pariyar, Bikash Gupta and Ruvani W. Fonseka is included in the Policy Arena regular feature. This article adds to the growing literature on the global reach of caste beyond South Asia. The UK Equality and Human Rights Commission project *Caste in Britain (2013–2014)* led by Dhanda included examples of caste discrimination experienced by Nepali migrants to Britain. This article shares findings from a USA focussed study of twenty-seven Dalit migrants from the hill regions of Nepal. Many of them have faced caste discrimination in housing, microaggressions in interpersonal relations, and workplace caste prejudice, severe enough to affect their mental health. The absence of explicit policies covering caste discrimination leaves them insecure, pushing them at times to hide their Dalit identity rather than taking recourse to anti-discrimination laws. Evidence of caste discrimination globally makes it ever more pertinent to find means of challenging the malady of caste by examining the strength of anti-caste thought, and its materialisation in politics and culture. Finally, this issue includes two book reviews: Helen Chukka reviews Sunder John Boopalan's *Memory, Grief and Agency: A Political Theological Account of Wrongs and Rites* and Gaurav J. Pathania reviews Chinnaiah Jangam's *Dalits and the Making of Modern India*.

The first section of papers dwells on anti-caste thought, featuring lesser-known thinkers from West Bengal and Tamil Nadu, and a paper that critiques the intersectional feminist discourse in India. Anti-caste thought at the turn of the twentieth century was immersed in the complex parameters of the emerging nationalist imagination. The figures who gained prominence were at the forefront of negotiations with the outgoing British colonial government. Thus, Ambedkar's arguments with Gandhi, are

well known by now (Dhanda, 2020; Kumar, 2015; Omvedt, 1994; Rathore, 2017) but there were others too who were quietly chipping away at the edifice of caste built over millennia, as the papers included here demonstrate.

Mahitosh Mandal's 'Dalit Resistance during the Bengal Renaissance: Five Anti-Caste Thinkers from Colonial Bengal, India' debunks the idea that Bengal is casteless. He argues that the existence of multiple anti-caste social/political organizations in Bengal for over a century, the proliferation of Bengali Dalit literature in the past few decades, and the eclectic documentation of Dalit atrocities in mainstream newspapers, all demonstrate that Bengal as a casteless land is a myth. Mandal picks five Dalit intellectuals from three Dalit communities (there are sixty in all in Bengal), and challenging nationalist, Marxist and subaltern historiographies from the state, he foregrounds the contributions of these thinkers, highlighting how they were critical of caste supremacy and the Swadeshi movement. The paper theorizes the indigenous and complex anti-caste intellectual tradition of Bengal, excluded from the intellectual history of Bengal. It argues that Bengal Renaissance was fundamentally an upper-caste Hindu renaissance that did not (effectively) address the issue of caste subalternity. Ignoring the parallel Dalit renaissance, Mandal argues, is 'epistemic violence'.

Shrinidhi Narasimhan's 'Between the Global and Regional: Asia in the Tamil Buddhist Imagination' looks at the Tamil Dalit-Buddhist thinker Iyothee Thass' Sakya Buddhist Society and explores how this organization, founded in 1898, imagined the Tamil Dalits as indigenous Buddhists and examines its intersection with other Asian Buddhist revivalist movements of the day. Using the category of 'pararegional', Narasimhan engages with how Thass and his Sakya Buddhism dealt with transregional developments in Buddhism, even while they remained grounded in regional intellectual and socio-cultural traditions. Thass, she claims, aimed to locate the Tamil Dalits in a 'global community of faith'. Her paper reflects on how Thass and the movement he led not only reinterpreted the past but also reimagined place, and thus she brings critical geography into conversation with historical analysis to rethink the spatial and temporal contours of late nineteenth and early twentieth century anticaste movements.

Santvana Kumar and Ekata Bakshi in their paper 'The Dominant Post-constitutional Indian Feminist Discourse: A Critique of its Intersectional Reading of Caste and Gender' highlight the limitations of 'mainstream' Indian feminisms, including their intersectional variants, in their approach to caste and gender. The authors argue that, despite its utility in highlighting the specificities of caste and the oppression of Dalits in discussions on gender, intersectionality nevertheless homogenizes the category of the 'Dalit woman', and thus, seek to destabilize these readings. Kumar and Bakshi reflect on post-Partition experiences of rehabilitation in West Bengal and caste violence in Uttar Pradesh to argue that Dalit women and upper-caste women need to be read as relational categories, and in this process, try to complicate the understanding of intersectional feminism.

