

# Dalit Diaspora: Perspectives on Caste, Identity and Migration<sup>❖</sup>

*Pratibha*<sup>\*</sup>

## ABSTRACT

While a considerable body of ethnographic work, sociological studies, even compelling fictional works on the transmutation of caste practices in diasporic Indian communities exists, by comparison, the scholarship reflects an under examination of narratives by diasporic Dalits themselves. Research has also not adequately scrutinised the insidious presence of *Savarna* hegemony in the wider caste-class networks that controls the narratives of Indian identity, history and culture in the global context. The result is a marginalisation of the Dalit diaspora. The first part of this two-part paper, “Caste as Hidden Apartheid,” discusses the relative inconspicuousness of Dalit diaspora in academic discourse. Part two, “Dalit Literature, Dalit Diaspora and Life Narratives” examines Dalit diasporic writers’ enunciated representations of caste discrimination. This section suggests that many diasporic Indians from the former Untouchable castes are hyperconscious of the caste stigma and wary of being ostracised. Often to their detriment, they resort to concealing their true identity or try to pass themselves off as upper-castes because of an internalised casteism. However, not all diasporic Dalits live a closeted life. A new form of anti-caste resistance based on transnational solidarity networks emerging at the international level is symptomatic of the radical mobilisation of diasporic Dalits worldwide. Diasporic Dalits are using dialectic tools in a whole constellation of blogs, web resources, online communities and social media platforms to articulate lived experiences, to relay accounts of discriminatory violence, to redress their historical obfuscation through the publication of researched articles, and for insertion of Dalit perspectives into contemporary debates. They are also using their digital platforms to wrest agency to articulate identity in a transnational frame. Thus, this paper also looks into the significance of virtual platforms in the life narratives of Yashica Dutt and Thenmozhi Soundararajan.

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Pratibha, Assistant Professor, English Literature, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Sharda University, India ([pratibhabiswas85@gmail.com](mailto:pratibhabiswas85@gmail.com)).

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The label Indian diaspora is a generic one in the sense that it takes into account the people who dispersed from territories constituting the Republic of India. Widely used, the term harkens back to the classical definition of diaspora, emphasising the ancestral homeland. However, it masks the complex internal variance on regional, religious, linguistic lines that the class or caste stratification inherent to the Indian milieu compounds as vectors affecting migration patterns and the formation of transnational communities.<sup>1</sup>

The naming of communities in prevalent social and political discourse, be it by themselves or by state/international agencies, is a highly tactical issue, as it can lead to recognition or misrecognition. Further, it can either narrow or expand the scope of attention, affecting the line of enquiry. The naming of a community is also immensely strategic in positioning a site of identification when it comes to the construction of social identities (Hegde and Sahoo 2). A considerable body of ethnographic work and sociological studies on caste document the transmutation of caste practices in communities of Indian diaspora who have put down roots in countries like Malayasia, Singapore, Guyana, Trinidad, Fiji, the UK, South Africa, the United States, and countries in Eastern Africa. However, Jillet Sarah Sam argues that most available studies on “caste practices, structures and organisations” within the Indian diaspora usually limit their analyses to the national boundaries of the host country and rarely take into account the inclination of caste communities “to project themselves as global diasporic entities” (148). On the other hand, Subramaniam Shankar and Charu Gupta contend that “Critical Caste Studies is vitally animated by Dalit Studies but is not coterminous with it” (3), the former referring to the study of “any aspect of culture marked by caste” (2) and understood as what Geetha and Rajadurai explain as “the varna-jati complex” (Geetha and Rajadurai xiii; qtd. in Shankar and Gupta 3), while the latter is “the study of Dalit archives and lives” (2). From the perspective of Caste Studies, Dalit diaspora as a category appears complex, multilayered and even a contested domain; but from the perspective of Dalit Studies, the category posits what Spivak has called “a *strategic* use of positivist essentialism” (13). Correspondingly, Alok Mukherjee has argued that “Dalit is a political identity instead of a caste name. It expresses Dalits’ knowledge of themselves as

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<sup>1</sup> In her article “Conceptualising Indian Diaspora: Diversities within a Common Identity,” Amba Pande gives a systematic explication of heterogeneity and diversity to espouse a definitional framework for understanding the Indian Diaspora.

oppressed people and signifies their resolve to demand liberation through a revolutionary transformation of the system that oppresses them” (qtd. in Brueck, *Writing* 68).<sup>2</sup> Thus, taking into account the definition given in the 1973 Dalit Panthers Manifesto, where the term Dalit encompasses “[m]embers of scheduled castes and tribes, Neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically, and in the name of religion” (qtd. in Brueck, *Writing* 9), then the term also establishes a collective identity taking the experience of exploitation as a common denominator. Pairing the term Dalit with diaspora—which Steven Vertovec defined in terms of “*social form*,” a “*type of consciousness*,” and a “*mode of cultural production*” (278)—the term “Dalit diaspora” in this paper indicates the transnational nature of the category. It posits a postnational framework and postmodern understanding of diaspora that denotes what Floya Anthias has called “a condition rather than being descriptive of a group” (565).

## I. Caste as Hidden Apartheid

Vivek Kumar in “Dalit Diaspora: Invisible Existence” problematises the propensity to frame the “Indian diaspora as a monolithic whole” (53). Kumar also points out the relative inconspicuousness of the Dalit diaspora in academic discourse, despite the existence of old as well as new streams of Dalit migration across the globe (“Dalit Diaspora” 53). Drawing on the works of Brij Vilash Lal, Bridget Brereton, Kernial Singh Sandhu and Sat Pal Muman in his essay “Understanding Dalit Diaspora,” Kumar argues that the old stream consists of indentured and assisted labourers taken primarily to British colonies like Fiji and Trinidad in the nineteenth century; whereas, the new Dalit diaspora consists of semi-literate, first-generation literates, professionally trained industrial labourers, technicians and students who migrated to the UK, US and Canada during the second half of the twentieth century (114).

