

**PERSISTENCE OF CASTE IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA:  
A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF  
VICTIMHOOD, LEGITIMATION AND PREJUDICE IN  
CASTE RELATIONS**

**Suryodaya Sharma**



**DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES**

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**PERSISTENCE OF CASTE IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA:  
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LEGITIMATION AND PREJUDICE IN CASTE RELATIONS**

*by*

**Suryodaya Sharma**

**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**

*Submitted*

*in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of*

**Doctor of Philosophy**

*to the*



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**JUNE 2024**

*“To my mother who refused to be a product of her times and  
changed our lives through her resistance.”*

## CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled “**Persistence Of Caste in Contemporary India: A Social Psychological Analysis of Victimhood, Legitimation and Prejudice in Caste Relations**” being submitted by **Suryodaya Sharma** to the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Delhi, for the award of **Doctor of Philosophy**, is a record of the bonafide work carried by him under my supervision. In my opinion, the thesis has reached the standards of fulfilling the requirements for submission relating to the degree. The contents of the thesis have not been submitted in part or full to any other university or Institute for the award of any degree/diploma.



Prof. Yashpal Jogdand,

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi

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Suryodaya Sharma

## ABSTRACT

Caste has been a system of oppression, violence, and inequality for thousands of years. Last two centuries have witnessed the mounting challenges to caste inequities by many leaders, social movements, government, and civil society. Yet, caste continues to be a prominent system of oppression in Indian society. The nature and implications of this oppression have been extensively studied in social sciences, such as sociology, political science, and economics. However, caste whether defined as a system of power, ideology, belief, or identity has an irrefutable psychological existence. Yet, psychology as a discipline has not given enough attention to caste context. While much of the extant social scientific research has examined the victim experiences and perspectives to approach caste-based victimisation, this thesis goes further to approach caste-based victimisation through the perspectives of the historically advantaged groups. Building on a social psychological perspective, the thesis seeks to fill this gap and offer insights into the persistence of caste-based violence, discrimination, and other forms of injustices.

Using interview ( $N=32$ ) and survey data ( $N=677$ ) and employing range of quantitative (multivariate regression, indirect effect analysis, structural equation modelling) and qualitative analyses (thematic analysis, discursive-rhetorical analysis), this thesis showcases the belief systems, psychological processes, and attitudes critical to legitimating and reproducing caste-based asymmetries. The thesis also identifies the dynamic content and ideological processes underlying caste prejudice and its implications for caste relations. Overall, this thesis contributes to understanding of caste-based victimisation, legitimation and prejudice in the contemporary Indian society.

## सारांश

जाति हजारों वर्षों से उत्पीड़न, हिंसा और असमानता की व्यवस्था रही है। पिछली दो शताब्दियों में कई नेताओं, सामाजिक आंदोलनों, सरकार और नागरिक समाज द्वारा जातिगत असमानताओं के लिए बढ़ती चुनौतियों को देखा गया है। फिर भी, भारतीय समाज में जाति उत्पीड़न की एक प्रमुख प्रणाली बनी हुई है। समाजशास्त्र, राजनीति विज्ञान और अर्थशास्त्र जैसे सामाजिक विज्ञानों में इस उत्पीड़न की प्रकृति और प्रभावों का व्यापक रूप से अध्ययन किया गया है। हालाँकि, जाति, चाहे वह शक्ति, विचारधारा, विश्वास या पहचान की एक प्रणाली के रूप में परिभाषित हो, का एक अकाद्य मनोवैज्ञानिक अस्तित्व है। फिर भी, एक अनुशासन के रूप में मनोविज्ञान ने जाति संदर्भ पर पर्याप्त ध्यान नहीं दिया है। जबकि अधिकांश मौजूदा सामाजिक वैज्ञानिक अनुसंधान ने जाति-आधारित उत्पीड़न का दृष्टिकोण रखने के लिए पीड़ित अनुभवों और दृष्टिकोण की जांच की है, यह शोध ऐतिहासिक रूप से लाभान्वित समूहों के दृष्टिकोण के माध्यम से जाति-आधारित उत्पीड़न का दृष्टिकोण करने के लिए आगे जाता है। एक सामाजिक मनोवैज्ञानिक परिप्रेक्ष्य के आधार पर, शोध इस अंतर को भरने और जाति-आधारित हिंसा, भेदभाव और अन्य प्रकार के अन्याय की दृढ़ता में अंतर्दृष्टि प्रदान करने का प्रयास करता है।

