

Introduction

Caste Souls: Motifs of the Twenty-first Century

Taking me into her cushy arms, my *aai* (paternal grandmother) was reminding me of the importance of my presence in her life. ‘My dearest *maajhya baalla*, you are so full of life. You’ve the best eyes. You’ve so many qualities that I can barely count them.’ Her darkened face and frail skin glow in the night, the cheapest light bulb in the market—known as ‘zero-power bulb’, which truly was a lightless bulb—the only source of light in the room, was switched off. She was consoling me in the room the size of a Toyota Minibus that I shared with her, my mother, father, sister and brother. I shared the floor space underneath the cot with my sick father and brother. Perpendicular to the cot on nylon mats slept my mother and sister.

Running her palm on my face in circles, Aai started massaging my head. Her soft palm had seen everything—the horrors of untouchability, the traditions of imposed inferiority, and her resolution to labour to build her family’s life by working in farms and fields as a landless labourer, a servant at someone’s house or in the mill. She represents the traditions of unknown yet so great people. The people made outcastes by the Hindu religious order, deemed despicable, polluted, unworthy of life beings whose mere sight in public would bring a cascade of violence upon the entire community.

In India, casteism touches 1.35 billion people. It affects 1 billion people. It affects 800 million people badly. It enslaves the human dignity of 500 million people. It is a measure of destruction, pillage, drudgery, servitude,

bondage, unaccounted rape, massacre, arson, incarceration, police brutality and loss of moral virtuosity for 300 million Indian Untouchables.¹

In school I was humiliated for not paying fees on time. The clerk, Tony, would visit the classroom every quarter and call out my name, asking me to stand up. Once I did, he would read out how many months of fees were pending. The higher the number, the more the embarrassment. My classmates added shame to that embarrassment by quietly staring at me in disgust. This was a regular occurrence. Every time Tony came to class, I wanted to leave school and join the hustlers in my slum; they made money and lived as they wanted, without relying on anyone's disrespect to get through the hustle called life.

I grew up in relative poverty in the early part of my life, until I reached sixth grade. After that my family was downgraded to a level below poverty, officially known as Below Poverty Line (BPL). BPL is a state-determined category that calculates the degrees of deprivation. The Tenth Planning Commission fixed seven 'parameters'. Kerala has nine parameters, while Haryana has five parameters to identify families in regard to ownership of land and access to employment, education level, status of children, sanitation, roof, floor, safe drinking water, transportation, food, ownership of colour TV, fridge and so on. In addition, there is an income cap which varies and is adjusted according to one's non-ownership of the above. In Maharashtra, the BPL numbers are premised on the basis of thirteen factors, identifying 46 lakh people (close to 50 per cent of the total population) below the poverty line in the 1990s and 39 per cent in the 2000s.² In the year 2012, a World Bank report calculated 17 per cent of the total population below the poverty line. The report stressed on the rising poverty in the northern and eastern districts of Maharashtra. My district, Nanded, had 18 to 24 per cent of the population below the poverty line.³ There was, however, no distinction made between families belonging to the Scheduled Caste category and other categories. My family, on the urban fringes, fit into the BPL category perfectly.

Caste is understood through various prisms, thus making it the most misunderstood topic of dialogue on/in India. Caste is thought of as

synonymous with reservations, Dalits, Adivasis, manual scavenging, poverty, Dalit capitalism, daily-wage labourers, heinous violence, criminality, imprisonment, Rajputs, Brahmins, Baniyas, Kayasthas, OBCs, etc. These are some of the many variations that bear witness to the everyday nakedness of caste. However, what remains undiscussed and therefore invisible is the multiple forms in which caste maintains its sanctity and pushes its agenda through every aspect of human life in India. Caste plays an important role in every facet and over an unthinkable large domain of public and private life.

So, my family had no agricultural land, colour TV or fridge and our income level was as low as it could be as my father was bedridden (health reasons meant he remained unemployed for most of our lives). He did not own a house. We lived on an inherited property of 30×40 feet, half the size of a basketball court—it was evenly distributed among three families comprising sixteen members in all. Access to sanitation was a struggle as we had only one bathroom and toilet. During the morning hours, cousins and siblings would line up as everyone's school started at around the same time. The education level in my house did not go beyond tenth grade. Rusty, corrugated iron sheets that served as the roof were placed on fragile brick walls, pressed down with heavy stones weighing 10–20 kg so that they didn't fly in the wind. Iron sheets transmit electrical current, and the chances of the stones slipping was greater during the rainy season. Iron sheets also meant that we got the first intimation of any change in weather. They were our live weather reports. Drizzles would alert us about the arrival of rain. We were the first to notice as those drops made thunderous noise. When it was summer the iron sheets would attract harsh sunlight. Whoever sat underneath them on a good summer day would choke as it was difficult to breathe. Due to lack of insulation the winter did not spare us either. We slept in the house bearing the ruthless weather. Our prayers round the clock were to somehow get rid of those iron sheets. Sadly, they were never answered. Whenever I visited my mother's side of the family I would wake up surprised to notice that it had rained the previous night and I didn't get to know—they had a thick roof made of cement which made no

announcement of rain. The noise of a downpour in my own house made it difficult to sleep. To survive in such a situation, I volunteered to do odd jobs, desperately looking for temporary relief despite my parents' resistance. Once I thought of joining the boot factory where my friends from the area worked as manual labourers. Another time I worked on groundnut soil in the fertile region of Vidarbha, accompanying my mother's family; I worked as a manager overseeing my father's newspaper; I worked as a helper to a truck driver; I worked in a warehouse, all in my attempt to make ends meet. I did all this before I reached puberty.

My family continued to live in the shared house with one room and a kitchen. Till recently, when my mother decided she could not bear the pain of the broken tin roof any longer. She moved to my uncle's house temporarily. She awaits the government-promised subsidized housing for people in the BPL category. This promise of over six years ago has kept her hopes alive. Each year, she gets happy noticing the visit of government officials to survey the house. And like each year, her hopes vanish. Her faith in the government arises not out of trust but from the hopelessness that she was put under by the state.

I grew up in a Dalit neighbourhood. Like all Dalit neighbourhoods in India, mine too was most neglected and placed on the fringes of power structures. The local government turned a blind eye towards us and our problems. Our area was seen by local authorities as despicable, hence it seldom received services of cleanliness and care. Outside each house was a dirty canal that carried faeces in the open, and flies hovering the dirt would often find their way into our house and kitchen. The canal was uncovered and shallow. More often than not, one of the flies would end up in the food we had to consume. Children would be crawling on the streets while their parents worked, flies hovering around their mouths. It was representation of poverty-stricken India.

Malaria-carrying mosquitos and typhoid-carrying flies had a permanent presence in our lives. The diseases that afflicted us were related to this exposure to viruses, a direct outcome of the lack of care and the negligence accorded to our existence. Weekly, a cleaner from the Mehtar, Mahar or

Maang caste (employed by the city corporation through a Brahmin/Bania sub-contractor) would manually clean the canal and put the slime that consisted of people's leftover food, shit, bathwater and all kinds of human and animal waste in the open for two to seven days. It would then harden and be difficult to remove. Crawling babies often ended up playing on this mountain of sewerage.