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<sup>2</sup> The word “dalit” implies “ground down” or “broken to pieces” in Hindi, Bangla and Marathi. It refers to those who were earlier stigmatised and vilified as untouchables, but commonly use the term today to identify themselves and assert themselves socio-politically. Although a contested category comprising heterogeneity, the capitalisation (Dalit) follows from Anupama Rao who in *The Caste Question* justifies it thus: “I capitalize the word because I believe that 165 million Indians are entitled to a capital letter” (xxi). Likewise, in this paper it refers to a political category positing a strategic essentialism and not a caste name.

Concerning colonial migration, scholars like Brij Maharaj and Elizabeth Grieco, have commented on the continuation of caste as a system of social, political and economic organisation amongst Indian migrants. Maharaj states that despite the heterogeneity and “diversity of geographical origin” amongst the Hindu community in Natal, South Africa, “caste segmentation was almost disappeared because migrants were drawn from a large geographic area: since caste hierarchies are only regional and not pan-Indian they could not be maintained in a population from various origins” (94). Then, tightly packed into ships and forced to eat the same food, the workers could not maintain strict adherence to caste hierarchy. Concurrent with this forced commensality, caste prejudice seems to have declined due to the formation of new kinship bonds called “*jehaji-bhai* (ship mates) . . . based on the memory of travel on the same ship” (Maharaj 94). The dissolution of explicit connections with India further augmented the demise of caste.<sup>3</sup> Contrary to Maharaj’s arguments in her paper “The Effects of Migration on the Establishment of Networks,” to describe the reformulation of caste abroad and how it has impacted migrant networks, Grieco formulates the idea of “migration auspices,” which she defines as “the social, economic, political and historical context within which migration begins and proceeds” in the context of sub-caste communities among Indians in Fiji (706). According to her, the “migration auspices” corresponds to a particular migration type as it determines features such as the “age and gender” of an individual, “the reason for migrating, [even] the level of social organization present within a migration stream, and the period of time in which migration is possible” (Grieco 706). Grieco refutes Barton M. Schwartz’s argument “that caste as a system of social, political and economic organization is unable to survive the migration process” (709). According to Schwartz, “[t]he corporateness of any local caste group would not be likely to survive transplantation to Mauritius . . .” (24) and he further argues how “[c]hanges in this institution have been so extensive that the caste system as it is known in India cannot be said to persist even in a modified form. Castes are no longer endogamous units defined in terms of meaningful functions—ritual, economic or political” (44). However, Grieco looks at caste as a “network structure” that enabled the establishment of “overseas communities” (707) in the case of

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<sup>3</sup> Bringing contention to the discussion, Suraj Yengde in his 2015 article “Caste among the Indian Diaspora in Africa” argues how within the diasporic Indians in Africa “caste has changed form in the new social and geographical context but it has not been eliminated” (65).

“‘caste-based’ descendants of non-labour migrants” from Gujarat who moved to Fiji between 1900 and 1930 (708).<sup>4</sup>

Paramjit S. Judge avers that until recently the field of diaspora studies has stressed issues of integration and adaptation, and post-1980s research has leaned towards multiculturalism (3244), consequently obfuscating the study of internal dynamics of Indians abroad. According to Judge, in the case of Punjabis in England, the phenomenological perspective assumes the Scheduled Castes as well as *Savarnas*<sup>5</sup> have been sharing a common stock of knowledge, to construct “their earlier inter-subjective world” based on experiences in the native land, which they expected would “become irrelevant—totally or partially—to create a new social world in which both the social groups might have altered their social spaces” after migration (3244). These groups were perceived to be located equally as strangers at the margins of the host society (Judge 3244).

The dominant perception of caste hierarchies as traditional and regional has caused an elision of Dalit diaspora from academic debates in India. In the decades just following India’s independence, researchers gleaned a considerable proportion of the corpus of social scientific knowledge about caste from “village studies” grounded in meticulous ethnographic accounts of rural life using the participant-observation approach (Deshpande 6).<sup>6</sup> The distinguished Mysore Narasimhachar Srinivas was one of the many sociologists who represented this strand of conceptualisation. He captured in his works the dynamic aspect of caste through terms like “Sanskritisation,” “dominant castes,” “vertical (inter-caste) and horizontal (intra-caste) solidarity” that form

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<sup>4</sup> For analysis of the reconstitution of caste among diasporic Hindus migrated to Trinidad, see the 2006 article “The Metamorphosis of Caste among Trinidad Hindus” by Narayana Jayaram. He argues that caste among diasporic Hindus in Trinidad has lost its “functional socioeconomic form,” yet it continues to prevail as “a systematic method for reckoning ideal rankings within the social hierarchy” (169).

<sup>5</sup> The *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Shudra*—the four caste categories that fall within the pale of the caste system. The *Avarnas*, considered the outcasts, were formerly called the Untouchables and Scheduled Castes in government parlance. The politically mobilised section of the *Avarnas* now call themselves Dalit.

<sup>6</sup> This argument by Satish Deshpande forms the contextual knowledge in chapter 3: “The Tussle between Tradition and Modernity: Historiography, Migration, Conversion” (157-58) of the author’s doctoral dissertation on *Self and Community in Autobiographical Narratives by Dalit Women in the English Translation* (submitted for award of PhD to the Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi), which analyses migration as a trope in autobiographical narratives. The author also used this argument in a different research paper titled “Dalitizing the Nation: Counter-culture in the Poetry of Meena Kandasamy,” a critique of poems published in *Touch* (2006) and *Ms. Militancy* (2010) that deal with the marginalisation of Dalits in the postcolonial nation-state.

the parlance of sociologists today (Srinivas 43, 44, 77, 79). However, because this methodology relied chiefly on villages for fieldwork, along with the corresponding paucity of case studies from urban sites, it eventually resulted in the ossification of the perspective that caste is principally a rural phenomenon dissociated from the urban middle-class milieu (Deshpande 6).