साक्षात्कार (एन = 32) और सर्वेक्षण डेटा (एन = 677) का उपयोग करते हुए और मात्रात्मक (बहुभिन्नरूपी प्रतिगमन, अप्रत्यक्ष प्रभाव विश्लेषण, संरचनात्मक समीकरण मॉडलिंग) और गुणात्मक विश्लेषण (विषयगत विश्लेषण, विवेचनात्मक-बयानबाजी विश्लेषण) की सीमा को नियोजित करते हुए यह शोध विश्वास प्रणालियों, मनोवैज्ञानिक प्रक्रियाओं और दृष्टिकोण को प्रदर्शित करता है जो जाति-आधारित विषमताओं को वैध बनाने और पुनः पेश करने के लिए महत्वपूर्ण हैं। यह शोध जाति पूर्वाग्रह और जाति संबंधों के लिए इसके प्रभावों में अंतर्निहित गतिशील सामग्री और वैचारिक प्रक्रियाओं की भी पहचान करता है। कुल मिलाकर, यह शोध प्रबंध समकालीन भारतीय समाज में जाति-आधारित उत्पीड़न, वैधता और पूर्वाग्रह की समझ में योगदान देता है।

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## PREFACE

In 2016, four Dalit youths were rounded by the self-proclaimed vigilantes in the city of Una in Gujrat province, tied to a car, publicly beaten and then paraded half-naked in the city. The incident happened in front of a police station and did not invoke any intervention from the cops. The video recordings of the incident caused a major outrage and forced a response from the administration (Langa, 2016). Dalit communities across Gujrat responding to the humiliating incident, boycotted their stigmatised vocation of handling dead cattle as a form of protest (Langa, 2016). Eight years now from the incident, the victim families are reported to be suffering from the shift from the traditional profession, animosity and boycott from advantaged caste groups, and lack of support from the government (Singh, 2023). All the accused are out on the bail at the time of writing these words. The chances of justice are slim, given the abysmally poor conviction rate for crimes against Dalits (Anand, 2021). Notwithstanding the chronicity of caste-based violence after Una incident, the Supreme Court of India in 2018, diluted the provisions of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act in favour of the accused individuals (George, 2019). This instance, among many others, raises some critical questions: How do people make sense of caste in its blatant and banal forms? How does caste manage to be public and simultaneously invisible to non-Dalits? How does prejudice against Dalits survive in an increasingly democratic and modern nation?

The workings of caste system are hard to translate in universalistic and concrete frameworks. The ancient Hindu texts divide the society into four 'varnas' or broad caste groups denoting the social location of an individual (Beteille, 1996; Dumont, 1970). The four

varnas place a substantial population outside the caste system, facing the brunt of physical violence and systemic victimisation and termed as '*achoot*' (untouchables) also called 'scheduled castes', 'lower castes' or 'Harijans'. The caste hierarchy (commonly termed 'caste system') is rooted in a mythical purity of upper caste bodies (twice-born or Savarnas) and the polluting bodies of Dalit caste groups at the bottom (Beteille, 1996; Gorringe et al., 2017; Omvedt, 2011). Since the antiquity, the untouchables were forbidden from access to education or respectable employment as they may pollute these spaces dominated by Savarnas. The sacred texts primarily 'Manusmriti', the law book of Hinduism, provide elaborate and highly hierarchical norms of different castes and even punishments for any violation. The purported religious sanction, to some extent is reliant on the Karma theory, which dictates that the good or bad deeds of the person in the past life determines the birth in a particular caste group. Caste system is broadly based on three broad elements: interdependence among caste groups (caste as hereditary occupation), an ideological hierarchy (essentialised purity and pollution of caste) and separation (a mutual repulsion with other castes) (Bouglé, 1968; Dumont, 1970). It is worth noting that the varna system functions towards building a broad system of social organisation of status, resources and power. However, it is the 'Jati' or the specific caste group as the de facto manifestation of caste (see Jodhka, 2015), that people often identify with, vote for in elections and maintain endogamous relationships.

