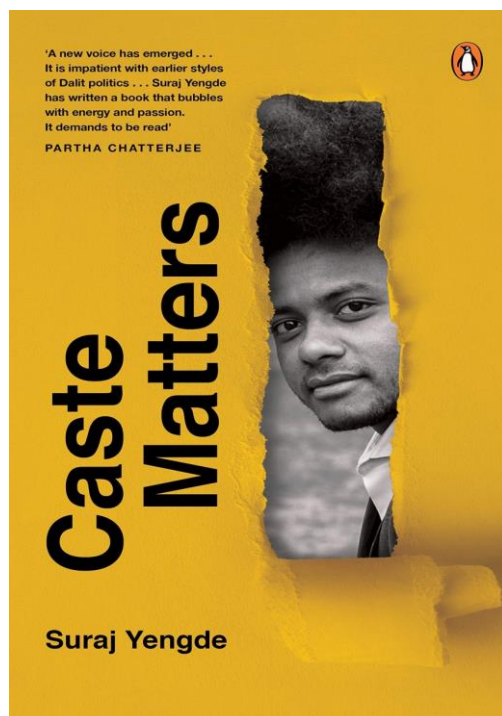


Suraj Yengde, *Caste Matters*. India: Penguin Random House, 2019. 325 pp. ISBN: 978-0-670-09122-5.



Dalit is robbed of his accurate registers of history, then, his human personality is torn apart, he is degraded to the caricature of slavery, and finally he is not allowed to express a profound critique of Brahmanical hegemonic creativity – art and music. Living in the midst of such a delusional optic, the Dalit lives in the present as well as the past; the latter being very strong in its spirit. The character of a Dalit in the present moment is forcibly subsumed into the empty rhetoric of banality. (Yengde 20)

Indian Caste system is one of the most talked about issues among writers. Caste system was fundamentally premised on the suppression of women, which is in the very Hindu marriage system of endogamy and child marriage. Being a first generation Dalit scholar educated across continents, Suraj Yengde is not an exception because he unravels his own experience of growing up as a Dalit in a slum. He not only brings to the fore the discriminations and violence in society among different *varnas* (castes) in India, but also emphatically and unambiguously points out the caste-based differences in politics, bureaucracy and

judiciary. He narrates, with examples, his account of divisions and discriminations among the community of Dalits themselves where it has multiple layers of sub categories – “Token Dalits,” “Elite Dalits,” “Self-Obsessed Dalits-,” and “Radical Dalits” – on the basis of class, gender, affiliations and different doctrines of beliefs.

The book is divided into six chapters and has an Introduction. In the introductory piece the author not only shares his own experience of growing up in a poor Dalit family, but also explains his purpose of writing the book. He contends that “caste plays an important role in every facet and over an unthinkable large domain of public and private” (3). He narrates the poignant incident of Surekha Bhootmange and her daughter’s brutal rape incident to point out how the media have intentionally skipped its coverage and the Dalit activists who tried to protest against it were hounded by the police and the state. Yengde maintains that “untouchability remains a lifeline of India’s present” (11), where more than fifty percent of households in India still practice and witness untouchability.

The first chapter, “Being a Dalit,” documents his experiences among non-Hindu friends and his struggle to negotiate with his identity as a Dalit. He says, “Dalits are not mono-identity, and the perception of them being so creates an additional burden on Dalit Being” (45). He also introduces the idea of “Dalit Love” (45) which mainly directs the love of a community battered by the social agencies and it is their own conviction to love those who are often oppressed. It is a love of growing up together and resisting the evils perpetrated against them and their endeavour to transcend the parochial Brahminical codes. Another important idea he moots is “Dalit Humour,” which enables the Dalits to laugh at the sorrows of life and embrace the little joys that life has to offer. Their emotion of laughing constitutes their bonding, thereby paving their path to Dalit humanity. Yengde seeks a progressive struggle that can totally annihilate the complete hierarchical system in society and bring about equality and justice for everyone.