Further, with the early 1990s' advent of the globalisation theory, which underscored the erosion of racial, religious, cultural and national differences, historians and social scientists came to regard caste both as a disintegrating remnant of India's pre-modernity and as losing epistemological potency. André Béteille compounded this view, espousing that "the growth and expansion of a new middle class, attendant on demographic, technological and economic changes is altering the operation of caste." He purported a shift from caste hierarchy to class stratification due to westernisation and secularisation among the Indian urban middle-classes. According to Béteille, caste consciousness persisted in contemporary times mostly due to postcolonial political interest groups, who brought caste consciousness to the fore in times of elections (Patel). Earlier, D. D. Kosambi had also espoused the stance that class struggle will eventually erode caste structures, a position reiterated by Irfan Habib, whereby caste came to be perceived as a decisive impediment to India's progress (Ganguly 95).

In "Ambedkar's Foreign Policy and the Ellipsis of The 'Dalit' From International Activism," Suraj Yengde comments on the general "ignorance about Ambedkar and the prejudice of the dominant privileged-caste academia" for the "egregious omission" of evaluation of Ambedkar's "international outlook" (87). Yengde points out that after India's independence (1947), the Brahmanical castes to a very great degree occupied the sought-after positions of bureaucrats, ambassadors, high-ranking officials, emissaries, specialists and delegates ("Ambedkar's Foreign Policy" 88). The functioning of various governmental committees at the international level required these positions, which shaped the historiography of India in Brahmanical ideological terms. It also ensured stringent checks on the global examination of domestic matters by "the postcolonial Indian state" and muffled the caste question on international platforms (Yengde, "Ambedkar's Foreign Policy" 88). However, according to Yengde, the Dalit Panthers have grievously ignored Ambedkar's international outlook ("Ambedkar's Foreign Policy" 104). A "radical Ambedkarite outfit"

that presented itself as an inclusive category of the oppressed across the world,<sup>7</sup> they failed to build international solidarity, their efforts remained limited mainly to “literary rhetoric” and their approach lacked “action-based programme” to construct “active partnerships with social movements around the world” (Yengde, “Ambedkar’s Foreign Policy” 104). Yengde explicates Ambedkar’s international outlook in the following words:

Nationalist histories as well as the organized Left’s counter-narratives overlooked these facets of the internationalist Ambedkar. Vernacular writings in India, which are rich in the narratives of the Ambedkar movement and the Dalit movement’s “counter publics,” also blatantly overlooked the Dalits’ interface with international rights movements. . . . [Ambedkar] observed “foreign affairs” to be the “most important subject from [a] social, political and financial point of view.” By taking a keen interest in foreign policy, Ambedkar was perhaps trying to extend his political constituency beyond India. This enthusiasm is seen in his efforts to communicate with other political movements, such as his famous letter to W.E.B. Du Bois, N. Sivaraj’s visit to the Pacific Relations Committee conference in Quebec as a representative of the AISC in 1942 and the Buddhist country diplomacy with South East Asian countries, which he thought of in terms of potential solidarity to help the emancipatory struggle of the Dalits. . . . However, even though he led one of the world’s most important civil rights movements, Ambedkar fell short of unifying it with other civil and political rights movements the world over. (“Ambedkar’s Foreign Policy” 89)

However, Dalits are now locating the caste discrimination issue in the Human Rights discourse, equating it with racial discrimination (Bob 167). They have reworded their rhetoric to call caste as “India’s ‘hidden apartheid’” (Barbour et al. 19). Overcoming the spatial and temporal limitation of traditional activism,

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<sup>7</sup> The Dalit Panthers Manifesto declared: “The Dalit Panthers aspire to join hands with the Dalits (oppressed) of the world which includes the oppressed and the exploited people in Cambodia, Vietnam, Africa, Latin America, Japan and even in US (specially with Blacks)” (qtd. in Yengde, “Ambedkar’s Foreign Policy” 104).

Dalits are establishing Transnational Solidarity Networks to advocate their rights beyond the confines of the nation-state and decry casteist prejudice by spreading awareness globally about Human Rights violations suffered by Dalits in India (Bob 178-81). “A transnational advocacy network [TAN] includes those relevant actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information and services” (Keck and Sikkink 2). The vital players comprise non-governmental organisations (NGOs), including “(2) local social movements; (3) foundations; (4) the media; (5) churches, trade unions, consumer organizations, and intellectuals; (6) . . . intergovernmental organizations; (7) parts of the executive and / or parliamentary branches of governments” (Keck and Sikkink 9). These networks are “public spheres” (3) in a sense espoused by Jürgen Habermas (1962; trans. 1989), as they are institutionalised discursive arenas for interaction. A “conceptual resource” different from the state, they are sites “for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state” (Fraser 57). Acting as “strong publics” (Fraser 75), TANs influence (Keck and Sikkink 25) policy outcomes and construct “cognitive frames” (8) about issues to make them comprehensible to target audiences by transforming the terms, the nature of the debate, discursive positions (28), procedures, and even monitoring regional and international compliance (3). TANs also influence decision making by using strategies like “networking, creating pressure, making recommendations, organizing rallies, campaigning, lobbying and cooperating with other organizations on the grassroots level” (Zabaliute 8). A case in point here is the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN). According to the IDSN website, “advocating for Dalit rights by influencing the policies and practices of governments and international bodies and institutions” (Schleimann), the International Dalit Solidarity Network with its headquarters in Copenhagen and official establishments in Sweden, Netherlands, France, Belgium and Germany, attempts to sensitise the E.U. to the inequalities of the caste system, to be considerate while making donations and to influence particular E.U. administration bodies to initiate political dialogue with caste affected states for the eradication of caste discrimination (Zabaliute 15). One of the primary objectives is to “[engage] in the UN discourse” by contributing to the “UN Principles and Guidelines for the Effective Elimination of Discrimination based on Work and Descent,” and to achieve this “[t]hey network, create