With colonisation of India, establishment of a constitutional democracy and the new social-political movements, the situation of untouchable groups has changed considerably (Gorringe et al., 2017; Jodhka, 2015). The colonialisation of Indian economy weakened the traditional and rural relations that maintained hereditary and rigid boundaries of employment. The colonial administration employed widescale caste census regularly that radically transformed caste groups into secular and administrative categories (Dirks, 2001). The

introduction of western education and a rule of law paved way for the emergence of Dalits thinkers and leaders such as Jotirao Phule, E. V. Ramswamy 'Periyar' and B. R. Ambedkar who developed ideology and social movements challenging the caste system. The groups hitherto called untouchables assumed the politicised identity of 'Dalit' (meaning broken or crushed), claiming the victimisation and redefining it in assertive terms.

The demands for human rights, dignity and representation for Dalits only increased after the independence of India. The constitution of India explicitly prohibited untouchability and secured seats for Dalits in legislative bodies, government employment and institutions of higher education (termed as reservation). Indian parliament passed a law in 1989- Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act that laid down stringent punishment for any casteist attacks against Dalits by any a non-Dalit person. These social, political, and economic changes have certainly challenged the caste as an institution.

Over the last few decades, researchers have consistently observed a decline in both the caste-based hereditary occupations and the practices based on caste-based purity and pollution (Bouglé, 1968; Dumont, 1970; Gupta, 2000). These are two of the three major markers of the caste system, that we discussed earlier. Many social scientists have viewed these changes as the death knell for the caste system. Some scholars have argued that caste is no longer a meaningful mode of social classification and consequently irrelevant to the questions of inequality (Beteille, 1991; Vaidyanathan, 2019). The well-known anthropologist M. N. Srinivas (2003) went so far as to write a piece on caste titled as: 'An obituary for caste as a system'. However, it is important to consider these claims more critically.

It is tempting to interpret the sea change in political and economic organisation of society to claim that caste is irrelevant in India. However, as the traditional bonds of caste hierarchy and untouchability have weakened, the caste has reproduced itself in the Indian

society in different forms (Bouglé, 1968; Gupta, 2005; Kishore, 2015; Natrajan, 2022)(Gupta, 2005; Judge & Bal, 2008; Kishore, 2015). Dalits over 200 million in population, continue to face physical violence, discrimination and systemic hindrances (Kishore, 2015; Teltumbde, 2010; Thorat & Joshi, 2020). National Crime Research Bureau (NCRB) has shown that in recent years there has been a consistent increase in violent crimes against Dalits (Anand, 2021; Sadanandan, 2018; Sharma, 2015; Teltumbde, 2010). What makes it more worrying is the trend that the violence is higher in the districts where the relative economic position between the Dalits and historically advantaged caste groups is improving (Sharma, 2015), suggesting a resentment over the rise of Dalits<sup>1</sup>. The social practices marked as untouchability have reduced, however caste remains a central mode of social life. A recent Pew research study (2023) showed that a strong majority of Indians object to marrying outside the caste and make friends from their own caste group. The discrimination against Dalits seem to be a norm in both rural and urban areas (Siddique, 2011; Thorat et al., 2020; Thorat & Attewell, 2007). Caste discrimination particularly against Dalits, seem to be pervasive in housing, marriages, educational institutions and employment (Ahuja & Ostermann, 2016; Mosse, 2018; Siddique, 2011). For instance, notwithstanding the common faith in the free market economy, some researchers have found blatant discrimination in the process of recruitment in corporate firms (Mosse, 2018; Thorat & Attewell, 2007). There is a popular narrative of caste as ‘other’ to a specific region (urban/rural), geography or class. However, caste oppression seems to be continuing even as the society is going through a rapid urbanisation (Mosse, 2018; Thorat et al., 2020). Caste has managed to transcend the

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<sup>1</sup> Caste violence is not limited to one group. However, the violence on the basis of caste has almost exclusively targeted Dalits.

core foundation of religion, as those who converted to other religions or moved to different national societies still find caste to be exercising influence on their lives (Matza, 2023; Pew Research Center, 2021).

