

## **Caste: Experiences in South Asia and Beyond.**

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In October 2016, as we set out to write this Introduction, caste was as inescapable a part of social lives and experiences in India as ever. Stories of caste-based violence and atrocities in India abound and continue to be legitimised by reference to the idioms of purity and impurity – particularly as applied to the lowest castes. In Uttar Pradesh (U.P), a school teacher – who we may assume to be educated and respected - beheaded a Dalit (ex-Untouchable) fellow-villager on the basis that the local ‘flour mill had been “rendered impure” by him’ (Press Trust of India, 2016). Such notions of purity and impurity are hard to sustain in contemporary India, where stringent legislative instruments exist to eradicate such blatant discrimination. Dalits, thus, routinely used the mill in question but specific injunctions had been imposed on them during a religious festival, highlighting how caste continues to shape social interactions. Each day witnesses similar reports of violence across India. Dalit lives, however, cannot be reduced to victimhood and suffering. Captured even in this account, which appears to follow ‘traditional’ caste norms, we see Dalits refusing to abide by the dictates of dominant castes. Indeed, around the same time during the latter half of 2016, a young Dalit woman from Punjab named Ginni Mahi was receiving global attention for a hit song called ‘Danger Chamar’ which turned the caste-title – often used as a term of abuse – into a badge of pride and honour (Lakshmi 2016). Mahi’s anthem does not emerge out of the ether; it speaks to ongoing processes of social change, seen most recently in the upsurge of the *Bhim Army* in Uttar Pradesh (Waghmore 2017). In July 2016, *Open Magazine* carried a special issue on Dalit success stories and achievements. The rise of Dalit politicians, entrepreneurs and artists is perhaps best captured in the fact that in his latest blockbuster *Kabali* (Pa. Ranjith, 2016), global Tamil film icon Rajnikanth plays a Dalit character who references Ambedkar and reads Dalit literature (Anshuman 2016). This marks the first reflection of Dalit assertion in a cultural industry dominated by intermediate castes (Karthikeyan and Gorringe, forthcoming).

These radically different accounts speak to varied experiences of caste in India, but it is no longer possible to confine studies of caste to India alone. Parallel to the events above, Dalit groups in the UK celebrated the re-election of Jeremy Corbyn to the position of Labour Party leader due to his long-standing commitment to Dalit rights. They also called for the new Prime Minister Theresa May to ensure that caste was included in Equalities legislation in the country (Sonwalkar 2016) even as others campaigned vigorously against the new caste law (Shah

2016). Although an amendment to include caste discrimination in the Equality Act was passed in 2013 (Waughray 2014), its implementation remains an issue. The British Government's public consultation on the caste legislation is running from 29 March 2017 to 18 September 2017. In the United States during 2016, controversy erupted over California state textbooks and how they represented caste. On one side of the argument, orthodox Hindu groups sought to delete references to oppressive aspects of caste to 'prevent bullying against Hindu children' whilst Dalit activists demanded that the texts should not 'sanitize history' (Soundarajan 2016). Such campaigns, however, may have hidden costs. Svensson, for instance, argues that 'even though Dalit ("untouchable") activists have been successful in bringing attention to caste as a global concern, present endeavours, on the one hand, reinforce the marginalised identity that they seek to overcome and, on the other, fail to recognise the diversity and situated-ness of the Dalit experience' (2014 :1691).

This special issue of *Contemporary South Asia*, seeks to capture 'the diversity and situated-ness' of the caste experience and deepen our understanding of caste dynamics and lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It follows Rawat's injunction 'to interrogate the discursive practices through which regimes of caste inequality have continued to persist' (2013: 1060) in different forms and in different places. Reflecting on contemporary manifestations of caste, Fuller (1996: 5) argued that in analysis of caste 'the book-view has become increasingly impedimental because it focuses attention on continuities with the past and scriptural tradition at the expense of the discontinuities which are becoming proportionately more salient'. This call to engage with the everyday aspects of caste is echoed by Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma (1994: 1) who insist that: "putting caste in its place" does not deny the centrality of caste as a lived experience for many people, especially those whose experience of caste is oppressive'. Significantly, some of the contributions chart new ways in which such inequalities are being practiced even within the Dalit category. Whilst 'Dalit' as a term has gained currency, this reminds us, it subsumes a huge variety of experiences, attitudes, and social positions (Takhar 2014). One obvious difference pertains to Dalits now living outside the sub-continent, ostensibly in countries free of caste structures. Our engagement with the experiences of such Dalits casts light on caste in the diaspora but, in so doing, raises the question of whether we are talking about the same system of stratification in each instance. Indeed, some critics such as Shah (2016: 57) argue 'that the *caste* system does not exist', seeing castes as discrete rather than relational entities. We begin this introduction, therefore, by engaging with the question of how to define caste