recommendations and facilitate consultations between special rapporteurs and affected communities” (Zabiliute 15). Clifford Bob in his article, “Dalit Rights are Human Rights: Caste Discrimination, International Activism, and the Construction of a New Human Rights Issue,” analyses this phenomenon meticulously, documenting a prolonged period where Dalit concerns have been overlooked as well as the recent, modest yet noteworthy triumph in terms of seizing global attention in “various United Nations organs . . . [and] international human rights NGOs . . . [which facilitated the formation of] a transnational advocacy network (TAN) around domestic Indian activists . . . and among select governments, especially in Europe, which began pressuring India for action after the start of the twenty-first century” (170). A recent example of this, is how the NCDHR attracted the notice of the media, academics and civil society groups towards caste discrimination, by taking part in the United Nations World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and related Intolerance (WCAR), hosted in Durban in 2001, despite opposition by the Government of India about the inclusion of the caste discrimination issue in the UN discourse (Zabiliute 18).<sup>8</sup> Shiv Visvanathan reads this tactic as “a politics of embarrassment,” whereby the Indian state that projected a moralistic image by condemning racism, colonialism and apartheid at international conferences (but glibly eliding caste as “an internal matter”), became entangled in its own web and was pressured into acknowledging the issue (2513-15).

Another modality through which Dalits have been making their presence felt internationally is the cyberspace. They are publishing life narratives, testimonies, articles, blogs on digital platforms such as websites, online personal journals, which are rapidly emerging as ideal spaces for people to narrate their experiences. Of late, Dalits are exploiting the conspicuous rise of Dalit websites and discussion forums, like *Round Table India*, *Dalit and Adivasi Students’ Portal*, *Ambedkar.org* and *Savari* to amplify a counterculture

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<sup>8</sup> This corresponds to Sidney Tarrow’s concept of “externalization” which he defines in *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* as “domestic actors targeting external actors in attempts to defend their interests” (235). This is one of the five processes, noted by Tarrow, as developing in what he calls “transnational contention” (235). Speaking of Dalits projecting caste as a hidden apartheid, is analogous to what Tarrow defines as “[g]lobal framing: the framing of domestic issues in broader terms than their original claims would seem to dictate” which is another process among the five listed by him (235). For further exploration of facets of transnational activism, refer to Tarrow’s *The New Transnational Activism*.

of resistance. *Dalit Camera* is a popular *YouTube* channel portraying community issues through narratives, public meetings, songs, talks and open discussion. A whole constellation of blogs, web resources, online communities and social media platforms are providing the dialectic tools to articulate collectively, the repressed sentiments and lived experiences of millions of Dalits across the subcontinent, shattering the veil of obscurity and reticence. However, Dalit assertion in the digital domain has attracted little academic engagement. Pramod K. Nayar, in “The Digital Dalit: Subalternity and Cyberspace,” points out a lacuna in academic studies about Dalit “access to and the usage of new media technologies in India” (69). Highlighting the emergence of “cyberculture” as a new political arena due to “the materialization of online lives and the digitization of material lives” (69), Nayar proposes that through digital information sites like *dalitstan.org* and *International Dalit Solidarity Network*, Dalits have been “constructing a *cultural memory*” to not only archive “a veritable genealogy of oppression” to relay accounts of discriminatory violence thereby redressing their historical obfuscation, but to also utilise these discursive arenas for “insertion [of Dalit perspectives] into contemporary debates about *rights*” (70-71). They have also been using information spaces to wrest agency to articulate identity in a transnational frame by adopting the historical narrative of torture and trauma to gain global visibility. Likewise, Vivek Kumar has noted that the internet is facilitating information sharing and dissemination among Dalit diaspora worldwide, enabling them to unite to create a global fraternity (“Understanding” 115).

However, Dalits alone are not resorting to the digital domain as a discursive arena, as evidenced in the campaign launched on social media with the hashtag #DontEraseIndia by the Hindu American Foundation. It asks students “to give testimonies about having been bullied in school” (Chari) and discusses the California State Board of Education’s removal of the word “Dalit” from textbooks (Chari). As a counter move, the South Asia Histories For All Coalition initiated a social media campaign bringing attention to these casteist edits (Chari). The coalition contended that removing the word obfuscated the history of the Dalit struggle against the violent and discriminatory caste system. Since California’s curricular framework is also used by other US states, the recommended edits had substantial ramifications (Chari). The review process that began in 2015 eventually embroiled several contending groups, such as the South Asia Histories For All Coalition, the Uberoi Foundation, the Hindu

American Foundation, and the South Asia Faculty Group. The long-drawn review process was contentious and vociferously debated online and offline, garnering widespread media coverage (Chari). The controversy is not an isolated instance where caste contention riled up the diasporic Indian community. In another case in 2016, UK-based Indians resisted the UK government's inclusion of a clause against caste discrimination in the Equality Act 2010 (Shah).