Many times, our cricket balls would end up in this canal and we had to dip our bare hands into the contaminated, darkened, thick muck, searching for it by going horizontal and navigating through the mess. We would often end up catching the ugliest and filthiest discarded things. Sometimes, it would be human waste, at other times hair, nails and other things the very thought of which brings nausea.

The neighbourhoods near ours were similarly infamous. The one on the west was Ambedkar Nagar and another on the east was Jai Bhim Nagar. Neither of these areas had a respectable reputation. Alarm bells would ring immediately if someone learned that I came from one of these areas. All kinds of stereotypes and prejudices were hurled against me and others who belonged to this part of the marked town. Whenever asked in school or college I would conveniently mention a neighbouring Brahmin area as mine. But casteists are casteists. They would question me about the house number and my neighbours. My lie would be caught and I would get a spiteful gaze to add to my embarrassment. Because those who lived there were not 'people'. They were identified by their occupations: maids, servants, labourers, factory workers and hotel dishwashers.

These areas did not fit into the modern definition of working-class neighbourhoods even though the majority of people living here were workers—skilled, semi-skilled, unskilled and so on. They never had what one would call a 'job' their entire lives. All they had was enslavement without a guarantee of fair returns. They lived with constant troubles which were not of their own making. Thus, they never enjoyed a protected working-class stature. They were class outcastes who had the bare minimum for survival. They seldom had a stable job or a life. Owing to financial distress, many turned to drugs and crime as refuge as they seemed

to be the only avenues open for survival. Fights—verbal and physical—violence, prostitution, sexual abuse, alcohol and drug abuse were common. These were the circumstances I grew up in.

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After one of my lectures on caste and race in Indian and African university campuses at Yale, I was asked by an Indian-American sophomore, ‘How do you identify one’s caste?’ He paused—a moment of silence followed, and the appalled gaze of his classmates stunned him. He was taken aback in embarrassment. He immediately shot me an apologetic gaze.

At another event in Johannesburg. I was attending a lecture on the subject of race as unbecoming of middle-class privilege. Later, I was asked by my friend from the Indian–South African community, Shenny, ‘How do you recognize one’s caste?’ Everyone surrounding her, including Indian Muslims and Hindus, paused and followed her question with a supportive nod, eager to know my answer.

At Harvard, during a discussion on caste, an African-American law professor invited me to her office to discuss the topic in detail. ‘Oh! We did not know this. This is great information and I have learnt a great deal,’ affirmed the acclaimed figure on campus.

Caste as a social construct is a deceptive substance, known for its elemental capacity to digress from its primary motive of existence that governs this oldest system of human oppression, subjugation and degradation. Originated in the Hindu social order, it has infiltrated all faiths on the Indian subcontinent. As old as the order of Indic civilization, the phenomenon of controlling human capacity, creativity and labour has been core to its ideological performance secured by strict legal order. Caste in India is an *absolute* sanction—of the dominant class over the dominated. Its strict division into five categorical instances organized in horizontal capacities is an archetype of legitimized apartheid. Caste in India is observed according to one’s location in one of these five categories. The

conversation on caste is navigated by the respective person's investment in the system.

My life was controlled by my surroundings, which had a defining influence on me. Having no power to demonstrate my equal self, violence and harshness proved to be the only way I could emphasize my presence. Anything other than that would not be acknowledged by the 'Others' of my world—Dalits included.

Injustice and mistreatment animated my life experience. I became bitter when experiences of naked injustice were heaped upon me. As I grew older I became extremely sensitive and was constantly looking for hints of injustice or mockery being hurled at me. As soon as I realized that I had been unjustly treated I would become sad and agitated. Other memories of similar mistreatment would immediately flash in my mind like lightning. This would further cause me anguish and agitate me because of my powerlessness. Despite the academic and professional credentials that I had carefully honed, I was still treated like an uneducated labourer from my area—vulnerable and unprotected. I noticed that people were denying me the bare minimum respect and recognition that I desired as an educated man. I was no one, my credentials and my desire could not shine through. I was forced to adjust within the caricatured stereotype of a Dalit—a violent, undeserving, meritless, criminal being. The strict apartheid based on caste and religion retains absolute sanctity, giving little or no occasion to understand the humanity of the 'lowly', 'polluted' or 'unmeritocratic' Dalit. Thus, Dalits live under constant fear and are feared and their humanity denounced. Dominant-caste parents casually stereotype the Dalit classmates of their children, endorsing the popularly held belief of Dalit criminality as a paramount defence of their casteist attitude.

Due to this, a Dalit individual has to live his/her life in marked isolation or anonymity. Most Dalits living in urban cities who have managed to enter into desired professions continue to live in anonymity. Once, a well-known advertising company owner from Mumbai started pointing out the names of successful advertising giants to me. 'The top three in the industry are Dalits, but they are scared to acknowledge themselves as such. People know it but

they still hide it.’ A successful management professional working for Reliance Industries confessed to me one day that he was a tribal from Haryana. With much difficulty he admitted his social location in the Indian caste order. He had not availed himself of the benefits accorded to Scheduled Tribes for fear that his colleagues might discover his tribal identity.

The answer to the questions raised by my friend, colleague and professor lies in the fact that those who openly defend or have a defensive justification of the caste system or present their ‘naivety’ over such a gruesome form of subjugation give historical references for the indefinite perpetuation of the caste system. Those who enjoy the privileges of caste never want to attack an abhorrent system as that would threaten their position of power. They are unwilling to face challenges to the caste privileges that were granted to them without any work. Many in this category offer ‘merit’ as a justification for this attitude without paying attention to their privileges that add up to the creation of ‘merit’, which is then considered ‘impartial’. Their cultural and social capital becomes ‘merit’. And therefore, anyone lacking access to these avenues is judged against their predetermined merit. In a competitive, unjust world, merit becomes an excuse for the historically privileged and dominant groups to rally against welfare measures that are oriented towards addressing inbred social inequalities. To address an unequal system, provisions to improve material conditions are necessities. Such material conditions are based on improving the living conditions of those who are oppressed and deprived. Currently, numerical scores are taken as an arbitrary measure of a person’s ability to study further, notwithstanding the fact that merit is an *outcome* and not representative of something. It is an outcome of family (support, care and attention to child’s education, extracurricular activities, education and economic condition), surroundings, economic support, teachers and access to quality schooling. Entrance exams are designed in a way to cater to the population which has all or most of the above boxes checked. Therefore, anyone coming from such a background can easily segue into the so-called merit-oriented world.

The networks that become the lingua franca of a capitalist society are nothing but caste-based ties, wherein a person from a specific caste ensures that his fellow caste people are given opportunities. In education and the job market, networks play a primary role. Guidance and mentorship are part of these networks, which are critical for students choosing the future course of action. In businesses and most other careers, caste networks play a significant role. They are nothing but euphemisms for caste nepotism. Many people who have seldom experienced the above don't bother about these issues. By choosing to remain silent, the dominant castes effectively practise a thinly veiled 'caste terrorism' by pleading 'ignorance' over caste issues.

