

Introduction: Caste in/as Humanities: Unsettling the Politics of Suffering

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Caste, as Nicholas Dirks suggests, has become the most important and well-known register of identification of the Indian civilisation. It is often considered 'intrinsic' to the Hindu society in the scholarly investigations on India (or more generally on South Asia) emerging in the global academia (Dirks 3). From the time of early travel narratives on South Asia by western tradesmen, orientalist scholars like William Jones, Max Muller, narratives written by Christian missionaries like Charles Mead or Robert Caldwell or the denigrators of 'oriental societies' like G.W. F. Hegel and concerned critics like Karl Marx to much of our postcolonial socio-political struggles, 'caste' has been perceived as either an elusive, resilient, hydra-headed monster, or a unique feature of the Hindu society that preempts competition that western modernity brings about.

The signifier *caste*, derived from the Portuguese word *casta*, is largely a result of intercultural encounters between the 'native' social hierarchies based on endogamous units and hereditary professions on one hand, and the idea of 'purity of blood' that people of the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal) were already quite familiar with on the other (Guha 21). This complex cultural confluence that codified social hierarchies in colonial modernity, has also been portrayed as yet another 'evil colonial import' by many nationalist discourses. The traditional '*varna*' hierarchies that are found in many pre-modern so-called Hindu scriptures indeed got rigidly codified because of colonial ethnometry, ethnographic or anthropological narratives of W.W. Hunter or Herbert Risley. While the Hegelian reading of *varna* – i.e. *varna* distorted/degenerated into caste – is reiterated and popularised by many Indian nationalists, Ambedkar in his 1936 tract *Annihilation of Caste* refutes the Hegelian thesis that perceives *varna* as an experiment in social management that eventually degenerated into the present caste system (Rathore and Mohapatra 140-166).

Ambedkar debunks the *guna* theory justification of *varna* as attempted by Lord Krishna in *Bhagavat Gita* by posing a simple mathematical question i.e. if *varna* is to be deduced from the corresponding three *gunas* (*satya*, *raja* and *tamas*) originally enunciated in *Sankhyakarika*, then there has to be, mathematically speaking, three *varnas*. Moreover, in this context, Ambedkar discerns a Platonic tendency in understanding human personalities only through certain definitive and somewhat cemented characteristics. In his formulation human contingencies are neither taken into account by Plato, nor by Krishna (Ambedkar 267). Just as Ambedkar's implied critique of Plato and Hegel refutes a standardized reading of *varna*/caste, historians and anthropologists like Susan Bayly have shown that there are pre-modern/early modern or pre-colonial codifications and configurations of caste that were already getting rigidified even before colonial modernity, or its enumerative ambitions started unfolding. Therefore, this does not imply that such social features were entirely derived out of Brahminical systematization of *gunas* into caste or even determined by the colonial rule or policies. The paradigm of reading caste would, therefore, not remain confined to a simple chronological idea of history but would spread beyond the ontological (Derrida 102-103) determinations.

Caste has undergone various forms of enframing (Heidegger 311-340) in various historical moments in the sub-continental culture which appropriates and restructures the past, instead of either abandoning or simply replicating its earlier forms. Therefore, caste could be read both diachronically as well as synchronically, as a historical formation as well

as a structural imperative. This makes any easy understanding of the question of caste impossible. We can never be sure of whether caste hierarchies were more flexible in the early Vedic period as it has been claimed at times. Textual evidence is not enough, nor are the various archaeological resources, as we know that each historical moment is also constituted by the logic of synchronicity and structure which produces its own form of aphasia and silence. The question of caste is also about silence and therefore requires incessant and seamless re-textualization. Yet such differentiation between the textual and the phenomenological, between the everyday materiality of caste and the ideational dimensions of *varna* encoded in the Brahminical textual traditions, looks moribund and redundant when it comes to making sense of caste's unstoppable resilience and centrality in the social dynamics of the subcontinent and its diasporic existences globally.

