

Caste Pride and Gender: Why You Cannot Use One Kind of Abuse to Justify Another



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More conducive settings are needed for the subordinated groups to talk to each other in respectful ways and in safer spaces.



Illustration: Pariplab Chakraborty.

The 2024 election results have shown the power of democracy and Dalit voters have played a key role. Among the other candidates who won, Sanjana Jatav and Varsha Gaikwad are the youngest Dalit members of the parliament. There is a need to step away from the rhetoric of 'subaltern' victimhood for a moment and pay more attention to anti-caste politics by listening more carefully to Dalit voices.

Aside from the unfolding of intense electoral politics this month, June, is celebrated as Pride Month in recognition of gender and sexual diversity. The idea of Pride is powerful in reclaiming identities and validating experiences that are otherwise subjected to stigma, derision, and abuse. Pride restores dignity and helps visibilise those who are rendered obscure and illegible in the social milieu.

One such illegibility came to the fore during the question-and-answer session of a public lecture on 'WEB Du Bois and his Vision of Democracy' at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in Delhi recently. The speaker, noted academic Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, didn't let a student ask a question because she thought he was "a Brahminist," and the student [took to social media](#) later and abused the speaker as "this Bastard and Bitch Lady."

This is a productive site for developing a comparative understanding of anti-caste politics through gender and caste-based abuses and for a broader formulation of the ideas of pride.

Caste-based identity and abuse

In an [interview](#), the student defended his use of the gender-abusive. To do this, he Invoked caste-based abuse and identity. He said, "I am a Chamar. My entire caste and my existence is a term of abuse so why is purity of language expected of me?"

Chamar is derived from the root word *cham* (as in *chamdi* or skin). It is a caste category that is traditionally associated with people who were tasked with the disposal of animal carcasses and the processing of their skin for making leather. It is considered "impure," and those who are assigned to this caste-based occupation are considered lowly and treated as "untouchable."

Chamar is listed as a Scheduled Caste. The word 'chamar' is also commonly used as a caste-based slur. Some people, including me, prefer self-identifying as Dalit – rather than with caste names which have been rendered derogatory. Others have sought to reclaim these slurs.

A personal experience of gender-based abuse

The incident at JNU reminded me of a personal experience from 10 years ago. I was about to enter the District Park in Haus Khas, Delhi, with workout music blasting in my earphones. Two men were walking in my direction and staring at me. There was a gap of a few seconds between two tracks of the music, that's when I heard one of them say, "*Chakka re chakka* (look at that faggot)." It took me a moment to grasp what had happened. By then, the two men had walked out of the park, and the next track had started blasting in my ears. I was running and thinking to myself:

Did that man really say what I heard? Why? Was it my clothes? Was it my gait?

A fellow queer runner has said to me often that I "run like a girl." It was harmless banter at the time. Yet, at this moment, that harmless banter came back to me. I checked my gait and wondered if my short shorts were too short.

Social code of masculinity

Writing about this experience on social media, I wanted to make a collective sense of it with the help of my friends and acquaintances, a group that included lawyers, scholars, activists, and a judge. A judicial magistrate in India noted that Section 504 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) of 1860 would apply. Section 504 identifies insult and insulter in these words:

Intentional insult with intent to provoke breach of the peace—Whoever intentionally insults, and thereby gives provocation to any person, intending or knowing it to be likely that such provocation will cause him to break the public peace, or to commit any other offence.

Did the two men intend “to provoke breach of the peace”? I do not know their intention.

If I were to speculate, I would think they intended to entertain themselves with a commonplace humour that happens to be homophobic. If I were to dig a little deeper into their intention, I might speculate that they were motivated by their ideas of masculinity. My skimpy clothes and my gait might have been contrary to such ideas. Consciously or unconsciously, the two men served as social agents for enforcing an unwritten code of masculinity.

Caste-based abuse and a legal protection limited by intention

There is a special legislation for protection from caste-based violence, [The Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes \(Prevention of Atrocities\) Act of 1989](#), referred to in short as the SC/ST Act or the PoA. Section 3 (1) (r) states:

3. Punishments for offences of atrocities. —

1. Whoever, not being a member of a Scheduled Caste or a Scheduled Tribe,— ...

(r) intentionally insults or intimidates with intent to humiliate a member of a Scheduled Caste or a Scheduled Tribe in any place within public view; ...

shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term which shall not be less than six months but which may extend to five years and with fine.