before outlining the virtues of detailed, ethnographic research in understanding the lived realities of caste and concluding with an introduction to the papers.

### **Defining and Experiencing Caste**

Any attempt at interrogating persistent ‘regimes of caste inequality’ and comprehending its experience in contemporary times must begin by questioning popularly held assumptions in much of the writings on the subject. Despite wide ranging contestations and questionings by scholarly research over a long period of time, the textbook definitions of caste almost always describe it as a system of social organization found almost exclusively in India (cf. Adeney and Wyatt 2010: 103; Gupta 1991: 1). Its structural logic, in this view, emanates from the ancient religious ideology of the Hindus, inscribed in certain sacred texts of the faith (ibid.). Since the underlying logic of caste in this influential and widely held view is presumably derived from ancient texts, its persistence in more recent times thus also becomes evidence of an absence of any kind of substantive change in Indian society (cf. Fuller 1996). Further, even when caste is conceptualised in this religion-centric view as a system of ritual hierarchy founded on the dialectical opposition of pure and impure (Dumont 1970), it is not viewed simply as a private affair of the religiously minded Hindus. Caste encompassed everything and it was present everywhere in the subcontinent. Even an act of conversion out of Hinduism did not allow any escape from this all-encompassing ideological system.

While an ancient ascetic called Manu scripted a notion of *varna* hierarchy in a text called the *Manusmirti*, the realities of caste on the ground and their histories are far too complex to be reduced to such a simplistic textual view. Not only does this classical “book-view” of caste, popularised most effectively by Louis Dumont (1970), incapacitate us from exploring the materialities of caste (Guha 2014) and the variation and varieties of its experience over time and across regions of the Subcontinent; it also transforms it into a political non-issue. Even when caste is defined as an all-encompassing system of hierarchy, such a view of institutionalised inequality did not imply discrimination or deprivations and privileges. As Dumont (1970) had famously argued, unlike the inequalities present in the modern day societies of the West, caste in India was not about power and domination.

As a system of ascriptive hierarchies (Jodhka 2016), however, the inequalities of caste are as much about power as are those of race, ethnicity or gender. Following Ambedkar, we

understand caste as a relational system, such that ‘caste in the singular number is an unreality. Castes exist only in the plural number. There is no such thing as a caste: there are always castes’ (Ambedkar, 2011: 29). Whilst one is born into a particular caste, there are no physical markers that delineate status. Caste, instead, ‘is etched into the social fabric by codes of conduct governing modes of address, attire ... physical positioning’, and forms of social interaction (Gorringe and Rafanell 2007: 103). Even though the papers presented in this special issue work with the assumption of caste being a reality in and among the Indians, caste-like status hierarchies have existed in most, if not all, societies, and they continue to persist and intersect with other forms of differences/inequalities.

Given its inherent inequalities, which go far beyond the sphere of rituals and religious belief, the experience of caste varies significantly depending on the location of the person and her *jati* or community in the ladder of hierarchy. As recently argued by Jodhka (2015), many contemporary articulations of caste emanate from “below”, through the voices and experiences of Dalits and the “backward”. Such voices insist on foregrounding the issue in public narratives on social, economic and political life not in order to keep caste alive, but to point to its continued disabling influence in their everyday lives. They do so to claim citizenship of modern nation-states and the globalizing world, which promise equality and dignity to all individuals irrespective of their caste and creed.