The second section looks at anti-caste politics, with papers on the political movement of the Ezhava community in Kerala, Periyar's approach to the politics of region, and how institutional Dravidian politics approached the issues of representation and redistribution. The 'region' has been seen in relation to the 'centre/nation' often in terms of linguistic nationalism. Ideas of regionalism significantly influence political discourse in not just the South Indian states, but also in Maharashtra, Punjab, West Bengal and the North-Eastern states. The politics of both 'region' and 'nation' is affected by, and in turn shapes, the politics of caste. In his now classic work *Nationalism Without a Nation in India*, Aloysius argues that the elites in India used an anti-colonial cultural nationalism to enable themselves to take over the modern nation-state, while also defining the nation in terms of archaic traditions. On the other hand, political nationalism was articulated by leaders from the 'region' like Ayyankali, Phule, Periyar and Mangoo Ram, as a pluralist concept to defend the interests of the diverse masses (Aloysius, 1997, pp. 148–149). The articles in the section contribute to the debates on 'region' and 'nation', by critically foregrounding the issues of caste and social justice.

Anish KK in his paper 'Conceptions of Community, Nation and Politics: The Ezhavas of South Malabar, India and their Quest for Equality' draws attention to the political movement of a populous subaltern caste in Kerala, the Ezhavas. Drawing attention to how the Ezhava movement was critical of the Congress-led Indian anti-colonial movement, Anish notes how the formation of the Ezhava political identity contended with the various broad political currents of the time. Anish makes a case for considering the Ezhava assertion in the colonial period as an 'autonomous anti-caste movement' and notes how they broadened the public sphere by articulating an anti-caste ideology and challenging the dominance of the Brahmins through counter-narratives.

Ganeshwar's paper 'Periyar's Spatial Thought: Region as Non-Brahmin Discursive Space' foregrounds Periyar's 'politics of space' as a radical attempt to subvert the cultural logic of hegemonic Indian nationalism which, Ganeshwar argues through his reading of Periyar, sustained caste privileges. Engaging with the theoretical framework of Henri Lefebvre, Ganeshwar claims that to Periyar, the region was a 'counter-discursive space' that would facilitate the movement of non-Brahmin politics from rarity to materiality, further asserting that Periyar's movement popularized the Tamil region as a force with a distinct set of egalitarian values, bringing about an amalgamation of regional and non-brahmin consciousness not with a nostalgia for cultural pasts, but by prioritizing an ethic of self-respect.

Vignesh Karthik KR and Vishal Vasanthakumar in 'Caste, then Class: Redistribution and Representation in the Dravidian Model' build on Kalaiyaran and Vijayabaskar's work *The Dravidian Model* (2021) to claim that in the political programme of the Dravidian parties that were at the helm of the state in Tamil Nadu since 1967, social justice was given as much priority as economic development. The authors claim what underpins this approach is the impact of Periyar's thought,

especially his position that caste inequalities must first be addressed before the question of class could be. In this, the authors highlight the strong differences which Periyar had with communists in Tamil Nadu. They further argue that the approach of Periyar and his followers in the Dravidar Kazhagam and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam led to some of the ‘strongest affirmative action reforms seen in India’, noting how different policies in the state led to a largely inclusive development.

The last section deals with cultural interventions and their significance to conversations on caste. This section features papers on a Bengali novel about a Dalit leader from that state, the autobiography of a Tamil Dalit leader, and two articles on recent critically acclaimed anti-caste Tamil films. As far as Tamil cinema is concerned, scholars have drawn attention to how attacks on superstition and caste, and a promotion of social harmony have been hallmarks of films influenced by the Dravidian Movement (Hardgrave Jr, 1973; Sivathambi, 1981). Others like Pandian (1996) have noted how the medium of Tamil cinema itself challenged elite (caste) culture and opened up possibilities for blurring the lines between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture. Much has been written on the interconnections of cinema and politics, notably, how this has been influenced by and in turn influences, the Tamil social landscape (Jacob, 2009; Prasad, 2014; Pillai, 2015). More recent scholarship, such as the essays in the volume *Tamil Cinema in the Twenty-First Century* (Velayutham and Devadas, 2020), critically look at caste and anti-caste themes in contemporary Tamil films. In the ‘Dravidian cinema’ of the 1950s and early 60s, addressing casteism and promoting an anti-caste message were mandatory. The more explicitly anti-caste films in the twenty-first century were based on this foundation, and new generation filmmakers like Pa. Ranjith often refer to films like *Parasakthi* (1952), directed by Krishnan-Panju and written by M. Karunanidhi, as inspirations. Arul Valan contributes to these debates through his reading of *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018). However, not much scholarly attention has been paid to independent Tamil cinema and especially to the work of women directors. Eswaran remedies this neglect in his paper on Leena Manimekalai’s *Maadathy* (2019).

