

## **Minds of caste – Discrimination and its affects**

Guest Editorial by Sushrut Jadhav, David Mosse & Ned Dostaler

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Is it any longer meaningful to talk about the Indian caste system? Has revisionist history and contemporary economic transformation dispensed with caste? Today, debate on caste is at once silenced and yet noisier than ever, and views on caste and caste-based discrimination are both diverse and socially dividing.

While most researchers would agree that caste, however understood, is simultaneously weakened and strengthened in the contemporary moment, the political alignments around these debates are more sharply drawn.

Unsurprisingly, the view of caste as benign or threatening, opportunity or constraint, an orientalist abuse of Indian culture or an abuse of human rights needing the attention of the United Nations, depends upon people's social position and the freedoms they enjoy.

For example, Satish Deshpande observes that '[u]pper caste identity is such that it can be completely overwritten by modern professional identities of choice, whereas lower caste identity is so indelibly engraved that it overwrites all other identities' (Deshpande 2013). Within this socially situated and contested field, we want to point to one current trend in interdisciplinary research that opens up an inner terrain of caste.

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Post-colonial anti-essentializing anthropologists have been drawn more towards deconstructive accounts of institutions such as caste caught up in forms of colonial government, than to representing the inner experiences of caste: that is, towards studying the 'castes of mind' (Dirks 2001) rather than paying attention to the inner minds of caste. With some exceptions, even those interested in emancipatory politics have tended to externalize caste as a structural constraint or a field of power within which oppressed Dalits operate as strategic individuals or groups, rather than following Dr B.R. Ambedkar's lead by paying attention to the way that people's subjectivity is damaged by oppressions of caste and to the inner dynamics of caste prejudice and the perpetration of harm.

A gathering of those interested in the *affects* of caste recently took place in London.<sup>1</sup> Attention was drawn to the fear and anxiety that are the pervasive affects of caste violence and its threat, and to their cultural expression. For instance, Veerachami, a leader of the Arunthathiyar (Dalit) community in a village in Tamil Nadu studied by Murali Shanmugavelan, lives with the fear that the dominant Maravar caste with whom he interacts daily could turn on him should he no longer be useful to them. Explaining how this feels, he says that 'talking with them is like shaking hands while holding an egg in your armpit', an analogy that speaks to the cognitive and embodied fragility of Veerachami's everyday life.

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It is true that practices of untouchability which were formerly pervasive in rural India are now criminalized. Even though caste is inseparably and in new ways a part of unequal and oppressive economic relations, everyday public enactments of caste ranking and dishonour are less manifest, although the self-assertion by Dalits that this social change entails has also brought an upsurge in more terrifyingly violent attacks on them. Correspondingly, those who continue to experience indignity, increasingly describe caste as an affect.

David Mosse's Dalit informants tell him that caste turned inward now resides as a 'feeling inside the mind/heart' (2012). The various sociopolitical, economic and religious relations that impact on people are captured in the Tamil phrase *caathi puthi* or 'caste mind'.<sup>2</sup>

With a growing awareness of citizens' rights, the forms of 'honour humiliation' that subjugated groups within a given social order are increasingly replaced by 'dignity humiliation', that is, the violation of claims to equal rights (terms used by Evelin Lindner 2007).

In the context of new aspirations, various claims to status and potential rejections multiply (Guru 2009), turning our attention to how humiliation impacts on mental health, for example, as the suicidal distress experienced by some talented high-achieving Dalit students in elite institutions as a consequence of social defeat or a failed struggle.<sup>3</sup>

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The psychological-behavioural dynamics between the perpetrators and victims of caste discrimination has opened up as a field of inquiry, and within this are the complex effects of stigma and its anticipation, of caste labelling and its looping effects (Hoff & Pandey 2012, alluding to Ian Hacking), of double identities (concealing and revealing caste), and of the asymmetries that attribute Dalit success to external factors (caste-quotas) and failure to inherent deficits (and vice versa for privileged castes).