Bairy (2012: 35) argues that ‘there appears to be a contradictory manifestation of being caste-d in the contemporary moment: to *foreground* caste if one is ‘subjected’ to a low position in the caste hierarchy, and to *invisibilize* caste if one is ‘subjected’ to a higher position in the hierarchy’. Bairy (ibid.) then notes how privileged castes’ ‘public presentation of the self was/is in terms of rendering one’s caste location as insignificant in one’s public deliberations and enactments’. This process, however, goes alongside the mobilisation of caste associations by dominant groups. The simultaneous denial and affirmation of caste is facilitated by interpretations of caste as difference or identity rather than hierarchy. Natrajan aptly calls this the ‘*culturalisation of caste*’. By this, he means the process ‘wherein caste groups (led by caste elites) attempt to (re)construct and (re)present themselves as cultural groups such that caste comes to be viewed, narrated, embodied, and performed by social actors simply as pre-existing “natural” cultural difference or identity rather than as socioculturally constructed relations of ascribed status and antagonism’ (2012: 5). This allows dominant groups to take refuge behind

discourses 'culture' – or 'merit' in debates around reservations - whilst masking the monopolistic practices on which caste rests and the inequalities it creates.

There is an echo here of Du Bois, whose idea of a 'white blindspot' highlighted how the interests of some whites can pose as the general interest. Du Bois also coined the idea of a 'psychological wage':

'It must be remembered that the white group of labourers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white' (Du Bois 1935: 700).

The 'psychological wage' refers to advantages that even economically deprived members of the dominant castes accrue by virtue of their standing in the caste hierarchy. Balagopal (2011: 261) details the hidden 'reservations' from which members of dominant castes benefit:

The poor of the Forward Castes – who are undoubtedly numerous – have one advantage which the Dalits do not have, namely, the use of caste links with the rich to obtain a small job or a petty loan; all of them do not always succeed, but the possibility of their success is undeniably present.

Jeffrey (2001), likewise, charts how caste organisation, networks and identity remain significant sources of social and symbolic capital for higher castes. We need, in other words, to analyse caste privilege as well as discrimination and to foreground the relational nature of caste identities in seeking to understand contemporary manifestations and dynamics of caste. Following Jodhka (2015), the contributions to this volume emphasise the necessity of analysing caste in the present and as an evolving form of human relations, rather than a remnant of tradition that will wither away of its own accord.

Taking this point seriously requires us to trace what happens to caste as a form of social relations when it traverses continents. Migration has long been seen as a way for lower castes to escape the predations of caste (Adas 1991), but what happens to the institution of caste as diaspora communities have established themselves around the world? In *Castes in India*, Ambekar (2011: 6) cites Ketkar to stress that 'if Hindus migrate to other regions on earth,

Indian caste would become a world problem'. Indeed, Kumar's (2012) study of caste identity in the diaspora notes that the prevalence of chain or family migration enabled caste identities and networks to continue. His research in South Africa, Fiji and the United Kingdom suggests that where numbers are high (as in the UK) caste distinctions and consciousness persist. Where populations are smaller caste reformulation may occur, but a concern for status remains. 'Caste', as Kumar (2012: 225) concludes, 'can reinvent itself from a rigid hierarchical system into a more fluid structure that offers some sense of superiority of social status'.

### **Papers in this Volume**

This special issue of *Contemporary South Asia* comprises of five papers; three of which (Collins, Gorringer and Philip) focus on understandings around caste dynamics and perspectives in the South Indian context. These papers trace the continuities and changes occurring to caste dynamics in the Indian context. They illustrate the significance of temporal, social and geographic contexts to the expression of caste assertion and highlight the increasing importance of political mobilisation to caste expression. Counter-intuitively, as Mitra (1994: 62) argues, 'caste-consciousness destroys those aspects of caste (traditional social obligations, hierarchy and dominance) which essentialists see as fixed'. Certainly, the three papers presented here document processes of contestation and change, but they also highlight the new forms that caste assumes in the face of changing social relations. The remaining two papers (Arya and Takhar) take up the challenge of researching caste outside the Indian context. They focus on the British context where caste identities continue to influence and shape marriage norms, networks and socio-religious institutions (Vertovec 2000). If politics is seen as central to caste expression in contemporary India, religious institutions are seen as significant for the perpetuation of caste in the UK (Kumar 2012: 223), but it is suggested that British-born south Asians have weaker attachments to caste identity (Patel and Rutten 1999).