Ambedkar, a fascinating reader of ancient texts, often willy-nilly contested textualist models of colonial ethnography or anthropology by registering the ascribed value that the Brahminical texts place onto the everyday occurrences apropos caste (Ambedkar 288). In his scathing attack on the said tradition in *Annihilation of Caste*, he does acknowledge the unbridgeable and irreducible chasms between the text and the extraordinary ordinariness, its normalcy, in everyday lives and yet, recognises how these texts, beyond their codifying value, also validate social practices at the level of transforming customs into customary laws i.e. the authority of these texts as the source of social legitimacy of caste. This special issue of *Sanglap* on "Caste in Humanities", therefore, attempts to achieve some contemporary re-textualizations that either focus on the performative, phenomenological dimensions of caste that can be best experienced through mediations of lived realities of caste in literary and cultural texts or can attempt at readings of governmentality's engagements with caste as culturally encoded manifestations of caste or read pre-modern texts on caste beyond their assumed historicist worth.

In this issue of *Sanglap*, Jimmy Casas Klausen's robust textual readings of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and the Indian nationalist Aurobindo Ghose's *Indian Polity* suggest that 'sovereignty- varna-violence' triad can be profoundly suggestive in comprehending some of the contemporary revolutionary political activism of the Dalits. By exploring the Dalit Panther Manifesto's clarion call for a global solidarity network – 'Third Dalit World'- that would connect the differentiated registers of violence that constitute the lives of the Dalits or the Blacks, Klausen argues how such initiatives can simultaneously contest utterances of nationalist modernity (Ghose's instance) as well as pre-colonial sub-continent's conceptions of sovereignty that is fundamentally based on the sexual homologues of the *varna* order as described in Manu's *Manavadharmashastra* or its ideological precursor Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. Read in such ways, Klausen's article reveals the necessary tropes of 'reading' caste/*varna* at the limits of the discursive trope of critiquing colonial/postcolonial modernity.

Klausen's article, however, gets its just historical context through Anindya Sekhar Purakayastha's article as it presents a detailed study on the 'gloaletics' of a potential revolutionary politics through a necessarily conjoined reading of caste and race. Purakayastha's article explores the possibilities of a differentiated-yet-shared revolutionary politics that connects W. E. B. Du Bois's attacks on American racism with Ambedkar's affront on the injustices of caste. Purakayastha's piece moves way beyond the usual comparative models that explore caste and race and excavates the Du Bois archives at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and the Ambedkar archives at the Columbia University at the City of New York to situate the historical as well as ethico-political connections between Du Bois and Ambedkar. Keeping such histories in the backdrop and deploying a

methodological trope similar to Klausen's, Subro Saha's essay examines the redundant binarisation of idea/matter vis-à-vis caste. Saha looks into the internal logic of Gandhi's war on untouchability and his apparent fixation with hygiene and cleanliness as well as our contemporary governmentalism manifested in programmes like *Swachh Bharat* in order to manifest the complex overlap between colonial modernity's obsession with hygiene and the perpetuation of the Indian subcontinental tradition that continues the embodied experience that caste is. In his essay, Saha draws upon a wide range of texts – from Louis Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* to the *Nyay-Vaisheshik* conceptions of body – in order to read caste beyond its materiality/ideational comprehension or its containment within a pure/impure grid.

In our post-colonial times, caste is also perceived as a resilient political and social force that not only interacts with and shapes various governmental policies but also brings about significant social, cultural and literary ramifications, albeit in a vastly differentiated time and space of the Indian nation-state. Many of these colonial perceptions haunt our neo-liberal, postcolonial equations of caste in contemporary times. The segregation and abjection in terms of territorial, cultural or bodily difference continues to manoeuvre from the colonial to the postcolonial moment through identity formation of both the privileged and the outcaste. It binds them into a relationship of irredeemable otherness and alienation. The pyrotechniques of subjugation are mediated often through the organization of space which produces caste identities and its other co-ordinates like untouchability or the so-called cultural, educational or racial backwardness. Joydip Dutta's article focuses on such existential or phenomenological alienation produced by the making of lower caste spaces occupied and denoted by the outcaste migrants. Dutta focuses on the experience of refugees in a camp of post-partition Bengal, mainly occupied by lower caste migrants, as a space of immanent experience of death and decay. His article doesn't talk about caste as a category and define the existential experience of the outcaste refugees, but rather about the silence and the indefinability of experience of these people to preempt caste.