Indeed, regimes of affirmative action such as India's, produce complex 'double-stigma' effects, as Dalits are stigmatized both for their caste identity and as recipients of state provisions (Deshpande 2015). While such processes are now understood, the impact of a system that masks caste privilege at the top within a discourse of casteless merit, while relegating the negative psychological load of caste identity to the bottom by construing caste itself as a subaltern formation (Subramanian 2015) have hardly been examined. How does this deplete the core human resource of self-worth, provoke humiliation and other affective and psychological impacts of life within a cultural landscape of caste. Caste, mediated by gender and class among other things, affects many millions of people and yet we know little of the mechanisms or experiences of the social suffering involved. Some of the richest insights come from those with autobiographical access to the unfolding effect of discrimination experience in a lifetime (e.g. Thorat 1979).

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Indeed, a burgeoning Dalit literature, anthropological interest in affect, and the work of cultural psychiatrists could be combined to open up a set of new questions about caste identity and its affective impact.

There is the potential to further our collective understanding of the 'caste mind' by combining the cultural insights of anthropology and the (underdeveloped) capacity of psychiatry to address psychopathology on the individual level.

In his attempts to do this, Sushrut Jadhav, working clinically as a psychiatrist-anthropologist, faced a challenge from his Dalit Avatari informants in Uttar Pradesh, India: 'We are grateful you will try to understand psychological experiences of discrimination, but once you open up our wounds, what will you do next?'

This led him to exploratory work on practical ways to address the psychological suffering of the victims of caste-based violence. Drawing on the frameworks of Frantz Fanon, Augusto Boal and Dalit social movements, Jadhav is piloting an approach which is against medicalizing oppression or pathologizing Dalits as victims, while paying attention to the psychological effects of landscapes of caste. Above all, this requires working with caste as a relational phenomenon and attending to the cultural dynamics of prejudice and perpetration rather than diagnosing disorders within the victims of caste abuse – an approach that provides a critical engagement with the Global Mental Health (GMH) agenda (Eaton et al. 2011).

The GMH movement glosses over local affective ecologies and sidesteps the naming of crucial culture-specific vectors that mediate and shape social suffering (Jadhav et al. 2015). For example, the treatment of 'manual scavengers' (divers into sewage manholes and handlers of human faeces who drink to cope with work in the 'sea of filth') as people with alcohol abuse problems who are subject to therapeutic strategies such as cognitive behavioural therapy and alcohol aversion medication, does not get anywhere near addressing the humiliation and damage to subjectivity involved in this deeply stigmatizing work (Gatade 2015).

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All too frequently these days, caste comes to the public attention through reports of horrific violence, rape, lynching, murder or arson perpetrated by the more powerful against the powerless, especially Dalits. We hear of a judicial system that is slow to respond, or even aids perpetrators; but what we learn less about is 'how injustice comes to be lived affectively' (Ram 2013: 87) and how caste-based assaults impact on emotional and mental wellbeing.

This editorial suggests then, that to understand the contemporary presence or absence of caste in South Asian social life, and the shifting nature of identities and relations of caste in its modern forms – social, political *and* affective – there is a need to develop a productive interface between anthropology and the fields of mental health. ●

1. 'Minds of Caste: An interdisciplinary seminar on how caste identities shape the mind', 4 September 2015, University College London. The seminar was convened by Sushrut Jadhav, UCL Division of Psychiatry and facilitated by David Mosse, SOAS and Caroline Selai, UCL Institute of Neurology. [http://www.ucl.ac.uk/intercultural-interaction/events/report\\_caste](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/intercultural-interaction/events/report_caste).

2. Ethnographic exploration of the meaning and *habitus of caathi puthi* is part of Murali Shanmugavelan's current PhD research at SOAS.

3. E.g. as testified in 'The death of merit' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2L3y9O1HCBw>.

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