Contrary to what some scholars (e.g., Beteille, 1991; Vaidyanathan, 2019, Srinivas, 2003) have argued, the continuity of caste inequality is apparent in blatant and systemic disadvantages. An individual from a historically advantaged caste in India is likely to live 12 years more than a Dalit and 10 years more than an OBC (Kishore, 2018). The traditionally high status and advantaged groups continue to dominate the national legislature, judicial bodies, media and private sector; whereas Dalits are disproportionately reliant on unskilled and stigmatised employment (Kishore, 2015; Vaidyanathan, 2019; Verniers & Jaffrelot, 2020). In the distribution of income and consumption, historically advantaged castes are the only social group enjoying more than their proportionate share, with Dalits as the worst-off (Kishore, 2015). However, the victimisation of Dalits is not just relative to other castes. As per the latest Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) two thirds of the Dalit households are dependent on the manual casual labour for the living (Damodaran, 2015). 37 percent of Dalits live below the poverty level, 54 percent of Dalit children are malnourished, more than 67 percent of Dalit women have experienced sexual violence, and Dalits make up 53 percent of India's prison population (Soundararajan, 2022). Thus, the persistence of caste is apparent in both the inequality of outcomes and the inequality of opportunities.

Mosse (2018) highlights the paradoxical continuity of caste in following words:

Caste is found to be a complex institution, simultaneously weakened and revived by current economic and political forces; it is a contributor to persisting national socioeconomic and human capital disparities and has major impacts on subjective wellbeing... its discriminations allow opportunity hoarding for others; and the threat

of the advancement of subordinated groups provokes humiliating violence against them. (p. 1)

Sociological, anthropological and economics researchers have contributed to the understanding of caste-based injustices at the macro level- following ideological, institutional and even historical perspectives (Ambedkar, 2014; Gupta, 2005; Jodhka, 2015; Omvedt, 2001, 2011; Teltumbde, 2010; Thorat & Attewell, 2007). However, this research is limited on few important aspects: first, there is a limited understanding of social psychological dynamics such as emotions, prejudice and belief systems associated with the caste-based victimisation (Jodhka, 2016). Second, the research from other social sciences has largely been focused on the victim groups, not fully delving into ingroup processes within historically advantaged groups. It is argued emphatically that social psychology is in a sweet spot to fill these gaps.

In caste context, the social psychological study into perspectives of historically advantaged and high status groups started as early as 1960s (Anant, 1970; Paranjpe, 1970; Rath & Sircar, 1960), but has been somewhat limited since then. Last decade has witnessed a small uptick in social enquiry into the caste context, but the research has not veered off from the antiquated and context-insensitive belief systems (Blanchar & Eidelman, 2013; Cotterill et al., 2014; Sankaran et al., 2017; also see critique by Jogdand et al., 2016).

In the context of Indian society, the violence and atrocities against Dalits have, arguably, been an undeniable objective reality in Indian society (Jogdand et al., 2020; Soundararajan, 2022; Teltumbde, 2010; Thorat & Joshi, 2020; Thorat & Attewell, 2007). With the history of atrocities against Dalits and the ongoing violence in the present times, one would expect the larger society and particularly members of historically advantaged groups to feel morally responsible and experience self-critical emotions of shame and/or guilt. However, there is little evidence to suggest that the social psychological processes of

acknowledgment of the moral responsibility, let alone any self-critical emotions are pervasive in the Indian caste context. On the contrary, we see a pervasive acceptance of casteist practices, both in public and private lives (Coffey et al., 2018; Pew Research Center, 2021; Siddique, 2011). The apathy and indifference become particularly illuminating in instances of violence such as Una mentioned earlier.