In addition, digital media communication is also fortifying discriminatory casteist tendencies within diasporic Indians. In the article, "Caste Diasporas beyond National Boundaries: Digital Caste Networks," Jillet Sarah Sam draws attention to the instance of *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. Invested in establishing that Thiyyas were superior to the Ezhava caste of South Kerala in terms of caste status, most group members believed that they faced discrimination because they were mistaken for Ezhavas (Sam 151). Hosted on a social networking site and set up to further the interest of this particular caste, the digital network exclusively targeted Thiyyas<sup>9</sup> living across the globe, including locations such as "Middle-East Asia, Russia, USA, UK, and Australia" (Sam 150). The forum was also used to build social capital by promoting an ideal of Thiyya culture, enabling its transmission across generations, sharing information about employment opportunities abroad, etc. (Sam 155). Sam also points out that some Indian diaspora organisations have been functioning unofficially in effect as "de-facto caste organizations" in the US (146). The Telugu Association of North America represents the interests of the Kamma caste. In comparison, the American Telugu Association, in reality, represents the concerns of the Reddy caste community (Sam 146).

## II. Dalit Literature, Dalit Diaspora and Life Narratives

Polemical from its inception with its insistence on social mobilisation, Dalit literature has primarily been movement literature. Dalits have been using the autobiographical mode in various forms of life writing, as what Paul Gilroy calls "a dissident space within the bourgeois public sphere" (69), whereby they

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<sup>9</sup> Drawing on Dilip M. Menon (40-61), Jillet Sarah Sam explains how residing in the Malabar region in North Kerala, Thiyyas rank highest "among the polluting castes such as the Cherumas and the Pulayas, and exerted administrative control over them" (149). Erstwhile untouchables, this community is now identified as OBC (Other Backward Castes).

have tried to contest caste discrimination, expose casteism and dislodge pejorative cultural values ascribed to them. With the objective of creating a positive self-image and address ages of cultural obscurity, Dalit writers have utilised the cathartic potential of autobiographical writing as a way to incorporate suffering into a meaningful life story and forge a collective identity. Presenting vivid depictions of a life marked by caste discrimination, Dalits have leveraged life narratives to record their subjugation as well as voice their agency to counter the hegemonic Brahmanical discourse. Some of the noteworthy Dalit autobiographical vernacular narratives include Daya Pawar's *Baluta* (1978), Laxman Mane's *Upara* (1984), Sharankumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi* (1984), Baby Kamble's *Jina Amucha* (1986), Narendra Jadhav's *Amcha Baap Aani Amhi* (1993), Vasant Moon's *Vasti* (1995), Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (1997), Lakshman Gaikwad's *Uchalya* (1998), Urmila Pawar's *Aaydaan* (2003), and so on. Alongside these are many English translations of vernacular texts and others written in English, such as Hazari's *Untouchable: The Autobiography of an Indian Outcaste* (1951), Balwant Singh's *An Untouchable in the I.A.S.* (1997), D.R. Jatav's *A Silent Soldier: An Autobiography* (2000), and Shyamal's *Untold Story of a Bhangi Vice-chancellor* (2001). These books have prompted significant academic engagement encompassing historical, sociological and literary perspectives.<sup>10</sup> However, hardly any scholarly works have substantively engaged with Dalit literature from the critical perspective of the diasporic framework. Recently, the publication of *Ants among Elephants* (2017) by Sujatha Gidla<sup>11</sup> and *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir* (2019) by Yashica Dutt<sup>12</sup> have enriched the corpus. These books have been authored by diasporic Dalits, as both Gidla and Dutt live in New York. Gidla's narrative recounts her family's history marked by poverty, injustice and caste discrimination in modern India. It traverses the lives of her family members,

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<sup>10</sup> This paragraph is a reworked section from the Introduction (5-6) to the author's doctoral dissertation on *Self and Community in Autobiographical Narratives by Dalit Women in the English Translation* (submitted for award of PhD to the Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi). These texts have gained canonical status within the corpus of Dalit autobiographical literature.

<sup>11</sup> Sujatha Gidla was born in Andhra Pradesh into a family belonging to the Mala caste. After her early education in Warangal and Madras, she moved to America at the age of twenty-six in 1990. Presently, she resides in New York and is employed as a conductor on the subway. The book is based on recorded testimonies of her relatives, friends and acquaintances in India. Her writing has also featured in *The Oxford India Anthology of Telugu Dalit Writing*.

<sup>12</sup> Born into the Valmiki family in Ajmer, Rajasthan, Yashica Dutt is a journalist based in New York who writes on caste, gender, identity and culture. Earlier she has worked with *Brunch* and the *Hindustan Times* in New Delhi.

from her grandparents to her own, but mainly recounts her uncle Satyam's transformation into a leader of the notorious Naxalite People's War Group. Dutt's narrative weaves the personal journey of coming to terms with her Dalit identity in urban locations with socio-political commentary on significant moments in Dalit history from a Dalit feminist perspective. Moreover, Dutt's narrative reworks some tropes of the diasporic condition, such as identity crisis, migration, alienation, and acculturation from the Dalit perspective to unveil caste's insidious presence as "the invisible arm that turns the gears in nearly every system" in her homeland (Dutt ix).

Migration is an important trope in both diasporic literature and Dalit literature. As pointed out by Sara Beth, migration to the city being a recurrent motif in Hindi Dalit autobiographical literature, customarily indicates certain normative spatial switches in the development trajectory of the protagonist, i.e., beginning with a description of childhood in a village Dalit *basti*, caste discrimination and humiliation in the rural school, subsequently moving to a neighbouring town to attend college, obtaining an emancipatory outlook through education and settlement in the city, signifying the onset of Dalit activism ("Hindi Dalit Autobiography" 548-49). A slightly modified, loose replication of this pattern can be found in Yashica Dutt's narrative too. After spending twenty-seven years of her life passing as a Brahmin, yet feeling ashamed each time someone mentioned the words, "caste," "reservation" or "bhangi,"<sup>13</sup> Dutt's psychological journey of grappling with her Dalit identity gets triggered when her Columbia Journalism School application requires her to write an "Identity Essay" (131). Dutt writes: "As I thought about how I could describe myself, the word 'Bhangi' kept popping up. I kept swatting it away. [But] . . . I soon gave up trying to come up with something else because I realized that I had no other personal story to tell, apart from the most obvious one of hiding my lower caste" (131).

