

Rise of An Unavoidable Dailt Voice: A Review of Suraj Yengde's *Caste Matters*

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Caste Matters (2019) is Dailt scholar, activist Suraj Yengde's first book. The title alludes to the book *Race Matters* (1993) by American philosopher and public intellectual, Prof. Cornel West, who is also Yengde's mentor. Thus, the title shows that Yengde took upon himself similar project regarding dailt people as that of Prof. Cornel West about coloured people, to make dailt voices audible and dissect the always mutating caste ecology of India. The book is a first of its kind in terms of theorising dailt experience of casteism as it is in the 21st century and also providing a nuanced critique of the caste system by analyzing not only the role of brahmins but each and every single person belonging to brahmin, bania, kshatriya, shudra and even Dalit sub castes and classes who participate in the caste system as it is everyone's participation and validation that makes the caste system thrive, but it is also sometimes blissful ignorance and denial. The book received much backlash in the early days of its publication mounted to labeling Yengde's as 'anti-Ambedkarite' for his 'more than the Constitution' approach to Dalit problems. These criticisms were defended by many Dalit scholars who realized Yengde's committed pro-Ambedkarite spirit. There are also criticisms about the theory and lack of structural coherence of the book, aspects which I will discuss later. The book addresses the operation of caste system in 21st Century India and also abroad.

The introduction of the book which is titled as "Caste souls: Motifs of 21st Century" begins with the autobiographical account of the author of 'being Dalit' which shows poverty stricken, unhealthy life of Dalit bastis. The aim of the book, according to Yengde, is "to spark the type of public conversation that most shy away from" (Introduction). In this section he summarizes his arguments of the following chapters. It is his first-hand experience of caste system that shaped his theory. Dalits exist on the fringes of Indian society. As they live in

segregated geographies, it becomes possible for them to retain their cultural ethnicity, one of such aspects is Dalit spiritualism which is quite different from the mainstream brahminist idea of God. Dalits can easily connect with their clan gods and goddesses which is not the case in brahminical spiritually impoverished, systematically coded and manipulated religious rituals.

Yengde radicalizes the markers of Dalit identity that differentiates them from the forward castes. Although not every Dalit can be a beneficiary of their community, Dalit middle class's attempt to mimic the elite oppressor can become a foul obstacle in the path of Dalit liberation. Yengde calls 21st century as the "Harlem moment" for Dalit community as many radical Dalits, mostly first generation higher educated, armed with the knowledge of the world and also the deficiencies of their own society, would not let caste remain invisible or a matter of past, they would initiate uncomfortable conversations and liberate their community.

Ambedkar once famously wrote critiquing the casteist attitude of brahmins that wherever they will go, they will take the caste system with them. Yengde testifies to this fact in the first chapter "Being a Dalit" where he recounts his moral harassment at the hands of his Indian friends both brahmin and non-brahmin. The upper caste gaze injects humiliation in Dalit souls. But in the face of such humiliation and violence that threatens their existence, Dalits chose to exercise 'Dalit love'. Dalit love is spiritual, it works in healing an oppressive past and dreams of a future of equity and dignity: "It is conditionally rooted in pain and simultaneously desires real escape." (Yengde 49) It does not hate the oppressor it rather tries to reform the oppressor. Dalit love does not fear the red-eyed gaze of the oppressor and thus becomes an act of rebellion. 'Dalit humor' is also an act of rebellion, pent up frustration and angst against the oppressive caste system find language in Dalit humor. But this Dalit humor that addresses burning social, political and cultural issues are still at the fringes of Indian society. The mainstream humor in India is mostly plain entertainment based and thus lack any real purpose. Yengde also talks about 'Dalit universalism', which symbolizes comradeship among all humans that will eradicate caste barriers.

The second chapter is about the rise of the neo Dalits on the economical and intellectual grounds but they are still socially ostracized for casteism. Here Yengde cites the

cases of Dalit judge Justice Karnan (of Kolkata high court) and his Dalit beaurocrat friend to show how injustice is still meted out on Dalit people despite their intellectual and economical forward status in the society. Constitutionalism does not ensure their social security. The Constitution like any other code of law does not become successful in the absence of social acceptance. Yengde also points to the linguistic inability of the Constitution to reach peasant and working class Dalit masses. Most of the time Dalits succumb to the state narrative of the Constitution as the only way for Dalit liberation. Thus, the image of Ambedkar and the promises of the Constitution is used by the ruling upper caste to subside Dalit rage which can actually bring about social change. This approach of Yengde has received much criticism but to see it from a different angle, it tries to find a real solution to the Dalit problem by providing a mirror to expose the limitations of present day Dalit leadership and the co-option of Ambedkar and the Constitution by the ruling upper castes. He also discusses aspects like Dalit nationalism, Dalit power, Dalit liberation and, Dalit patriotism. Each of the sections are equally intriguing in terms of bringing out the peculiarity of Dalit existence and struggle.