This 'ignorance' is practised, it is intentional to not have to face up to reality and instead continue living in a cocooned world. Therefore, their problems become the rest of the world's problems. The rape of Jyoti Singh Pandey, aka 'Nirbhaya', in Delhi in December 2012 was disgraceful and it deserved the attention it got. However, how does one explain the fact that six years earlier, in 2006, forty-year-old Surekha Bhootmange was mercilessly raped along with her seventeen-year-old daughter Priyanka, a twelfth-grade topper, by the Kunbi-Marathas of Khairlanji village, not far from Nagpur, in broad daylight at the village square? Chilli powder, rods and sticks were forced into their vaginas. They were stripped, battered and then paraded naked—and eventually murdered. In this brutal episode, Surekha's sons Roshan, twenty-one, and Sudhir, nineteen, were also stripped, mercilessly beaten and killed in cold blood.⁴ The issue did not get the desired media coverage. Had it not been for Dalit activists and a young American reporter who was then interning at the *Times of India*, it would have been completely buried. Even if it had received enough media attention, one wonders how much public outrage it would have generated. Did we have a national uprising after the Khairlanji massacre was reported? Did we take this act as a moment of national disgrace? On the contrary, the Dalits who tried to fight the injustice were hounded by the police and the state. Many individuals had to flee their hometowns to avoid arrest. How can we continue to be 'ignorant' when 'every day three Dalit women are

raped, every hour two Dalits are assaulted, two Dalits are murdered, and two Dalit homes are torched’?⁵

Untouchability remains a lifeline of India’s present. As recently as 2015, more than 50 per cent of households in the country admitted to practising or witnessing untouchability in urban capitals such as Delhi. India-wide, 30 per cent of Indians have no hesitation in imposing the worst form of human oppression—untouchability—upon fellow humans.⁶ In Tamil Nadu, a study over four years (2014–18) revealed that over 640 villages in twenty districts surveyed practise untouchability.⁷ Clearly, untouchability and casteism are not things of the past. They are real and present. They are everyday and personal.

Those who do not know about the above incidents and statistics are the ones who partake in perpetuating violent casteism.

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This book sets out to present the explosive issues in India’s totalitarian caste society. It intends to spark the type of public conversations that most shy away from. It is the issue of Brahmin supremacy, inter alia caste supremacy. The Brahmin as a social category has to be tackled and brought forth in critical conversations. Putting the pioneering dialogues of Phule and Ambedkar in the forefront, this book aims to Socratize the dialogical thinking on caste. This kind of method elevates human desire to a level of critical thinking where hierarchies melt and curiosity takes precedence. It is an open-ended inquiry where questions are commonly owned and a democratic process is deployed to find answers. The purpose of such an exercise is not to gain an upper hand or put anyone down, rather it is an opportunity to dive deep into the domain of one’s unfulfilled desire for knowledge. Thus, the book aims to bring forward issues of deep philosophical concern that degrade the human personality, by putting the subject in the mould of a conversational tradition—a tradition that believes in the eternal power of conversation and has resolved to encourage self-criticism.

Indian caste society has willingly embraced its violent and toxic ethos. Deep hatred of the Other is a fuel for survival. India has been unleashing caste terrorism upon 'lesser' defamed bodies since the advent of Veda-sponsored casteism. Brutal chronicles from the past and the continuing experiences of humiliation and stigma in the present determine our imagination, which means having impunity to physical violence on the bodies of labourers working on sites, maids in houses, servants in offices, peasants in fields, orphaned children on streets, beggars on the peripheries of temples—all of whom invite contempt in today's India. We have discovered new reasons to discredit the precious lives of the marginalized sections of society.

My father, Milind, was educated till ninth grade and my mother, Ranju, till seventh grade. My father was the eldest of three siblings and did odd jobs as a teenager. Having a mill-worker father who indulged in heavy drinking and a mother who worked as a maid put enormous responsibility on his fragile shoulders. So he started delivering milk cans in the morning hours and cleaning the floors of a lodge as a child labourer. He worked long hours and was a social person, often demonstrating interest in matters of the intellectual kind. He was polite and could win people's hearts. On one such occasion, he endeared himself to one of his clients, who was a Muslim banker. The banker offered this floor-cleaning staffer a job of a peon, equivalent to his educational qualifications. Eventually, my father was to establish eight social and cultural organizations, began a school for the underprivileged, was an active member in the Dalit Panther movement and a committed BAMCEF/BSP (the Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation/Bahujan Samaj Party) activist. He also went on to edit a daily (colour) newspaper, *Daily Sarvjan*, and a weekly, *Vastunishta Vichar* (Objective Thoughts), both in Marathi.

My mother was forcibly married after her father's death by her tyrant uncle and elder cousin, both of whom she ended up cursing her entire life. There is a nasty misogynistic custom in traditional India where marrying a girl child is the only primary responsibility of the male members. After her father is dead, the girl child has to be married within six months or not

marry for another three years. Owing to this bizarre custom, my mother was put on the marriage market when she was barely fourteen. Just having passed seventh grade, she was summoned to a group of people visiting from a neighbouring district, Nanded. Dressed in her teenage attire, she was asked to put on her aunt's saree with a little make-up of powder and eye colour. She served them tea and she was accepted as the bride.

My father resisted the marriage as he was not prepared, but his parents saw marriage as the only way to control his big aspirations. For them, an unmarried life meant that he would not be accountable to anyone, which was the kind of life my father preferred. My mother, who had friends belonging to the Komati, Brahmin and Marwari communities, had thought of getting a good education and a job, just as they would. She aspired to become financially independent and support her poverty-stricken family. But, despite protestations against marriage from both my parents, they were urged to tie the knot by older people in the family who eventually died within a decade or so.

In no time, Ranju was married. In the marriage procession, she sat beside a man she had barely spoken to. People came up to her and gave her wishes for the marriage. But in the photographs, Ranju is seldom looking up. Her eyes are mostly cast downwards, thinking about the world of innocence and the future she had imagined that was all going to be left far behind.

Ranju's mother, Sarubai, saw her young, beautiful daughter getting married to a man nine years older than her. Sarubai had tried to prevent it from happening, but the elder male members of the family did not listen to her. Having lost her husband, Sarubai did not matter to the family, let alone her opinion.

Having married at such a young age, Ranju's first child was born when she was fifteen. As is the custom in India, the bride goes to live with the groom's family after marriage. The woman, or in this case, the girl, is alone, exposed and vulnerable, and has yet to acclimatize to the new family's rules, tastes, wishes, dialects, daily schedules, in-laws' commands, new neighbours and so on. Everything must be fully understood and managed by the new bride. She has to make huge efforts to change her mode of

behaviour and attitude in order to fit into the new house because that is where she will live her entire life until her death. Walking on this thin thread is her sole responsibility.

Ranju was trying to adjust into the new world that was far and distant from her own—physically as well as emotionally. In this entire process, she braved all the odds. Bearing a child is perhaps the happiest moment for a bride as her fertility is valued in the entire household. And the new baby is her way of winning more respect.