Suhasini Roy’s ‘Barishaler Jogen Mandal: Construal of the Undisputed Dalit Leader of Undivided Bengal Through a Twenty-first Century Bengali Novel’ critically looks at Debes Ray’s 2010 Bengali novel *Barishaler Jogen Mandal*. The novel is based on the life of Jogendranath Mandal, an important leader of the Namasudra Dalit community, and revisits the socio-political arena of undivided Bengal. Roy undertakes a Bakhtinian reading of the novel, and notes how it navigates into history, pushing the disciplinary boundaries of reading and interpreting history. She explains how Mandal’s politico-ideological agenda of establishing separate/distinct political identity for the Dalits and in Bengal’s context finding solidarity with their Muslim counterparts in the agrarian population was lost in the post-War years and abandoned by the new nations since 1947. As a historical novel grounded in a Dalit lifeworld, Roy claims that the novelization of the life of Mandal is in itself an act of resistance, given its account

of the plurality of the nation and the centering of Dalit self-declaration and sudra autonomy as 'sudratva'.

Malarvizhi Jayanth in 'Struggling for Freedom from Caste in Colonial India: The Story of Rettaimalai Srinivasan' brings attention to a Tamil Dalit leader Rettamalai Srinivasan's work. Jayanth states that Srinivasan's autobiography, written in 1938, was the 'oldest known Dalit autobiography' and reads this work along with his other writings to emphasize Srinivasan's important contributions to the anti-caste discourse. Srinivasan was Ambedkar's contemporary and attended the Round Table Conference in 1930–31 along with him, and was involved in struggles in the Madras Presidency in the colonial period to improve Dalit political representation. To Srinivasan, representation of Dalits and leadership of their own communities was crucial to challenge the social hurdles they faced. Through a critical reading of his life history, Jayanth shows how categories like 'Dravidian' and 'Pariah' were re-signified by Srinivasan and how they continue to influence contemporary cultural and political ideas.

Swarnavel Eswaran's paper '*Maadathy*—An Unfairytale: Caste, Space, and Gaze' undertakes a Lacanian reading of the film *Maadathy* (2019) directed by independent Tamil filmmaker Leena Manimekalai. Eswaran uses the Lacanian concept of 'gaze' and the Lefebvrian concept of 'space' to understand the creation of mythical space in the film and its representation of caste and gender issues. *Maadathy* is based in South Tamil Nadu and revolves around a girl from the Puthirai Vannar Dalit community. The Puthirai Vannars are among the most oppressed Dalit castes in the state, an 'unseeable' caste, whose issues are often not addressed by mainstream Dalit formations. The film provides an insight into their world, and Eswaran's paper highlights the different axes through which Manimekalai brings their lives to the fore.

Antony Arul Valan's '*Pariyerum Perumal* and a Periyarite Note on Political Engagement' undertakes a psychoanalytic reading, relying on the work of D.W. Winnicott, of Tamil filmmaker Mari Selvaraj's *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018). This film shows the struggles of Pariyan, a protagonist from a Scheduled Caste in South Tamil Nadu (from the Devendra Kula Vellalar caste, many leaders of which community resist the 'Dalit' identity) for education, empowerment, and recognition as equal. Apart from the film, a key text for Valan's article, the other main reference point he uses is a speech delivered by Periyar in Nagapattinam in 1931, to 'explore the salience of the self as a site of political action'. Valan charts out the dimensions of 'creative play' in these two works to understand the anti-caste message of Periyar and *Pariyerum Perumal*.

The articles presented in this issue showcase diverse struggles for freedom from caste in the modern period, from colonial times to contemporary times. There will, very likely, be biases, prejudices and blind spots which escape critical scrutiny. And there is no guarantee that we are in a better position in the present to make conclusive assessments of inherited knowledge. However, to give truth and critical thinking a chance to succeed, it is crucial to foster academic freedom. Anti-caste thinkers need

the protection of this space of freedom more now than ever before. We invite the readers to engage with the transdisciplinary, contemporary scholarship on anti-caste thought on offer here as a freely available resource, to draw upon in intellectual and political pursuits of social transformation towards a caste-free world.

We would like to convey our thanks to the panel chairs of the ‘Anti-Caste Thought’ conference—Gajendra Ayyathurai, Dag Erik Berg, Gaurav Pathania, Malini Ranganathan, Scott Stroud and Selvaraj Velayutham, for their enormously beneficial and thoughtful feedback on papers, some of which are featured in this issue. We thank the reviewers for *J-Caste* who gave their time generously.

Anti-caste thought is produced like all thought in particular circumstances. Intellectual histories enable us to chart the webs of interaction—the opening or closing of doors—the serendipities that create the possibility of the birth of new ideas. It seems opportune to note at this point that the conditions for jointly writing this editorial were constrained by personal circumstances. Writing under distress caused by the untimely death on 22.2.22 of her younger brother, Raj Dhanda, Meena wishes to dedicate this special issue to him. A multiple fracture in her arm from a fall during her bereavement added to the strain, and towards the nail-biting finish, the production process was jolted by her Covid infection. As Guest Editors, we owe a huge debt to the Joint Editors-in-Chief and the production team at Brandeis University for their patience and efficiency in working around these mishaps and ensuring timely production of this special issue.

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