Unaware then, that it was the same institution where Dr. B. R. Ambedkar had presented his thesis on caste in 1919, Yashica Dutt had at that time only expected her education at Columbia, an Ivy-League school, to make her a well-informed journalist. Nevertheless, the experience proved metamorphic for her. In the course of her education, she not only learned the theories of journalism but also became attuned to the semblance between political, racial and social

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<sup>13</sup> A common slur, also a caste name, which loosely translates as a human scavenger.

structures in the United States and the caste system in India. According to Dutt, it was the course work on feminist theory, the “matter-of-fact openness” with which her “black, Latino and queer classmates” discussed their experiences of abuse, discrimination and racism, that instilled in her the courage to speak her truth (134). As noted by G. Sampath in his 2019 review of the book, it was Dutt’s location in New York, the “geographical distance [that] insulated her” from the toxic backlash, that gave her the courage to confess her true identity. In Dutt’s words:

In Delhi, I could not declare my lower caste because the demands of daily living and making ends meet were tough enough. Adding Dalitness to that could topple my already unstable life and threaten any opportunities that could come my way. I was too worried, too weak, too tired, to face the fallout. It was only when I moved to New York, where caste was not an issue, that I learned to accept my lower caste. (135)

Thus, going away from home enabled her to arrive at not just an acceptance of herself and her family’s past, but also initiated her into the discovery of Ambedkar and his legacy. Critical of the textbook historical accounts that gloss over Ambedkar’s contributions, she recalls learning in school only facts, such as that Ambedkar drafted the Constitution and was the leader of the Depressed Classes. In Dutt’s words:

According to the images that accompanied this information, the Depressed Classes were starving, bare-chested, stick-thin people who lived in remote villages with neither electricity nor roads. As an urban, English-speaking, educated millennial born into an educated Dalit family there was no reason for me to think that I belonged to this class. As recently as 2016, when I came out as Dalit in the Facebook note, I only had a faint idea of his contribution to our history. But once the note went viral, I started learning just how immense his role was in my story of coming to study at Columbia University in New York. (136)

This dilemma is reiterated in the chapter titled “The Danger of the Single Narrative,” where Dutt questions the stereotypical projection of an image of Dalits as “suffering victims or reservation grabbers” (158). There has been the normativisation of such an image in the literary realm too. The entrenchment of the stereotypical depiction of Dalits as wretched victims could partially be an inadvertent outcome of the influence exerted by the early proponents of Dalit literature. For instance, Sharankumar Limbale, in *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, insisted on separate criteria for artistic standards and aesthetic yardsticks to critically evaluate Dalit literature (105-06). He describes Dalit literature as “a lofty image of grief,” the kind that portrays sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule, and poverty (Limbale 30). The rhetorical strategy was meant to create a distinct Dalit representational sphere and a cultivated design to shock, shame, and invoke guilt in the *Savarna* reader for their complacency in perpetuating the caste system. It has been a tactical move to elicit sympathy, compassion and a sense of morality/justice from the readers. The intention with which these narratives’ emphasis on rendering pain and humiliation, is not to harp on the rhetoric of victimhood but to articulate a common experiential ground for seeking solidarity with the community. As Sarah Beth notes in “Dalit Autobiographies in Hindi,” the pain of humiliation and discrimination is taken as the common denominator of identity that fortifies an individual’s connection with the larger imagined Dalit community and authenticates the individual “I” to stand for the collective “We” (5-6). However, Dutt’s narrative presses for a reassessment of the simplistic framework, which for an extended period regarded such literary accounts as most symptomatic of an authentic rendition of the Dalit lived experience. Correspondingly, in “The Emerging Complexity of Dalit Consciousness,” Laura R. Brueck states that when “many urban, educated Dalits climb the ladder of social class, they have had to struggle to fit their narratives of modern alienation and crises of identity into the rubric of a literature of oppression that finds its most salient expression in the narratives of atrocity and exploitation in the village. For many Dalit writers today, these are simply no longer their personal experiences.”

Moreover, if the existing corpus is not revitalised by renderings about traditional caste discrimination mutating into new forms, such as in the debates about “national interest,” “meritocracy” and “transnationalisation of caste,” then the representations reiterating caste in the purity/pollution framework

alone or limited to the malaise of untouchability, may counterintuitively foster re-subalternisation of Dalits.

