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ARTICLE

Caste, gender, power, and impunity: an interview with V. Geetha

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Abstract
V. Geetha is a feminist activist, scholar and publisher based out of Chennai. In this interview she explores the intertwined concepts of caste, gender and power, their significance in determining the socio-political capital of persons and groups, how they decide access to education and employment (hence, class), and the ability to interact with the state, assume power or be delignated from it. She elicits several examples of violence, massacres, sexual assaults against Dalits in which caste positionality allowed serious crimes to go unpunished, even unrecognized. Drawing upon the rich tradition of Dalit scholarship and Dalit feminism, V. Geetha elaborates on the culture of civic and state sexual impunity in South Asia.

Keywords Caste · Cultural Capital · Labour · Public-Private · Endogamy · Hinduism · Patriarchy · Sexuality · Graded Inequality · Social Death · Intimacy · Family · Sexual Impunity · Dalit Feminism · Collective Memory

Sameena/ Upasana/ Albeena (Editors): *You have consistently examined the relations between caste and capitalism, starting with your early book* Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium[1] *in 1998. How vital do you think is this paradigm to the India of 2019?*

[1] V Geetha and S V Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Thass to Periyar* (Samya 1998).

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V. Geetha (VG): As long as we continue to be a caste society, caste will continue to shape relations of production, the production process and the making of labour. Accumulation in the Indian context is defined by: (a) access to capital, either as inherited private property or as something that one can appropriate, based on one's social and political capital, and relationship to the Indian state; (b) relations between capital-holding classes and castes and those which have nothing but their labour to offer, to transact a livelihood within the terms of a given production process. And such labour is often marked by caste, gender and ethnicity, since a lot of it is also Adivasi labour; and (c) by inherited skills.

In empirical terms too, one can establish the salience of caste in shaping class-based realities: who owns what, for instance, is a question that is likely to yield mostly familiar answers. Traditional mercantile castes, sections of the Brahmin and other traditionally literate communities are those who have access to capital in a given sort of way. True that some others have joined this group – from the backward and even most backward castes, in some cases, as you see with sections of the economically mobile Nadar community in the Tamil context – but these 'upstart' castes still lack cultural capital, which is what it takes to mediate capital and the state, capital and labour, capital and the world market, and increasingly capital and the public sphere, so to speak, rather the world of print, electronic and social media. While these are contested spheres, they remain dominated by those who speak for entrenched class and caste interests.

We need, of course, to be precise in establishing the play of caste in the making of social relations of production, and also point to the ways in which capital intersects – or does not – with social and cultural authority, and how capital 'manages' to make this authority its own. An examination, for example, of the managerial class in both public and private sector companies would help in identifying the role played by traditionally literate castes in holding together this system of capital and labour – as mediators, communicators and as those who help define the limits and possibilities of accumulation, appropriation and of exploitation. Then, again, while information technology-based industries have sort of made for a relatively mobile workforce, comprising workers from across communities, the cultures produced at the workplace and the sites of consumption remain in the hands of the traditional purveyors of social and cultural capital.

Further, if we are to examine what in India is referred to as the 'non-formal' sector, you will see how this is a domain where Bahujan, Dalit and Adivasi workers, especially women from the latter, predominate. It is another matter that today all jobs, even those that are integrated with formal factory systems of employment, have been rendered precarious – in any case, such precarity is also marked by caste, gender and ethnicity, with traditionally dominant and upper castes not found in large numbers in this category.

Editors: *Would you agree that caste is a significant factor for understanding social reality not only in India but also in the rest of South Asia?*

VG: I would say so: if by caste, we understand the prevalence of endogamy, underwritten by punitive codes that punish transgressions; and the persistence of untouchability.

On the other hand, in countries where a majority of people comprise those who are not Hindus, the hold of the caste order, both with reference to marriage, untouchability and to issues of access, to education, work, property and so on, might be said to be somewhat less harsh (while existent). For one, there is no customary or religious stricture against crossing the caste line (as Ambedkar pointed out, all those years ago[2]) either in Islam or Buddhism, which hold sway in South and South East Asia. Secondly, neither Buddhism nor Islam require a reference to or endorsement of birth-based inequality to underscore their creed, their salvific principles or their cosmogony. Whereas the plethora of practices and beliefs we call Hinduism constantly reference differences, hierarchy, orders of precedence, notions of high and low, both with respect to rites of passage as well as familial, caste and social rituals – and this is consequential for all those who are party to these rituals and rites, with some of them marked high, and others low, and yet others, outside the limits of the social compact.

Some of us might be inclined to argue that there is a philosophical and ethical core to Hinduism, such as we find in the Upanishads, or the various strands of philosophical thought, or traditions of Bhakthi devotionalism – but again, to invoke Dr. Ambedkar, if equality and respect are to accrue only in terms of ecstatic piety, or in the realms of philosophical abstraction, they cannot ever be permanent aspects of the Hindu social order. For, these values have to be affirmed unconditionally, unequivocally, and with or without the sanction of an all-pervasive and all loving deity. Essentially, liberty, respect, fraternity and equality hinge on our relationships with each other and may not be transferred or displaced on to our relationship to god, or some other cosmological principle, whose very capaciousness is taken to be an alibi for our not interrogating secular inequality.