But Ranju's first child died prematurely. She was yet to fully comprehend the experience of bearing a child. It had happened to her when she was not in complete control. She was a passive observer of this calamity. When the baby that suckled at her breast for a day and a half was suddenly gone, Ranju was tormented. She suffered a shock. As days passed, the loss began to sink in. She cried hoarsely at not being able to see her young baby. She was still lactating and the milk had to be released as it caused her pain. She suffered for another month, releasing her milk in a bag of cotton. She did not receive medical attention and care, which is the common fate of a poor person in India.

When Ranju was five months pregnant, she got pain in her legs. It was so unbearable that she cried out loud for an entire day. No one bothered about her, nor did they inquire about the difficulties she was facing. When her husband returned from work, he took her to the hospital, where it was diagnosed that she has lost water content and she desperately needed saline. For two days she was put on twenty-six saline drips, trying to bring her back to life. Ranju's mother-in-law, Chandrabhagabai (Chandra), treated Ranju as her own daughter and nursed her at the hospital. Ranju survived but her foetus had clearly been affected.

One day in her seventh month, her stomach pain increased suddenly. She was in tremendous pain. Once again, she was not given proper medical attention. When she was rushed to the infection-laden government hospital—that lacked proper medical facilities—she gave birth. The baby boy was weak and required serious care. Having no money to admit him in the intensive care unit, the boy's fate was sealed. The doctors did not furnish

any medical reports on the cause of the infant's death. There were theories as to what might have caused the baby's death but no word came from the medical side.

Both my grandmothers suffered the intense pain of patriarchy clubbed with the vicious marks of casteism branded on their resilient skin. Their eyes were as deep as one could imagine, that brought me ashore from my uncharted fears. They worked as house servants or cooks in the households of 'upper-caste' maliks or malkins (literally translated as masters and mistresses). I recall an incident with my maternal grandmother, Sarubai Maay, who was a maid in the house of a Bania. She avoided taking her grandchildren to work for fear of exposing her pitiful life. One day, as a curious ten-year-old, I insisted and followed her to see where she worked. She was mortified upon learning that I was there, watching her clean a toilet. I suddenly got the urge to pee. Initially, she was hesitant for me to use the facility. But seeing a ten-year-old in pain melted her heart. She did the unthinkable. She allowed me to use the bathroom of the maliks that was placed outside their luxurious house for the use of visitors. During the course of my less-than-40-second stay in the bathroom, I could see my grandmother moving side to side in anxiety, as if to caution me to come out before anyone from the house spotted me.

I successfully used the toilet and my grandma almost pulled me outside so that she could flush away the evidence. As she did this, a woman with an eye of suspicion glanced at me from behind the door of the house. Her face turned red—her forehead already had a red bindi on it. I was positive she had not seen me exit the bathroom but she suspected something. Her suspicion turned my grandmother's wrinkled face—where each wrinkle was as fixed and historical as the carved layers of sedimentary rock revealing only pain and fear—pale. Maay stood aghast, staring at the woman and then looking away, as if hoping to avoid the abuse she might have to hear. She hoped that she would not be insulted in front of her grandson who studied at an English-medium school, a fact she was very proud of. The inevitable happened. The malkin cursed my grandma with the kind of contempt one has towards a person who has murdered their family members. I did not

understand the nature of the curse words, nor their meaning, but as a ten-year-old I recognized the negativity. The malkin did not stop there but also directed her rage towards me. I felt very vulnerable and insecure. I crouched, trying to hide my face.

This incident brought home to me my beingness as a Dalit. The behaviour of this person who yelled nasty and derogatory comments upon the suspicion that a ten-year-old Dalit boy, the grandson of their maid, had used a bathroom on the fringe of their house was unacceptable. I was lesser than the bathroom that was a receptacle of shit. I did not know what I was to imagine. Is there a lexicon that gathers the experiences of such an unexplainable act? I am yet to find it. It remains the marked tattoo that I carry unwillingly—that is why caste matters.

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We cannot begin a conversation about India without prominently engaging with the metaphors of caste, society and the intra-relations of culturally similar communities. The idea of difference forms the bedrock of discrimination, and thus, despite the commonality of caste as a defining category—Ambedkar referred to this as a ‘cultural unit[y]’⁸—there is a strong sense of grouping amongst the members of each caste, sub-caste and sub-sub-caste.

Our impulse to celebrate the common humanity irrespective of differences has been atrophied owing to the diminishing capacity to love. This catastrophic occurrence is the outcome of what Cornel West aptly describes as a market-oriented ‘spiritual blackout’—a relative eclipse of integrity, honesty, decency and courage’ in the face of naked violence and deceit.⁹

India is not yet a nation. It is still in an improvisational mode like a jazz band that needs to perform repeatedly together in order to uplift every voice in the chorus. India as a mythical construct on the world map gives everyone a shape of their existence. However, beyond the physicality of the nation state, India is a very loosely knit community. Barring its

Constitution, nothing ties its citizens to each other. Groupism combined with casteism produces feelings of hostility among different groups. Ambedkar had presciently observed that each caste is a nation in itself as each caste has its own caste-consciousness that did not help to form a fellowship of national feeling.¹⁰ And due to the caste-nation feeling—a sentiment of self-centred growth overlooking the larger benefit of humanity—caste nationality grows stronger as more insecurities hit society in the form of unemployment, poverty and partisan control over resources. In all these issues, caste plays a central role. For instance, loans to farmers by local moneylenders—usually from the Bania caste, known as *sahukars* in Maharashtra—at exorbitant interest rates are primarily responsible for farmer suicides. Instead of making this a central concern, popular and progressive movements misdirect attention to the abstract nation state—which is in any case used by the ruling class to enjoy the inherited privileges of caste society. Though the state is summoned to bail out some farmers, the prime culprit is the *sahukar*, who is enjoying his caste nationality as an absolute owner and custodian of wealth. The system through which he operates also needs appropriate attention.

The people enjoying the benefits of their caste always direct the attention of suffering people towards the state, thus diverting from the real reason for their troubles, which is the existence of the caste system. For instance, issues surrounding communalism take precedence over anything else that has to do with the state. The case of the Babri Masjid demolition in Ayodhya in 1992 became a diversion from the issue of reservation for OBCs brought forth by the V.P. Singh government on the recommendations of the Mandal Commission report in 1990. In fact, these are specific caste-nation issues but consensus is created by lies and deceit. And the common citizen who is suffering at the hands of dominant-caste nationalism buys into the false propaganda and effectively becomes the martyr of someone else's national imagination. Due to the obvious divisions, everyone holds on to his/her caste. Such feelings produce hostility and insecurities. Thus, the 'nationalistic' feeling has to be constantly manufactured by the ruling classes to obscure the divisions, often seeking opportunities to display their

angst. Due to this, India continues to be a nation of repeated riots and atrocities imposed by one caste nation upon another.