The second chapter, “Neo-Dalit Rising,” begins with Yengde’s own experience of being “marginal among the marginalized” (69) position in his school because he is both Dalit and poor. Here he sternly questions the controlling machineries of government which is only run by the legislators of the Brahmin caste. Even in the courts, he relates how the upper caste judges take the decision and continuously work in their caste networks. He further discusses the ideas of Ambedkarism and constitutionalism. Indian Constitution has become “a grievance cell offering no immediate solutions” (76) and it is not a panacea to their problems. The internal caste divisions among the Dalits form a completely modernised form of untouchability, though all are under the strict purview of Brahminical dogmas. He argues that Ambedkar’s name is used to hide the elitism of the Constitution and his sanctimonious image is used to silence Dalit rage and

uprising. Reservation policies are not “emancipation project[s]” but “extension of dependence” (87) and appeasement. To become a part of the “emancipation project” they are always forced to prove their legitimate status in India:

A Dalit, while subscribing to the views of Ambedkar and demanding his or her legal rights, always finds a need to footnote their nationalistic sentiments. Dalits are forced by caste colonizers to be patriotic in their own homeland. (91)

The third chapter, “The Many Shades of Dalits,” basically discusses the sub-castes and “sub-sub-castes” (99) who have their own baggage of history and memory which they fail to forget. Even among Dalits there are some like “Token Dalits-,” and “Elite Dalits,” who like to work within the hierarchised regressive power structure. Educated salaried Dalits often prefer to drop their identity of being a Dalit. The author has also touched upon the experiences of Dalit women for whom “caste, religion, patriarchy, class, and spatiality” (141) work as the “five-fold structures of fixed hierarchy” (141). A Dalit woman is someone who resides at the periphery of the power structure where she is fiercely oppressed and ostracised. Dalit spiritual sphere is also equally diverse and Yengde points out the homogeneity and multiplicity of their spiritual practices though they continuously negotiate in a problematic social and cultural space.

In the fourth chapter, “The Dalit Middle Class,” Yengde perspicaciously outlines how the middle class is an outcome of the modern “capital-intensive industry and techno-capital work,” and this class always has the “possibility of climbing a step up or sliding one down” (165). Dalit middle class emerges as a potent mediator between the poor Dalits and the society with privileged class in society. These people are mostly working for the liberation of the poor Dalits and trying to effectively provide ideological guidance. Yengde also discusses the hegemonic dynastic politics among people of Dalit community.

The fifth chapter, “Dalit Capitalism,” identifies the capitalistic common thread in India that is “Brahmin-sanctioned Bania-controlled model of business” (229) and how this merges with spirituality to control the sub-castes. History has an important influence on the formation of “Bania capital” (231). Brahmins have dominant caste supremacy in a social class hierarchy from time immemorial. The author cites Ambedkar’s and Du Bois’s idea to elaborate that the Dalits should get proper intellectual training to enter the commercial world. Dalits are the “deprived occupants” of Indian society and they hardly contribute to the capitalist economy. He argues that, “History has had a significant influence on the formation of Bania capital. ... And to ‘regulate’ society one has to normalize the caste order and the hierarchy it fosters” (231). The connection between caste and capital is persistent and it is historically rooted ad perpetuated.

The sixth chapter entitled, “Brahmins against Brahminism,” highlights how the dominant Brahmins oppress the subordinate Brahmins, whose sufferings are not represented in popular discourse. The diversity among the Brahmins has been highlighted by Ambedkar. All the Brahmins are not equally privileged. Yengde has tried to highlight almost all the points related to Caste which really affects the lives of people and he has also cited different real life instances and demographic details including the ideas of Ambedkar, Phule and others. He has even endeavoured to foreground the diverse connections between gender inequality and politics against the Dalits. He has tried to traverse the governmental reservation policies of Dalit emancipation and has also talked about how India, an independent nation, was born and its Constitution was formulated.

Yengde has spent his childhood in the Dalit *bastis* (slums) and after all his hardships he is now situated in the USA. As he is now away from the present lived conditions of the Dalits in India, all his arguments mostly hover around the information provided by secondary sources like newspapers and conferences. To discuss the caste issues, especially in a diverse place like India, it is very important to live in the present scenario because focussing on any issue regarding caste differences in any Indian society requires nuanced precision. By staying away from the situation and conditions makes the representation a deferred reality. Yengde has also not given proper space for discussing the representation of Dalit experiences in art and literature. He has sparsely hinted at this issue but has not elaborated the fact how their representation in creative domain can help them get a foothold. However the book is an important addition to Dalit studies in India.

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