While Dutta's article is based on field experiences of being inside the camp space, Samrat Sengupta's article focuses on the autobiographical writings of Dalit writer Manoranjan Byapari, who also happens to be from a migrant refugee family having experiences of class, caste and cultural alienation. Beyond the experience of the possible, Sengupta pushes his article towards caste as an impossible possibility of habitation. While habitation and habitability anthropologically for a Dalit is based on abandonment in terms of space, the relationship of abandonment, he shows, is not based on a total separation and geographical isotopy. Rather the abandonment is organized in a modern urban space in terms of contiguity, making space heterotopic in a Lefebvrian sense, thereby making it precarious for modern biopolitics to contain and determine. The spatially alienated urban poor Dalit people live under precarity but they also charge the isotopy of the space with radical possibility of occupation and contamination.

But these complex genealogies of caste in terms of anthropological, historical, social or political narratives get radically ruptured with the introduction of what the editors call the 'literary turn' in caste studies. Most of these non-fictional accounts, somehow or the other, elide the everyday negotiations with caste that billions of south Asians and Indians grapple with, especially those who are placed at the lowest rungs of the society. It is this affective, phenomenological dimension of caste-marked lives that define such 'literary turn' in caste studies. This involves a literary activism as well as an aesthetic subversion. To intervene the ideological formation of caste that synchronizes culture and society and persists despite democratic transformations, historical and anthropological enquires are not enough.

Intervention in the linguistic and literary unconscious and a foregrounding of the unsayable voices of the marginalized become essential. Therefore, we witness the literary movement that started in the post-Independence Maharashtra in 1970s eventually being spread in various other vernacular literary traditions while keeping Marathi Dalit Panther as its epicentre. These 'Dalit' narratives have radically altered the social science academic engagements with caste as most of them invariably place themselves at the limits of state-based negotiations.

Rajat Roy's article in this issue revives the silenced traditions subjugated by the dominant Brahminic Hinduism based on Vedic conventions. Roy reclaims the mythological and cultural narratives of the outcastes, the untouchables such as the *Namashudras* in Bengal, focusing on the *Matua* religion of the *Namashudras*, a non-dominant religious sect which follows partly the non-Vedic strain of Indian religious tradition. Roy revives alternative myth making through Manindranath Biswas's *Harichand Tattamrita*, a book based on the teachings of the Matua guru Harichand Thakur. He shows among several other cultural and theological interventions how the re-imagination of time through *yugas* has been facilitated to unsettle the dominant caste Hindu assertion of the relationship of *satya yuga*, the classical age and the current *kali yuga* as one of pure opposition. The present age of *kali yuga* for a Dalit brings promise of emancipation and therefore assures a future utopia of return of *satya yuga*, literally the 'age of truth'. The mythological here becomes the political narrative for reclaiming identities and re-imagination of temporalities against the established Hindu religious tradition. The fracturing of silence in the domain of the literary and the mythological also opens up the space of foregrounding the caste invisibilization in hitherto unnoticed cultural texts beyond their dominant ways of reading.