Each incident of violence and rioting exhibits the lack of unity amongst so-called Indians. Societies with divisions continue to witness bloodthirsty civil wars in their nation state. Whereas in the Scandinavian countries, ethnic riots rarely take place. The fact is simple—everyone has agreed to the liberal ethos of democracy, and the grievances of their hostilities are resolved by making society culturally, socially and economically equal. In India, the privileged would protect their free privilege to the death, fearing that a dialogue on equality might lead to questions about their unjust position in society. Communal and casteist expletives are deployed towards distressed, poor, lower-caste, working-class groups. This is how fractured India tries to project itself as a unified diverse India. Such a projection of the country helps the traditional elite to easily assemble a ‘caste-neutral’ definition of the nation state while on the other hand continuing to hold diehard loyalties to its caste nation. This is visible with the number of their caste folks being incorporated and promoted—through the euphemism of ‘networking’—into positions of power in the government, bureaucracy, judiciary, education, film, entertainment, non-government, academia and capitalist enterprises.

In contemporary moments of social upheavals and conscientiousness, the cruel reality of caste remains an overtly ignored phenomenon even among the progressives. Indian democracy is not representative and therefore ends up being almost autocratic in its functioning. Caste India is yet to democratize its institutions. We are set to exclude the oppressed castes which form the corpus of the majority, and promote the minority, which are the historically privileged castes. The institutions of films, academia, theatre, business, religion and bureaucracy remain enamoured with caste pathology, imposing physical and mental harm upon the lower-caste subjects in the graded hierarchy. This affects the ability to understand the Indian problem, which is a caste problem—therefore, caste matters.

This book is an ethnography of the sociality of caste in the moment of social justice and prejudice. The caste question is so badly handled that it

needs immediate attention among other important issues in parallel globalized social movements. People know about caste but rarely understand it. This is perhaps one of the reasons we do not have regular active dialogues on caste at the world stage or continuous movements rallying for the rights of subjects living under the caste system. People are now slowly getting hold of what it is and they are willing to explore the foundations of such a system. However, there can be no dialogue on caste without becoming aware of the life of the people who are part of an entire caste ecology. Therefore, we need to place our attention on politics, sociality and the cultural discourse of caste.

This book offers a statement on the beingness of Dalit. What does it mean to be a living Dalit in today's caste-capitalistic India? How do we understand a group that is offered no space to think and live independently without intimidation and fear? Thus, being a Dalit is being now, it is being urgent.

Taking the mantle of liberation from their predecessors, Dalits are excited to join the ranks of becoming liberators of their community. The confidence of carrying the self as a Dalit without the immediate fear of social death, psychic death and spiritual death is a characteristic of being a Dalit. This is the focus of [Chapter 1](#) of the book, 'Being a Dalit'.

A Dalit is robbed of his accurate registers of history, then, his human personality is torn apart, he is degraded to the caricature of slavery, and finally he is not allowed to express a profound critique of Brahminical hegemonic creativity — art and music. Living in the midst of such a delusional optic, the Dalit lives in the present as well as the past; the latter being very strong in its spirit. The character of a Dalit in the present moment is forcibly subsumed into the empty rhetoric of banality.

The society and the Dalit have been juxtaposed to co-opt Dalits into the imperial project of Hindu globalism. It is similar to the proclamation of the US 'empire', where Black slaves were the constituent elements in forming the country. The Dalit is a major feature in the making of a universalist Hindu claim. Persons belonging to castes higher than Dalit draw their human-caste legitimacy by keeping Untouchables below them. Dalits are a

lifeline to the otherwise fractured Hindu identity. A religion divided among more than 7000 castes and sub-castes—each in conflict with the other—manages to survive only by ensuring the maintenance of untouchability, and then considers itself superior and stable because of this abhorrent practice. A Brahmin is to an Untouchable what the master is to a slave. The Indian caste habitus is a disunited form of comradely existence. I take up these issues in [Chapter 2](#).

The Dalit movement sees itself as a product of dialectical casteism—of caste-based and class-interfaced struggle. The Dalit position has often been relegated to the dilemma of ‘metaphysical futurism’, that is, whether Dalits are to live in the future or be permanently fixed to the historical registers of India’s past. The unseen future is sold as a promise. The future for the dispossessed acts as hope. The hope for Dalits is not of abundance. Time acts as a perception of the lived reality. Historical records show that their being is not considered as precious as that of others. This has a bearing on the making of the future. The present is a randomly arranged accident for Dalits to imagine themselves through the canon of attackers. The Dalit lives in a *no-time*.

As the German philosopher Martin Heidegger observed, there is no absolute, existential ontology of time.¹¹ The Dalit ‘being’ is to be understood in a temporal setting that exhibits the limited ownership of existence or *dasein*—one of the original human experiences of being. ‘Time’ in the Dalit experience could be understood as a deprivation of privilege where the body politic is facilitating the civic death.

Dalit Creation

Dalit identity is disguised in public, it is hidden and loathed. Many affluent Dalits restrict their coterie to the world of Brahmins and other dominant castes. They spitefully denounce every arrangement of Dalitness. Even if they are benefactors of the Dalit movement, emerging Dalit elites try to wilfully damn the credentials of Dalits. You would notice them identifying as ‘no more a Dalit’ or as Buddhist, Christian, Sikh or simply atheist in

order to fit into the grand schematic of a 'humanist' identity. Dalits ascribing to these meta-identities are anxious about their Dalitness. At times they even refer to the word Dalit as something alien to them, an external or downgraded Other. Oppressed Dalits who have not yet broken out of the caste mould very obediently adhere to the supremacist tendencies of their oppressors. The mimicry of the affluent castes is reproduced at every level. Thus, just as Brahmins find an incentive in discriminating amongst themselves based on sub-caste affiliations, every other caste entangled in the adamant cobweb of the caste system does the same.

But awakened Dalits are extraordinary in their sense of being. This book makes a claim for the position of Dalits in the global rights struggle. In the midst of uprisings against fascist right-wing ideologies, many liberals and socialists alike have joined the tirade against populism. Nationalism of a certain order is being summoned by the protectors of the state. The state here is turned into a monologue and a mono-version of a few despots. Therefore, the book presents the perspective of a first-generation educated Dalit, and how he experiences the changing world of diverse ideologies. It is a confrontational battle of deciding whether to borrow jargon from existing parallel social justice movements or creating a new idiom for transformation.

Is the borrowing really a desperate attempt to include the Dalit experience in others who have been traditionally oppressed or to create an affinity of shared marginality? The book aims to add value to ongoing social justice movements by adding the Dalit narrative to their constitutional terms. The Constitution of India is regarded as the foremost document for Dalit hope. However, does it specify the ingredients for emancipation? How has the Indian state confined the possibilities of its progress on the basis of Dalit hope? Simply put, the hope of the state continues to function adjacent to Dalit hope, both intangible and virtuous. The day Dalit hope ends, the state's hope for Dalits will end. This end is to the peril of the Indian state and all who cohabit in it.

Dalit Life

Dalit Life and Dalit spiritualism have been wounded for ages. Its formation as a resistance to human suffering has been destabilized by anti-human casteist forces. This has made Dalit existence miserable. Offering a hermeneutical reading of rich Dalit spiritualism, this book plunges into the lives of Dalit *chawls* and *bastis*—the ghettos and abodes imagined under the traumatic gaze of state-induced immorality—the vicious circle of police, violence, drugs and socially disgraceful acts of existence. The book also visits the elite circles of Dalit and non-Dalit spaces, trying to make sense of Dalit hope. Spiritual warfare is carried on beyond the religious piety of theisms. The Dalit embodiment of supremacist tendencies has only added to the programmatic fortification of the supremacist project.