Dalit is not a monolithic identity, their ideology, their struggle and their reaction to oppression differs depending on their sub caste, class status within the Dalit community. And these divisions are not peculiar to only Dalit community, it can be recognized in every varna or caste. In "The Many shades of Dalits" Yengde talks about these 'castegories' within Dalit community: 'token Dalits', 'elite Dalits', 'self-obsessed Dalits' and, 'radical Dalits'. While describing these 'castegories' he not only criticizes them for not being able to put up a strong resistance, but he also sympathetically analyzes their role in the caste ecology as each Dalit even if she/he belongs to elite or middle class, does not escape caste based humiliation or manipulation. Their denial or suppression of their Dalit identity is based on their desperate urge for survival in the suffocating system of caste. But while the descriptions of 'castegories' are nuanced and well grounded, it seems paradoxical on the part of the author to succumb to idea of categories after stating that Dalit is not a monolithic identity, as categories tend to bracket an otherwise complicated and multidimensional identity and experience that is 'Dalit'.

Yengde defines the Dalit middle class as the section of thinking mass, they influence government policies, they function as trend setters and consensus makers. Dalit middle class

can take the advantage of this position to do something beneficial for their community but they fail to produce any strong Dalit leadership or any effective rhetoric of Dalit struggle as "they happily emulate unoriginal brahminical thinking.' (Yengde 200) They largely get benefitted from the reservation policy but after establishing themselves they forgot to give back to their community, they go into a denial mode, suppressing the values of their Dalit root.

Discussing about Dalit capitalism, Yengde brings into conversation Washington and Du Bois debate about negro emancipation and Ambedkar's ideological affinity with Du Bois. While Booker T. Washington endorsed vocational training for negro emancipation, W.E.B Du Bois advocated higher education and intellectual development as a way of achieving liberation. Ambedkar much like Du Bois has always put emphasis on higher education for Dalit struggle, his motto was "Educate, Agitate, Organize". Economic development does not guarantee agency. Dalit capitalism celebrates Washington and mistakenly tries to fuse Ambedkar's ideology with that of Washington's, quite unable to grasp the totality of Ambedkar's intellectual agenda. Dalit capitalism believes that the shackles of caste can be broken through economical independency but in India where the market economy is completely controlled by caste which the author terms 'baniaization', any project of Dalit capitalist adventure remains trapped within brahminical market monopoly: "Thus, Dalit capitalism is the farcical face of an oppressive and exploitative order." (Yengde 238) The author further argues that the very grain of capitalism goes against Dalit ideology of equality.

In the last chapter "Brahmins against Brahminism" Yengde catalogues brahmins who have fought against the heinous system of caste by tracing the history of Swami Chakradhar's anti-caste movement in 13th Century India and also recounting the brahmin followers and comrades of Phule and Ambedkar. These brahmins have opposed their own community to fight for liberty and equity of every section of society. The burning of the *Manusmriti* is suggested by Sahasrabuddhe, a brahmin friend of Ambedkar, informs Yengde. There are many instances such as this cited by the author. The narrative of these brahmins' struggle against their own caste is suppressed in the mainstream brahminical culture for obvious reasons but they are also marginalized in the discussions of Dalit circles today. The author asks us to keep these narratives alive as 21st century India lacks such courageous brahmins.

Yengde observes that liberal brahmins 'passive anger' does not mean anything which only finds its way in Facebook posts and conversation among like-minded people, they need to become 'cultural suicide bombers' much like their Phuleite and Ambedkarite predecessors. By asking the 21st Century brahmins to become 'cultural suicide bombers' the author does not necessarily put the onus of Dalit liberation on the upper caste but tries to make us remind that to break the hegemony of caste we need people from every section of society even the dominant one. The rationale for the upper caste's participation in Dalit struggle is their obvious oppressed status in a hierarchical system like caste.

Suraj Yengde's *Caste Matters* is a well-researched book with empirical data of present day ground situations of caste system in India. It critically scans limitations of Dalit movements and scholarships in India only to provide an idea of possible ways for Dalit liberation. Like most Dalit literary works, this book also falls prey to the criticism of lack of merit for its supposed structural incoherence. But I would like to argue that Yengde's fusion of theorisation with personal narratives is not foreign if seen in the context of Dalit studies (or any other theory that deals with oppressed voices like Holocaust, Black lives, Feminism or Queer studies) as what else can be better ground to develop theory about Dalits than their testimonies and personal narratives.

Work Cited

Yengde, Suraj. *Caste Matters*. Penguin Viking-Penguin Random, 2019.

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