Along with migration, Yashica Dutt's narrative refashions nostalgia which is another significant trope in diasporic literature. Instead of a wistful longing for the past, Dutt's nostalgia transmutes into a catalytic process of reclaiming the memory of repressed facets of a dislocated self, "deeply buried beneath layers of convent education, urban upbringing and a hardened resolve to avoid engaging with anything related to caste" (Dutt xiv). Dutt laces her nostalgia with regret, especially when she recalls deleting Rohith Vemula's friendship request on *Facebook*, which he had sent about two weeks before committing suicide. The news of Rohith's tragic death<sup>14</sup> and his note that went viral on the internet became cataclysmic moments for Dutt, pushing her to shed the burden of living a lie. In many places in the narrative, while reflecting on her psychological metamorphosis, Dutt advocates the potential of the digital domain and online media spaces as democratic translocal sites for Dalit activism and the assertion of Dalit identity (165). To substantiate it, she acknowledges and extols the amplifying role played by "Dalit academics, bloggers and activists [who] took to Twitter and Facebook" alongside platforms like "*Round Table India (RTI)*, *Dalit Camera* and other Dalit-run websites . . . [and] released up-to-the-minute updates of the campus protests that broke out [across campuses] in Telangana, Mumbai, Delhi and Hyderabad soon after [Rohith's] death," making the story too important to be neglected (Dutt 165). At the same time, the traditional print media outlets operating under the *Savarna* stranglehold (*Times of India*, *Indian Express*, *Hindustan Times*, etc.) did not pay requisite attention to the incident until days later after violent clashes erupted between the protestors and the police. Rohith's death and the charged online conversations about casteism on campuses triggered Dutt's instincts to search for reports on Dalits like her, who had been living with a pretentious upper-caste identity. However, she felt disappointed when she failed to find stories that spoke of the kind of emotional and mental conflict she suffered. Dutt states that even excellent narratives that render the direct consequences of being a Dalit, namely Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* and Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*, did not address her "unique anxiety of giving

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<sup>14</sup> A Dalit PhD scholar at the University of Hyderabad, he hanged himself after not receiving the allocated stipend for seven months. His death started many charged debates across social media and academic circles about caste-based discrimination in universities in India.

up one's identity to take on another that is seen as superior" (xvi). Moved by the impulse to provide a safe space for Dalits like her to openly talk about their experiences and share their stories, she decided to open a *Tumblr* page, *Documents of Dalit Discrimination*. But before she could provide such a space to others, in good conscience, it was imperative for her to come out herself as a Dalit first (Dutt xvi). Adhering to her decision, Dutt announced her actual caste status through a *Facebook* post containing Rohith's photograph next to her note.

Yashica Dutt's step of taking to digital media to publish her true identity corroborates the argument of Heather Elliott et al. about the potential of virtual spaces to foster "widely prevalent forms of knowledge and identity construction, largely personally narrated, concerned with everyday lives, and with wide socioeconomic, cross-gender, and intergenerational reach" (1). As argued by G. Thomas Couser, virtual platforms, not constrained by traditional gatekeepers of the publishing industry, have exuded "a powerfully democratizing effect on life writing" (12-13) by opening it up to new platforms and audiences. Explicating this argument in the context of Dalit diaspora in the US, Shweta Majumdar Adur and Anjana Narayan bring attention to "virtual blogs and online news stories" as "alternative data" to be considered as chronicles of "experiences of Dalit women and postimmigrant-generation Dalits" (259). As a case in point, they discuss blogs by transmedia artist, activist and technologist Thenmozhi Soundararajan (Adur and Narayan 252). Soundararajan is a second-generation Tamil Dalit in the US, her parents, both doctors, had migrated to the US in the 1970s from a small town in Tamil Nadu. As a storyteller, singer/director, Soundararajan is driven to tell stories of marginalised communities and speak about casteism in Indian Diaspora. Her blog is interestingly called *Dalit Nation*. The site also publishes writings by other scholars, artists and activists. Co-founder of Media Justice Network, Executive Director of Third World Majority, she is also the Executive Director of Equality Labs.<sup>15</sup> Leveraging her role as an artist, Soundararajan has been involved in raising awareness about caste-related sexual violence inflicted on

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<sup>15</sup> Equality Labs is "a South Asian technology organization dedicated to ending caste apartheid, gender-based violence, Islamophobia, white supremacy and religious intolerance" (qtd. from [www.equalitylabs.org](http://www.equalitylabs.org)). As per the website Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim, Buddhist, Sikh and Christian South Asians comprise the membership. Expressing solidarity with all movements for justice and freedom, the organization also aims at dismantling internal hegemonies of caste, language, gender, sexuality and religion.

Dalit women, by collaborating with the All India Dalit Women's Rights Forum on an art-inspired social media campaign called #DALITWOMENFIGHT.

In her life narrative, "The Black Indians," published in the *Outlook* magazine, Thenmozhi Soundararajan recalls how she found out about her caste. At the age of 17, she came across an old dusty book by Ambedkar in her family library with some notes by her father. She also remembers her parent's inclination to keep their caste identity secret for all those years by passing as non-Dalit because of the fear of being shunned by the Indian community in the US. They would avoid mentioning anything about their community while attending public functions or temple ceremonies. Yet, through an underground network of activists, they vigorously supported Dalit causes in India. Men debated caste issues over phone calls, meetings and conferences, and women exchanged Dalit songs and stories. The caste-based intolerance that Soundararajan's parents had tried to shield her from, was unleashed upon her when she assumed the performance name "Dalit Diva" after deciding to return to her caste profession of singing and telling stories. Soundararajan faced virulent abuse when she came out as a Dalit woman, recollecting:

Friends stopped talking to us. I had plates and utensils switched on me. I even received hate mail and death threats . . . . All of the Indian professors on campus were upper caste as well, and all, except one, refused to advise me on projects and blacklisted my work. I stopped getting invited to South Asian events.  
("What It Means")

The trope of "coming out," a phrase that means disclosure of one's identity that is otherwise stigmatising, is common in Dutt's and Soundararajan's narratives. The courageous and subversive act of reclaiming one's authentic self, paradoxically also renders the burden of anxiety, fear and ignominy that many diasporic Dalits are compelled to live with. Even Sujatha Gidla recounts in an interview with Dipti Nagpaul (10 July 2020), published on *Dalit Camera*, that her niece attempted to conceal her caste by posting a cropped picture of her book, *Ants Among Elephants*, that hid the subtitle: "An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India." However, this incident does not imply that all diasporic Dalits resort to hiding their caste identity.