Dalit spiritualism exists in variant forms across the Indian subcontinent. The remembrance of ancestors and devotion to their egalitarianism promote the healing of the deeply wounded Dalit community. However, these facets encumber a Dalit to fight back. Dalit spiritualism is an in-practice phenomenon which goes beyond the narrow ideology of state secularism. Dalit spiritualism lives with a hope of the divine. The divine is pierced and cut across as hope. Kancha Ilaiah describes this as a lively culture of gods and goddesses wherein the spiritualism informs the metaphysics of Dalit and Shudra cultural production.¹² For him, oppressed-caste groups have not confined their spiritualism to a priest or a certain edifice that practises exclusion. The gods that are part of the Dalit experience have more rationalized beliefs and do not genuflect to Brahminical parameters—they are mostly ancestral formations that have revolted against Brahmins. The ‘common god’ concept is an abiding form of group unity. The best example of this is found in the Kuldevata, a common deity worshipped by specific caste-clan groups. Dalit Kuldevatas differ from those of Brahmins and other castes. Every year, a pilgrimage is undertaken to remember and offer respects to the caste gods. Children are inducted into this tradition—their names are given in the presence of the Kuldevata; their hair is offered up as sacrifice and even promises are made in the presence of these caste-clan-specific gods. There is no mediation of a Brahmin priest to order the relationship between the Dalit subject and their collective Kuldevata. There

is a Dalit priest who officiates at the religious ceremony. Children are exposed to the independence of offering prayers as they please. No restrictions and codes of prayers animate spiritualism like the complicated Brahminical step-by-step method.

Dalits loathe the pre-eminence of Brahmin gods that takes the form of what Ilaiah describes as ‘spiritual fascism’.¹³ According to him, this is a manifestation of violence in an anti-democratic set-up. The Hindu religion in principle banks on this concept to advocate violent forms of suppression. Thus, the Dalit spirit is found in the natural obeisance of non-material values.

Dalit Moment

The Dalit community is having its Harlem moment at present. It is now able to articulate loudly and clearly through words and action—becoming more global and more reachable than ever. Sensorial Dalit expression is an experience of revelation of the person and the personal. In the revolutionary age of technologies of communication and new expressions of freedom, Dalits are claiming their rightful position in the armours of justice and democracy. Dalits are the recently ‘freed Untouchables’, the second generation of constitutionally freed citizenry who are now coming out of their inbred shackles and segregated ghettos to combat the enforced Brahminical societal codes.

But with this comes tougher challenges as the endogamous nature of caste is becoming stricter. Shankar, a twenty-two-year-old Dalit from Tamil Nadu, was hacked to death by the parents of a supposedly higher caste girl in full public view after marrying a woman he deeply loved.¹⁴ Twenty-three-year-old Dalit Pranay Kumar was beheaded in broad daylight when he walked out of hospital with his twenty-one-year-old pregnant, dominant-caste spouse in Telangana.¹⁵

Many Dalits, young and old, reckon how many times they nearly lost the battle to survive for the mere fact of being a Dalit and exercising their virtue of being human. There has been one Rohith Vemula already.¹⁶ There

is perhaps another already in the making, surrounded by casteist forces. Dalit as an identity has existed within a suffocating structure. Recognition and appreciation from other human beings is what this whole movement has been arguing for and is about. Ambedkar's famous reference about refusing to abide by the brutal caste Hindu order remains the order of consciousness among the Dalit class, rural and urban. The mandate is not to reform the Hindu social order, rather it is to claim equality on its own terms.

What was demonstrably proven from the much-publicized Rohith Vemula incident is that the acknowledgement of caste-based violence was palpable in cities. The other aspect was the brazen defence of the institutional murder of a Dalit. The state acted as a partner in caste crime. The vice chancellor of Hyderabad Central University, Appa Rao, a prime accused in the Rohith Vemula case, was rewarded with the Millennium Plaque of Honour Award by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.¹⁷ In deference to the law and to honour the victims of caste crime, Modi should have stayed away from such a felicitation. The Brahminical mindset is fascist; it has become a matter of habit to commit caste crimes without any accountability.

The embrace of Dalit feeling is not merely an academically constructed theory. In the quest to make Dalit and caste part of the grand narrative, this book sets out on an ambitious task: to inform the audience—local and global—about the ghastly order of caste and Brahmin supremacy that appears unwilling to wither away. In their quest to seek universal peace and brotherhood, popular global social movements cannot afford to overlook the suppression of 300 million people in the subcontinent. If the ideals of justice have to be promoted, the commitment to this cause needs to be demonstrated steadfastly. The potential of any progressive movement has to be idealized. Caste and the suppression through it need to be exposed, provocatively challenged and eventually delegitimized ad hominem. [Chapter 3](#) deals with these historical conjunctures viewed through different kinds of Dalitness.

I was invited to an upper-middle-class event organized by a bunch of bureaucrats, largely Dalits, in Bangalore. Their teenage children—armed with sophisticated smart watches, iPhones and cosmopolitan ideas—were discussing a school project where they had to imagine life in space. After an arresting discussion and jaw-dropping description by one of the youngsters, his parents, who were hosting that dinner, started discussing the prospect of sending their son to NASA.

I asked the students interested in extraterrestrial life about their opinions on the social deficiencies in India, to which they responded by saying that caste was an issue of the past. Their parents, immediately uncomfortable, shifted in their seats, nodding to their children's response. Dalit middle-class dreams are yet to mature; for now they exist in the mimicry of the oppressor Other. Their elevation from living in penury to being an income-owning class in the span of just one generation has put them in a new world, one that their ancestors had not experienced. This new position in mainstream society has burdened them with the added responsibility of commanding an equal position in everyday interactions, producing an asymmetrical power relation. Their aspirations and goals have undergone various changes, at times producing conflicting viewpoints—political, social, economic and cultural—vis-à-vis the rest of the Dalit community. The Dalit middle class, by virtue of its purchasing power, gets seen and heard more than the struggling working-class Dalit. These issues are covered in [Chapter 4](#) with a description of the existence of the Dalit middle class in the aspirational mode and how it has a social responsibility towards poor Dalits. This class at times complicates its position by assuming leadership of the entire Dalit masses, becoming the default representatives of the community and falling short of expectations.

There has been a strong desire from the state and its neo-liberal agents to push for Dalit capitalism. While the economic system of feudalism has been gradually replaced with a mixed modern-day model of capitalism and state socialism, the social aspect of feudalism is as entrenched as ever. The inherent form of capitalism reproduced with it the age-old structure of oppression. The conditions of working in the field as a landless tiller or

working in a factory in modern industrial society were premised on the extraction of labour and exploitation of its productive value. This misuse of power remains at the core of the execution of capitalism.