Caste as an ascriptive hierarchy is marked by the conflict, oppression, and domination from time immemorial. Caste divided people based on birth into impermeable compartments and created unassailable boundaries for the marriage, employment and social mobility between castes. The thousands-years-old history of systemic inequality, untouchability and humiliation resulted in caste identities as markers of prejudice, discrimination and violence. Indeed, the caste system is not the only social institution with such a history in the world. The transatlantic slave trade led to enslavement and exploitation of generations of African people; in the Nazi Holocaust around six million Jews were systematically killed, and in Australia entire generations of indigenous Australian tribes were damaged by forcibly removing mixed race (termed Half-caste) children from their families and communities. These are some terrible human travesties that have shaped the moral universe of the modern world.

People in these contexts have at times felt morally obliged to confront the perpetration of inhuman atrocities and felt inclined to correct the wrongs. For instance, after holocaust in Nazi Germany, the German Republic not only acknowledged the moral burden of the grave crime against the Jews, but also allocated reparative measures to the survivors of concentration camps and officially apologised to Israel, expressing a strong sense of collective guilt (Wohl et al., 2006). There have been similar responses in some other contexts. For instance, Barkan (2001) notes a similar manner of engaging with the morally questionable past across several instances such as United States' self-indictment and restitution measures in the internment of people of Japanese origin during World War II.

Similarly, different governments in Australia, Canada and USA have apologised for their treatment of indigenous communities in past and through substantial reparations sought to break away from the morally flawed past of the nation (Barkan, 2001; Leach et al., 2013).

The central idea that we wish to reaffirm by highlighting these collective responses is that indifference and denial about a system of oppression are pervasive, but they are neither inevitable nor permanent. Instead, a social psychological interrogation of these responses whether in their presence or absence gives us a vantage point into what makes the persistence of caste unproblematic and even normative for many.

The acknowledgement of caste or its denial allow us to examine the meaning-making of the process. The emotional responses to injustices, for instance, are the result of a dynamic understanding of the relation of self with the social event. While an individual may feel humiliated by the denigration of a casteist slur, the speaker may feel a sense of pride from the interactional affirmation of their superior caste position. The emotions are also important carriers of critical social information about the world- the material and psychological organisation of the world (who is 'us' or 'them'), the legitimacy about the action (should one feel guilt or pride for one's actions), and the action orientation (defensiveness or mobilisation) (Folkman et al., 1986; Mackie et al., 2008; Tausch et al., 2011; Van Kleef, 2009). Likewise, if there is a lack of acknowledgement or emotional responses about the injustices, it may inform us of the beliefs, ideologies, prejudice, or values that legitimate or deproblematise the caste relations. To paraphrase Jodhka (2016), it is not the violence alone, but the violence and its responses together that produces the sociopsychological matrix of power relations in caste.

Balmurali Natrajan (2011) draws a paradox in the persistence of caste in recent times- caste is surviving without the caste system, and casteism is continuing despite decline in the

traditional legitimacy of ‘purity and pollution’. Natrajan in his painstaking research has noted a shift in the accounts of caste, i.e. the ethnicisation of caste relations that allows the caste groups to reproduce themselves as a groups of differences but not of hierarchies. He further observes in his data that the redefinition of caste groups as cultural and ethnic depoliticises the casteist practices and allows the advantaged groups to reproduce the inequalities as arising from the cultural differences rather than the socio-political asymmetries. While the culturalisation-ethnicisation thesis explains the ways everyday practices in caste are normalised and redefined, it does not adequately explain how do people account for and respond to the caste-based violence, discrimination and blatant inequality that harms the disadvantaged groups particularly Dalits? Social psychological research into the persistence of racism, xenophobia or sexism have highlighted the dynamic and evolving nature of identities and consequently prejudices that legitimate and reproduce the intergroup asymmetries and inequalities. However, as noted before, these processes remain surprisingly underexamined for caste context.