Born to “untouchable,” Jatav, Chamar, and Dalit parents, I am a member of a Scheduled Caste (SC), and I think the two men intended to humiliate me. That would not be sufficient for invoking the SC/ST Act because it penalises only certain kinds of insults inflicted by non-SC or non-ST persons upon SC or ST persons. Presuming the two men were non-SC/ST, for Section 3 (1) (r) to apply, their insult must be based on caste in some way. For example, if they were to say, “look at that chamar,” that could be an offence under the SC/ST Act.

Along these lines, I am reminded of another incident when I was a law student. In a casual conversation, a classmate who was Muslim remarked on something personal about me and laughingly said, "Sumit, you're such a Chamar." My facial expression must have changed because she immediately said, "You know I didn't mean it that way." Regardless of her intentions in the delivery of caste-based abuse, the injury was inflicted on me. It's etched in my memory, such that I haven't forgotten it in almost 30 years.

Name-calling as a means of insult

Even according to judicial decisions, some caste names are used as a means of insult. Drawing upon an analogy with abusive name-calling like "nigger" or "negro" for African Americans, **the Supreme Court of India has stated:**

[U]ses of the words "pallan", "pallapayal" "parayan" or "paraparayan" with intent to insult is highly objectionable and is also an offence under the SC/ST Act. It is just unacceptable in the modern age, just as the words "Nigger" or "Negro" are unacceptable for African-Americans today.

The analogy of racialised slurs with caste names in India presents a combined understanding of insults based on caste and race. Similarly, there could be a combined understanding of insults based on caste and gender. "Look at that faggot" is not an insult based on caste, yet, I would say, the intention to insult is analogous to insults based on caste.

Aside from broad analogies such as these, I ask myself, would I have felt any more or less insulted if I were called "Chamar" instead of "chakka" by the two men in the park? The answer is no. I would have felt equally insulted at being called either of the two. The former is a slur based on caste, and the latter is a homophobic slur based on misogyny and patriarchal ideas of masculinity. They are both intended to secure interlocking power systems of casteism and patriarchy.

Competing victimhood of age, caste and gender

The JNU student has defended his gender-based abuse by self-identifying with caste-based abuse. The two are not at parity, though. Chamar is formally listed as a protected legal category. The gender-based abuse, "this bastard and bitch lady," are not legal categories of protection. Here, language operates as a tool for inflicting insult. It is not a matter of "purity of language" – as claimed by the student. There is no defence to this abuse.

On the other hand, it is not a criminal offence to call someone a bastard or a bitch. While calling someone "a Chamar" could result in criminal penalties. If someone who is not a member of the SC or the ST were to call the JNU student a Chamar – with the intent to humiliate him, it would qualify as a criminal offence under the SC/ST Act. In that sense, the JNU student's caste position is legally protected in ways that the speaker's gender position is not.

Of course, the speaker and the student are also different in their age and academic stature. In an interesting numerical reversal, one is 82, and the other is 28. The speaker is an accomplished academic, while the student is young and has yet to start his academic career. In that sense, he is more vulnerable to the effects of this controversy.

Caste, pride, internal contestations and empathy

Sometimes, abusive words are reclaimed by those who are abused. This sort of reclamation is a political act that seeks to transform the humiliation of abuse into the power of pride. Depending on who uses it and how, the word queer could serve as an example of both abuse and reclamation in the context of gender and sexual diversity. Ginni Mahi's 2016 song '[Danger Chamar](#)' is an example of reclaiming caste-based abuse and infusing it with pride. Along similar lines, Doja Cat's '[Boss Bitch](#)' makes a self-referential statement of gender-based abuse, but it's clear that the artiste is wearing it as a badge of honour, not an insult.

The JNU student's self-referential statement is emphatically and exclusively located within the typology of abuse. "I am a Chamar. My entire caste and my existence is a term of abuse.." is not a proud reclamation, it's a poor excuse. Any self-identification with abuse cannot entitle anyone to abuse others. Rather, our experiences of abuse should make us more sensitive to how language operates to secure multiple forms of subordination.

We should empathise with those who are routinely abused and not replicate the patterns of abuse. We should deploy the power of language to transform the humiliation of abuse into proud reclamations and push back against abusive expressions even if they seem to originate from among the same subordinate group of which we are part. In this case, the newly elected Member of Parliament, Sanjana Jatav, the JNU student, and I are all positioned similarly along the same caste lines—with significant differences in their genders (and perhaps sexualities).

Internal contestations are common in the seeming cohesiveness of the LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, plus) Pride. Broadening the understanding of pride along the caste lines helps in building intersectional solidarities among the subordinated groups. Plus, more conducive settings would help these groups to talk to each other in respectful ways and in safer spaces.

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