In taking up Mitra's (1994: 56) call 'to understand caste in terms of categories drawn from the lifeworld of the individual, placed in the context of the local arena', the papers in this volume offer fine-grained, locally-contextualised analysis of social relations and caste formations. All five papers are based on extensive ethnographic research which allows for the authors to engage with their respective arguments from a contemporary angle which questions traditional understandings of caste and social mobility.

Michael Collins' paper reflects on the dynamics of the origins and development of the Dalit Panther *Iyakkam*, also known as the Dalit Panther Movement, established in Tamil Nadu in 1982 by Malaichamy. Collins' discussion provides a detailed analysis and critique of 'political society' by referring to the works of Partha Chatterjee. Collins argues that the politics of the early Dalit Panther Movement stand in marked contrast to conventional representations of subaltern assertion in relation to generating visible public presence. His paper underscores Bairy's (2012: 36) contention that those who experience caste discrimination *foreground* their caste selves in negotiations with the state and demands for recognition and reparation.

The paper by Hugo Gorrings is also situated within the Tamil Nadu context and focuses on Dalit political mobilisation, but it highlights the intersectional and cross-cutting nature of caste identities. The paper explores gender issues by analysing the treatment of Dalit women with reference to concepts such as disempowerment and emasculation, which constrain the activism of Dalit women. Gorrings' discussion focuses on the stigma attached to female Dalit activists with reference to caste pride, honour and patriarchy. His discussion is based on extensive ethnography amongst the Dalit women of the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi* (The Liberation Panther Party), and points to problems with assuming that all members of a caste experience their social position in a similar manner.

Jessy Philip's discussion around democratisation of caste in rural society concentrates on a South Indian village and suggests the dominance and persistence of caste in every day social and political interactions. Philips places her argument within understandings about neo-liberalism and argues that despite democratization in the specified South Indian village, power and authority continue to lie in the hands of the landholding Kamma caste which results in the continued importance of caste in political spaces. The necessity for a relational understanding of caste is seen here, as central to dynamics of caste reproduction and contestation.

The remaining two papers focus on caste in the UK. This is an apt location for research on diaspora communities given the debates around the issue generated by calls to include caste in Equalities Legislation. Scholars are divided on the merits of – and necessity for – the legislation. Shah (2016), for example, presents mobilisation against caste as the project of Christian missionaries, whilst Dhanda (2017: 65) demands the acknowledgement of 'the existence of casteism and its pernicious effects'. Against this backdrop, Rina Arya examines caste identities from a generational perspective in relation to Hindu Punjabis in the Greater

Manchester area of England. Her paper explores whether there is a change in the expression and experience of caste between two generations of Hindu Punjabis. Arya's discussion also incorporates caste identity amongst Hindu Punjabis as having a strong sense of belonging and therefore affiliation to an ingroup, that is, to same-caste members. Arya highlights how the experience of caste is shaped by social context, but also points to change over time in the differing experiences of first and second generation migrants to the UK.

In the final paper of this Special Issue, Opinderjit Kaur Takhar discusses British legislation in reference to the amendment of the Equality Act 2010 by adding caste to the protected characteristic of 'race'. Takhar's exploration relates, in particular, to the obstacles in the implementation of the legislation from the Sikh Council UK in their demand for a Sunset Clause which essentially argues that caste has no relevance amongst the younger generation of British Sikhs. The argument from the Sikh Council, therefore, insists upon the irrelevance of caste-based legislation in Britain, even as Dalit groups lobby for its implementation. The paper captures the multiple and varied interpretations and experiences of caste in the UK, and illustrates how caste remains central to discursive constructions of community.

The papers in this Special Issue of *Contemporary South Asia* therefore, raise and highlight many contemporary changes in attitudes towards caste, but also the persistence of caste based identities and dynamics in India and Britain. We appreciate that this Special Issue offers a limited insight into the complex arena of caste experiences in South Asia and beyond, but they emphasise the need for detailed and contextualised studies of caste that interrogate casual assumptions about how caste operates and how it is experienced. As we finalise this Introduction to the Special Issue, caste politics remain as visible as ever in the public domain of both South Asian, as well as British society. Caste based issues continue to shape livelihoods, cultures and identities in South Asia and beyond due to their array of manifestations and understandings, and we offer this special issue as a contribution to the scholarship on these issues.

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