The continuity of caste-based victimisation should be an apparent phenomenon, not to be showcased. The discriminatory practices and inequalities are part of everyday lives for most citizens. Yet, the victimhood of the affected groups are either denied outrightly or made irrelevant with indifference (Teltumbde, 2010). This gap should be hardest to bridge for the members of the historically advantaged groups given their high status position in caste hierarchy, economic advantages and the highest degrees of discriminatory practices (Pew Research Center, 2021; Thorat et al., 2020). On the contrary, we find a contestation of victimisation of Dalits and more astonishingly, indications of a growing claim of victimhood among the members of advantaged caste groups (Lokniti-CSDS, 2019; Yadav, 2023). This contestation of victimhood and counterclaims raises important questions about the meaning-making of the caste in the present context.

The socio-psychological processes that reproduce and justify the caste-based victimisation can be better examined through the beliefs, prejudices, values and discourses of the advantaged groups. Caste prejudice has been considered one of the more important tools to understand how caste inequalities are materialised and maintained (Siddique, 2011; Thorat & Joshi, 2020). Yet, there is a pressing need to examine new forms of prejudice that may legitimate and reproduce the caste. Caste inequalities are not only reproduced in its traditional and static forms but also the new and more liberal forms (Natrajan, 2011; Deshpande, 2013; Jodhka, 2016; Subramaniam, 2016). These new forms reproduce the hierarchies of caste relations but are uncharacteristic of the old notions of ‘purity and pollution’. Deshpande (2013) for instance, notes that the historically advantaged groups have claimed a ‘casteless’ position in the free market society. Ajantha Subramaniam (2015), however shows in her analysis of ‘merit’ and ‘caste’ in Indian Institutes of Technology (premier technological universities in India) that the claim to a casteless position is not pulling away from caste identities but is rather a reconstruction of caste privilege. The seemingly innocuous question of ‘what was your JEE rank?’ can be used to identify someone’s caste, and bring the humiliating aspects of caste back to life without the threat of being called a casteist.

A problem commonly overlooked in the caste research is how do people make sense of their privileges, harm to other or the broader context of inequality. The traditional explanations of theory of karma, or the bodily purity are increasingly inadequate to explain how people make sense of the caste inequalities. It is not fully clear how the reproduction of caste injustices in blatant or banal forms are managed and justified by lay persons. The persistence of caste raises important psychological questions that may be best investigated with the groups that should be most threatened by the existential-moral problems of caste and yet manage to legitimate their positions in everyday lives.

The positions of historically advantaged groups are inextricably linked with the persistence of caste in ways their reproduction and legitimation of own positions inform us of the same processes that legitimate and reproduce caste injustices. Traditional pathways of legitimation offer affordances to the historically advantaged groups; however, it is not very clear if the old biological-mythological notions of superiority still hold any currency for the caste relations. Few recent works have shown that the old discourses of caste are not completely incompatible with the new discourses of ‘merit’ and equality (Deshpande, 2013; Subramanian, 2015). Subramanian (2015) identifies this gap in following manner:

“Significantly, the proliferation of work on lower castes that shows the increasing significance of caste, not simply as a discrete unit based on birth but as a consolidated sociopolitical category, has not led to parallel work on how upper castes are similarly consolidating in multiple arenas and through a variety of discursive registers.” (p. 296)

Much of the existing literature on caste has focused on the marginalised caste groups or the mid-level groups (Gupta, 2000, 2005; Guru, 2011; Jaffrelot, 2010; Natrajan, 2011; Omvedt, 2011). However, it is the advantaged or perpetrator caste groups that are most invested in the maintaining and reproducing the status quo. Their dominance of historically advantaged groups over economic resources, media, judiciary make them co-actors in the perpetuation or contestation of the caste system (Deshpande, 2013; Mahalingam et al., 2019; Subramanian, 2019; Teltumbde, 2010). They can be important allies or the most important roadblocks to the ‘annihilation of caste’. Their roles become all the more important as we know that the resistance to change is much lower if there are challenges from within the ingroup (Hornsey et al., 2002). Thus, taking the perspectives of members of the historically advantaged caste groups can serve as a meaningful entry point into legitimation and reproduction of caste.