Capitalism, as Anupama Rao has observed, took Dalit existence 'outside the culturalism of caste'.¹⁸ On the other hand, Balmurli Natrajan reassesses the cultural dogma that inhibits the cessation of casteism. His theory purports to revisit caste as a system and caste as a functionality. Natrajan argues that the cultural aestheticism attributed to the caste system is a modernist concept that at times ends up ethnicizing an identity which then comes across as 'positive'. This idea supports the conclusion that since caste is a cultural thing, there is no necessary hierarchy or oppression in place, only a tension of intercultural wars; that it is merely a fundamental part of India's intercultural diversity. This presents to us an untenable 'paradox' of multiple misunderstandings: whether the caste system can be improved within the existing structure or it should be eliminated to achieve the sanctity of a religious society, or if caste is needed to maintain historical identity.

Such sanitized versions of casteism are made all over by various stakeholders—the state, civil society, in sacred and secular, private and public spheres. This attribution of the 'cultural' promotes the value of caste as that which upholds culture. Thus, the caste system becomes something to be preserved and not destroyed. Many public spaces echo these amplified iterations of casteism. The 'difference' that persists in the hierarchical form is renamed so as to tamper with the formations of caste-based hierarchy, thus making "“cultural” casteism . . . the legitimate form of casteism".¹⁹

The reinvention of capitalism in the most simplistic terms obfuscates the specifics of its destructive capacity. By denying the specificity of caste universalism and its original experiences, the capital-oriented struggle upholds the virtue of labour over the stigmatized Dalit body.²⁰ A labourer becomes positive value while a Dalit does not. Dalits are shown a distorted vision of the capitalist nodes of living as something to aspire to. This is the focus of [Chapter 5](#), weaving together personal narratives and stories from African-American and Dalit experiences of capitalism.

I had gone on a group trip organized by Harvard's outing club. It was a two-day hike in the white mountain range of New Hampshire in winter. Two days of rigorous mental and physical exercise brought the team together. After the usual awkward ice-breaking conversations, a Frenchman curiously and rather hesitantly ventured to ask about Indian prejudices. He was not sure what to ask for fear of being called a racist or an ignorant white European. After guzzling two shots of rum, he dared to raise a question about Hindu religion and its metaphysics. The Frenchman was a doctoral student in physics. He had been educated on Hinduism and Indian culture by his Indian cohorts at Harvard. He was told that social and cultural regressiveness is not part of India. The India that we see and read about in early twentieth-century literature as being a land of snake charmers, people pooping on the street, bias and violence against women and caste discrimination were all concepts of the past. He had been presented with an image of India as the shining model that it used to be before the arrival of the British—a golden goose that the English came to and ground its glory to dust in the 200 years of their rule.

The Frenchman was having a hard time believing fellow Indian cohorts as he had read reports in the *New York Times* and *Le Monde* about gender and caste violence. He also accidentally came across a documentary on YouTube that appeared contrary to the description given by his Indian acquaintances. Thus, he wanted to confirm if the Western media was really not being accurate about India's progress out of simple jealousy. His Indian acquaintances had made it clear that they would not tolerate any comments that would make India look like a parochial outfit. He was firm that any reportage of discrimination was amplified by the West for their personal gains. Any inquiry into this would be taken as an offence and could amount to racial bias against Indians.

There is a plain denial and unashamed conviction that caste does not matter in present times. It is for this very reason that the performance of caste and its mechanics is getting reintroduced every day by getting greater visibility through social media. Brahmins in India are primarily responsible for the existence of the caste system. They created it and worked full-time

to keep it operational. Epoch after epoch and generations after generations, Brahmins bequeathed crude strategies to their progeny, who carried out the shameful execution of caste-based divisions without much inquiry or questioning. Brahmins were gladly co-opted with any ruling power in order to retain their exploitative status. However, historical records reveal some courageous Brahmin and 'upper-caste' individuals who braved social orthodoxy to challenge the stupidity of the caste system.

There were radical anti-caste Phuleite and Ambedkarite Brahmins who laid their lives in the service of the upliftment of Dalits and in the project of the annihilation of caste. I uncover these figures in [Chapter 6](#) by analysing what prevents contemporary Brahmins, the progeny of Ambedkarite Brahmins, from taking an active stand against caste-based discrimination. Many liberal Brahmins and 'upper castes' do express their disagreement with casteism but their disapproval of such a system does not change the situation of Dalits. This has to do with passive liberalism rather than the radical humanist position of being a 'cultural suicide bomber' willing to blow up the oldest surviving edifice of discrimination.

International Non-Dalitism

This book builds on the theoretical formations of global struggles by identifying caste as an important element in the making of global solidarities. The solidarities that were created in the post-colonial phase nurtured the Third Worldism that was premised on anti-imperial nationalistic sentiments. It also made a call for solidarities mostly premised on class issues, overlooking the internal strife in newly independent nation states. Due to this, the inheritors of the independent nation state, who were mostly from the upper echelons of social hierarchy, continued their dominance by initiating struggles that did not threaten their unquestioned privilege. The historically poor and oppressed continued to live under depredation and penury. Their suffering did not lead to much of a social revolution. Today, such groups are being pushed further to near-extinction by the stakeholders of neo-liberal capitalism. This again is giving rise to

class-based sensibility by withdrawing internal caste-based struggles. To clear historical errors and fix the problem I aim to advance the argument why caste-based global activism is an important intervention in current global problems.

The Dalit diaspora has been active in Western spaces since the 1960s. Post-colonial governmental projects in India focused on organizing governance. The non-government sector concentrated on development issues such as poverty and health care while social justice movements took up the issues of social and economic inequality on a larger scale. In spite of this, why has the Dalit cause not yet become an international concern? Why have popular social and cultural movements not considered the miserable suffering of 300 million unfortunate beings? Why is there no empathy to the burgeoning problems of these outcastes, whose mere presence is considered impure? The plight of Untouchables who decide to exercise their rights as human beings is defined within the curvature of a religio-social edifice. It is an impossible task for lower-caste groups to rebel and get recognized, unlike the great Haitian revolution and other rebellions in Africa, of which tales are told and retold in glorious narratives. The Untouchable's inventory of archival memory is meddled with by Brahminical annals, and thus the radical movement is presented as reformist, reducing its revolutionary zeal to that of being willing to be co-opted into the integrationist model as second-class citizens.

Thus, in the 'diversity' clause of popular movements and Internet-savvy social media activists, the phenomenon of suffering is limited to either mental or the most cognitive level of understanding the suffering of the oppressed. The mental state of suffering is hegemonic in that it privileges the narratives that are most audible and readable. In the instances where blind eyes and deaf ears are directed to address the issue of caste, diversity is absent. What a scandal! Diversity cannot be fulfilled as long as the movement is directed from the metropolis. It will retain its hegemony even if one claims to fight for the Dalit, Black, queer or other socially marginalized groups. The top-down approach has created a somewhat unradical understanding. The 'radical' Black movement in the US and

around the world that embraces globalism with love is set on the notion of ‘pan-___ism’: pan-African, pan-Indian, pan-Southern, etc., which falls seriously short of deeper change. The Dalit movement and the Dalit people have a unique position of experiences to share with global struggles—it is their ability to thrive amidst the state and society’s refusal to acknowledge their humanity. The Dalit community’s focus on attacking the oldest form of human subjugation by mixing various methods of survival—especially anti-caste religious warfare against the oppressive system—is one such example. By being part of the global rights dialogue, Dalits give our collective failures another chance to reckon with our past. Dalits stand testament to the world’s oldest surviving discrimination. Their minds, bodies and views of the world carry enormous repositories of ‘fight back, live long and stay strong’.