Similar to the way Roy's article invokes the non-dominant texts from the forgotten literary archives of Bengal, Ritu Sen Chaudhuri's essay on the apparently innocent children's movie *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* unravels the textual unconscious of caste from its erstwhile silence. This silence, Sen Chaudhuri's article shows, is structural with respect to a certain evasion of the caste question in Bengal, which claims it to be more progressive with respect to other Indian states. In Bengal caste is often translated into cultural chauvinism as the upper caste landed people alienated themselves from labour under colonial rule to become comprador bourgeoisie. The alienation affects the realm of the cultural to render caste discrimination unspeakable or to represent it by other indirect means. *Goopy*, in the film, of lower caste origin gets frequently humiliated by the upper caste people of his village for his interest in classical music – a domain solely occupied by Brahmins and Kshatriyas for recreation and performance. His humiliation closely resonates caste practices where the bullying men evidently show their casteist entitlements and renames him as Gyne, the one who sings, mockingly, following the casteist practice of titling people according to their profession. He and his peer Bagha Byne, whom he met on his way, are both thrown out of their respective villages, and eventually they become successful in the outer magical world by the boon of a ghost king. Their mobility is ensured by their apparent expulsion from the casteist space of humiliation and mocking humour. Thereby this reading turns the 'innocent' text into a politically loaded counter-narrative.

Anirban Das's article is a reading of scholars like Aniket Jaware who counter the separation of the empirical and historical from the philosophical. He challenges the isolation of the two and speaks against the reversal of the dominance of historical, sociological scholarship on caste to replace it with the philosophical and the aesthetic. Anirban shows how the philosophical can mediate and transform the sociological by displacing the forms of marginality in casteism from its specific domain into other discourses and practices such as gender. He likewise invokes the debates on authenticity of experience in feminist theory in

the realm of caste studies. Then by reading a short story of the Bengali experimental fiction writer Kamal Kumar Majumder he brings back the paradigm of purity and pollution in caste from his previous reading in a different context to see how the singularity of such binary can evoke a certain generality of experience where gender and caste discrimination can come together to form a provocative dialogue.

As we start listening to the experiential narratives of Dalits, the apparently innocent texts reappear to be politically charged and disturbing for the dominant caste consciousness. The putative claims of ‘lived experience’ becomes the basis of alternative canon-formation and thus, contests, ruptures and interrogates the standardised narratives of history, sociology, literary and cultural studies. This shows the limits of entirely positivist and objective approaches to caste and opens up ‘experience’ as a critical category of enquiry. While the fetishization of ‘experience’ may uncritically yield alternative models of foundationalism replicating the majoritarian methods of self-fashioning, a critical venture into the ‘self-narratives’ can enumerate ambiguities, paradoxes and above all the denials within the epistemic foreclosures of a caste society. It is in this context that *Sanglap*’s special issue on “Caste in/as Humanities” is focused on how these literary and cultural narratives mediate caste-based experiences and represent the complex realities of caste as we live in/with them. Based on the ideological template of a somewhat nebulous Phule-Ambedkarite discursive tradition or Periyar’s writings that contest the dominant Brahminism, such narratives can simultaneously engage with the fact-centric narratives of social sciences as well as question the normative aesthetic assumptions that dominate our hegemonic cultural space. It is in this context that we have attempted to compile articles that foreground the interactions of these various political, social and literary discourses to engage with the representational, aesthetic or philosophical concerns raised in Dalit literary narratives in particular, as well as caste-based literatures that are not easily identified as ‘Dalit literature’. We have also tried to include reflections on social and political situations which through a philosophical and aesthetic re-reading may foreground caste as a paradigm of negations in language and thought. The point however is not to exchange the sociological and the empirical for the philosophical.

The articles in this volume consider experiences of pain, suffering and negation as an important paradigm of understanding the social, cultural and political field occupied by caste, but also attempt to move beyond it. Derek Walcott, extending the third world experience in Caribbean Islands, comments on the poets and creative writers of his time who focus on pain and suffering in their writings primarily as this: “This shame and awe of history possess poets of the Third World who think of language as enslavement and who, in a rage for identity, respect only incoherence or nostalgia” (Walcott 371). With hybrid and impure experiences of manifold sufferings, the scholarship on caste requires identification of the problems of such circulation of “rage for identity”, and an attempt to read the negative experience of caste as “a creative and culpable force” (Walcott 371).

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