Another account in Thenmozhi Soundararajan's "The Black Indians" recalls how Indians abroad normalise caste in their everyday performances of ethnic identity. Exposing the insidious presence of *Savarna* hegemony in the wider caste-class networks in the global context, that controls the narratives of Indian identity, history and culture, results in the marginalisation of the Dalit diaspora; as Soundararajan states:

For second-generation NRIs, flashing caste becomes a part of their cultural street cred with other communities. Some do it intentionally to elevate their identity while others operate from a misunderstanding of their own roots and blindly accept the symbols of their culture. Punjabi rappers throw down lyrics about being proud Jats. Tam-Brahms show off their sacred thread, recreate Thiruvayur in Cleveland, and learn Bharatanatyam while using their powerful networks to connect and succeed in the diaspora. Ultimately, we trade and calcify what is seen as proper Indian culture. But hidden within that idea of "proper" lies the code for what is aspirational and ultimately upper caste. ("The Black Indians")

Echoing her view, there are many testimonies by Dalits from across the globe, as included in the 2018 report *Caste in the United States: A Survey of Caste Among South Asian Americans* by Equality Labs, which is one of the many initiatives by Soundararajan. These testimonies reinstate that overseas, hyperconscious of caste stigma, many Dalits still live a closeted life wary of being ostracised. The 2018 report by Equality Labs is an important document providing firsthand quantitative and qualitative data testifying how caste has replicated itself in the South Asian Community in the United States. Some key findings of the report posit: "Two out of three Dalits surveyed reported being treated unfairly at their workplace; 60% of Dalits report experiencing Caste-based derogatory jokes or comments; 40% of Dalits . . . were made to feel unwelcome at their place of worship; 20% of Dalit respondents report feeling discriminated at a place of business; over 40% of Dalit Respondents have reported being rejected in a Romantic Partnership on the basis of Caste" (Zwick-Maitreyi et al. 28). It also mentions that over 75% of Dalit and Shudra respondents kept their caste status hidden to protect themselves and their

families from discrimination as they “live in fear of their caste being ‘outed’” (Zwick-Maitreyi et al. 28). The fear of one’s caste identity getting exposed and the reluctance to complain against caste-related harassment, springs from the marginal position of Dalits in the dominant caste networks that operate across companies, affecting their career prospects, opportunities, appraisals and promotions. Having encashed their traditional caste assets into contemporary types of capital, including but not limited to higher educational privileges, professional credentials and leadership positions in the corporate hierarchy, the dominant castes enjoy a stronghold in lucrative professions today.<sup>16</sup> They exert their influence in the hiring process for vacant positions and peer review systems of appraisals and promotions, recreating structures of power and privilege. This misuse is especially evident in the modality of filling posts through internal referrals where dominant castes get first-mover advantage to recommend and place people of their caste in corporations (Mukherji). Anahita Mukherji reports the essence of Raj’s testimony in the article, “The Cisco Case Could Expose Rampant Prejudice Against Dalits in Silicon Valley.”

The data and anecdotal evidence created by Equality Labs is a decisive refutation of the widespread denial about the existence of caste-discrimination among US based Non-Resident Indians. According to Anahita Mukherji, the Equality Labs’ report corroborated the covert caste biases rampant in Silicon Valley in July 2020, when the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing initiated litigation against Cisco for failing to avert, monitor, and rectify discriminatory treatment meted out to a Dalit engineer by his Indian-origin colleagues (“Home”). The lawsuit accused the multinational technology company of violating a section of America’s momentous Civil Rights Act—a favourable consequence of the 1960s movement spearheaded by the African Americans (Mukherji). Mukherji also notes Shailja Paik’s observation that the Cisco case replicates the casteism rampant in the IITs and is indicative of the “transnationalisation of caste” (Mukherji). *Savarnas* under the euphemism of “general category” frame themselves as meritorious and discredit Dalits as intellectually inferior and undeserving of making it to the Indian Institute of

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<sup>16</sup> This argument by Satish Deshpande forms the contextual knowledge in chapter 3: “The Tussle between Tradition and Modernity: Historiography, Migration, Conversion” (157-58) of the author’s doctoral dissertation on *Self and Community in Autobiographical Narratives by Dalit Women in the English Translation* (submitted for award of PhD to the Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi). For more formation on this argument, which is also included in chapter 3 of the author’s dissertation, see footnote 6.

Technology through reservations under affirmative action. Since the controversy erupted during the coronavirus pandemic, Mukherji notes that Shailaja Paik calls the caste system analogously, “a shape-shifting virus that travels across continents and mutates over time” (Mukherji).

### **III. Conclusion**

Today, caste has a global presence that manifests in dual potentiality with both negative and positive implications. Negatively, it continues to be a source of harassment for Dalits. In its positive manifestation, caste groups are using it not only to network and establish transnational diasporic communities but also as social capital for access to better opportunities and resources. Dalits have also been establishing transnational advocacy networks to counter the casteist mindset, decry prejudice and project claims of Dalit Human Rights into international arenas by increasingly using digital platforms for lobbying and political mobilisation. The issue of caste-based discrimination, reworded as work and descent-based discrimination, is being situated in the Human Rights discourse. However, considering the existing body of Dalit literature, a lacuna still exists in the examination of Dalit diaspora experiences and the assessment of Dalit life narratives published online. Also, considering that Dr. B. R. Ambedkar had sought to extend the radical constituency of Dalits beyond India, the inclusion of life narratives available in the digital domain can exponentially increase the sphere of influence of Dalit literature and open up the Dalit community to a larger global readership. It will make this body of literature more inclusive by embracing Dalit diasporic concerns and enabling a space to interrogate the complex intersections of caste and race.

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