Through empirical evidence and intellectual argument, I wish to make a case for the actual plight of Dalits by drawing the attention of popular social movements towards this larger yet neglected group. There are five major global issues that are mainstreamed in popular social justice movements: race, gender, climate change, capitalism and indigenous people’s rights. Every major activity concerning these issues is fairly reported and gets echoed in international bodies. Unlike race and gender, the issue of caste is not physically distinguishable. Thus, hiding behind this justification, many dominant-caste supremacists continue to inveigle themselves into positions from where they can speak for the oppressed.

Due to access to global culture and spaces, dominant-caste people auction Dalit-related issues to attract the attention of international development agencies. The development-related model reinforces the unequal donor–receiver relationship, thereby permanently putting Dalit people at the receiving end—the lower end. This hierarchical engagement with Dalits sidelines the radical call of Dalits who want to destroy the oppressive system from its root. It instead proposes development-based models tied to the liberal notions of welfarism, wherein project-based instalments of community ‘progress’ are proposed, undermining the urgent call of the oppressed who want to end and annihilate the echo chamber of

their oppression. Such development-based models are under neo-liberal control across the world; they are funded wherever oppressed people have demonstrated dissent. These models, as vehicles of neo-liberal finance capitalism, are deployed to pacify the brimming anger of the oppressed and slow down radical action by bureaucratizing and eventually paralysing a potential revolution. The handlers of such agencies and country/mission heads are invariably dominant-caste people who are hand in glove with neo-liberal aggression. Perhaps due to this, we do not have any active international anti-caste solidarity work on the United Nations and other important forums. Since the inception of the United Nations in 1945 the United Nations General Assembly has not passed any resolution condemning caste-based violence, let alone recognized its prevalence. If this is indicative of anything, for the world and neo-liberal development institutions, 300 million Dalit lives do not matter.

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The invisibility of extant caste violence—psychic, bodily and on the group—needs serious consideration. As much as caste is cultural, social, political and economic, caste nurturing is also bio-individualistic. It is a performance of individually managed acts conspired to execute violence upon the ‘Otherly’ body. This is done to produce pain upon beings who are considered lesser. In this definition, I aim to concentrate on the role of the individual and not allow them to escape culpability under the rhetoric of community-oriented action. In horrific events such as the Holocaust, individualized crime brought in a new dimension. The Holocaust theories upheld individual action as culpable on its own.

Discordance and dissent as part of national duty are yet to be cherished in caste-infested India. There is a desperate ethno-nationalism being forcefully promoted through Dalit constituents. Dalits are nationalized in the grand scheme of ‘Indianness’—a la ‘Bharat Mata’ populism seen in the performative zeal of Republic Day or Independence Day celebrations or in extreme instances as the Babri Masjid demolition or the Godhra riots. Every

bit of populist nationalism is an order of the tradition that harbours supremacist hierarchies, producing devious harm on marginalized bodies. This nationalism is sold by the caste-obsessed society, the market-driven greed of capitalism and neo-liberalism, and the Hindu right. This has decayed the national ethos of rich traditions that contained democratic branches of self-criticism.

The darkness of Dalit lives quivers in the anecdotal pages of news media summaries when Dalit deaths are reported. The scandal-hungry Brahminical media strives to find the next horrific story to be presented to the audience. The tragedy of a scholar's death ricochets around the corridors of major universities across the world. An author who writes experiences of the self is celebrated in the book reviews sections of major, world-renowned publications. Tales of Dalits are criss-crossing the world over.

Dalits are struggling to fight the social boycott imposed by dominant-caste villagers in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Punjab, Bihar and Kerala;

Dalit women are still seeking justice for mass rape;

the souls of raped and lynched bodies paraded in the middle of streets yearn to seek justice;

the brandishing of Dalit talent before the childish argument of 'merit' is haunting the doorsteps of educational institutes;

the autonomous political praxis of Dalit students in college campuses is seen as a negative move;

the death toll of manual scavengers keeps hitting national newspaper headlines;

we keep talking about the greatness of India's civilization and culture,

when the only time a Dalit gets noticed is upon his or her death;

when the world is trying to find solutions to problems with little success;

when social movements are gearing up to create new bonds with new comrades;

when ecological disasters affect the person at the bottom who has no means of employment;

when the neo-liberal catastrophe is sacrificing the measures of livelihood to the global capital monster;

when pedagogies are proving inadequate to express the blackout of morality;

when teachers are unable to explain to their students where lies the unaccountability for the oppression of human beings;

when India is 'shining' and the mass is fighting the darkness;

when banks are ruling and governments are following;

when democracy is being prostituted to the profligacies of the ruling elite;
when the LGBTIQ movement refuses to actively endorse Dalit queer and trans bodies;
when academic departments do not detail a course on the Dalit episteme;
when research institutes do not commit to having detailed studies of Dalit lives in past and present;
when the mother who cannot stop wiping her eyes at the loss of her three-year-old;
when the temple priest continues to rape Dalit women for 'religious needs';²¹
when the dominant castes continue to loot the country;
when the international left movement honestly takes hold of their oppressed comrades in India;
when the solidarities of other groups become the priority;
when prisons continue to get populated with oppressed-caste people;
when the father who has lost his eighteen-year-old son has to beg for someone's pittance to gather money to bury him;
when the world's governments and international bodies do not recognize the lives of the unheard;
when an old woman tries to survive by begging on the streets;
when animals are allowed to sit on people's laps while even the shadow of a Dalit is forbidden in the house;
when atheists say that religion is the primary problem and not caste;
when Dalit remains Dalit and Brahmin remains Brahmin;
when a son loses his father due to the lack of medical care owing to poverty and the privatization of the health industry . . .

So,

until the progressives can take a courageous stand by denouncing and renouncing self-privilege;
until radicals make caste their primary project;
until rationalists do not stop commuting to agraharas to educate;
until Dalit exploitation becomes a concern of the world;
until Dalit scientists are able to organize;
until Dalit cinema is successful in the project of creativity;
until Dalit rap becomes the lingua franca of revolt and is accepted in the mainstream;
until Dalit achievers are unafraid of revealing their identity for fear of losing their future;
until #castemustgo is truly embraced and #DalitLivesMatter is in the list of priorities;
until my mother can sleep with reassurance without worrying about her son's returning home safely in the caste police regime;
until then, caste matters.

Caste will matter until it is done away with.

When my aai talks about love she is interested in the balancing act of love, which does not intend to harm others. She continues to live under the coded pressures of caste violence. Her bravado in fighting caste-mongers has fortified her children. Her compassion and love have dissolved our fear of others and made us strong. Through her life we see hope and she sees in us a brave attempt to break the shackles of caste. That is why caste matters.

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