In this sense, while caste is a useful category of analysis for us to understand how societies across South Asia are constituted, it is an acute category of understanding and critique in our context, and we might want to keep this in mind.

Editors: *How are caste and patriarchy connected? How does class play into this combination? Do you think that intersectionality[3] is a useful analytical tool to understand this interplay in India/ South Asia?*

[2] B R Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) <http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/mmt/ambedkar/web/readings/aoc_print_2004.pdf> accessed 15 November 2019.

[3] Intersectionality was a term coined by black feminist legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw, to understand the overlapping oppression of race, gender, caste, class that a poor, black woman would face since she embodies several intersectional identities. Kimberle Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color' (1990) 43(6) Stanford Law Review 1241.

VG: Endogamy is the principle that underwrites, sustains and perpetrates the separation of castes. It is the 'mechanism', if you will, that keeps the caste order, including notions and practices of untouchability, in place. In this sense, it points to the centrality of the sphere of family, household, kin and caste in reproducing the social order; and in an affective sense, to reproducing notions of love, intimacy, conjugality, as these are defined by the caste order. This latter, to quote Ambedkar, is marked by an "ascending scale of reverence and descending scale of contempt,"[4] which affects how castes are placed and dealt with, both in intimate as well as public spheres.

This system of graded inequality is thus fundamentally gendered – and requires us all to essay specific roles and functions which we need to take on, as men and women. As women, we are to ensure that we 'guard' ourselves against being lured by men who are not our caste men. As men we are enjoined to be vigilant with respect to the 'purity' of 'our' women and to 'protect' them should it be necessary. And for those who choose to not abide by these rules, punishment awaits them. And if a man or woman fails to 'function' as he or she is meant to, that is, if they do not play their gendered roles and live their gendered identities, they stand to be hurt in horrific ways. We know from the autobiographies of trans-persons and queer people, the punishment for being sexually heterodox is severe, and violent. And if one is to breach the limits of caste as well, both real and social death could be visited on that individual.

Social death is not often recognized for what it is, but it is cruel and consequential: the withdrawal of affection, and a place within kin and familial networks, and in their place, abuse, hurt, and alienation. And this is what makes for what we call patriarchy, a system that seeks to control desire, choice, and which is held in place by all of us playing the roles and functions assigned to us.

This also has to do with work, as it has to do with intimacy and sexuality: the manner in which we, as women, notwithstanding whatever else we do, by way of labour, work, or a vocation, are bound to the household, family, kin networks; and the manner in which we are disallowed from 'exiting' these spaces – and more important, the ways in which we make these spaces our own. And this is where we become 'complicit' with what fetters us, for within the social order, our sense of self is defined by how well we comply or even if we don't, how well and successfully we negotiate freedom within these spaces, such that we don't quite breach limits, even as we constantly seek to re-set them.

The sphere of reproduction of the family is as much a crucible for the forging of our selfhood, as the wider world, and the intersection of the two, of caste and the family, happens at that point where we choose to think through our emotional, sexual and vocational or professional lives – and our choices are restricted or enabled by how our caste status validates or does not validate these choices, and how much our families are willing to endorse or not support these choices. Further, sometimes

[4] Vasant Moon (ed), *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches Vol. 3* (Dr Ambedkar Foundation 2014) 48.

our familial and caste status prevents us from literally 'thinking' some choices – as those who are from Bahujan and Dalit communities know.

As to how class works in this context, if a Bahujan Dalit caste has within its confines a middle or upper middle class segment, clearly certain sorts of access, especially to education or a white collar profession might be eased somewhat. Especially, government employment in the Indian context. It could also be that Bahujan castes have access to land, as we see in several parts of the country, and this possession marks a clear line of distinction, honor and respect between these castes and Dalits, who are simply not entitled to land, even if they might be able to afford them. And should Dalits access land, they are never allowed to forget how precarious their status as landowners are. When and if an instance of local altercation and antagonism turns into a caste riot, Dalit homes and land are invariably targeted. Arson, looting, and destruction of their access to water are common markers of such riots.

With respect to urban society, we see how state or service employment in the private sector which fetches a modest income actively reshapes the material circumstances of Dalit and Bahujan life. On the other hand, the ability to access cultural resources, and to find one's place in the social landscape remains fraught with tension, constant negotiations over questions of identity, hostility and downright violence. Then there is the problem of holding on to homes that are found on the margins of the city, such as lower income neighborhoods or designated slums. And of accessing valuable social goods, including education and health. Class and caste together mediate these transactions.

Interestingly, with respect to dominant and upper caste groups, class and gender as these play out within groups have made for a relatively 'empowered' female population that then goes on to assert caste markers – if not openly, at least in tangential ways, and sometimes in open ways, as when they flaunt their sense of entitlement, without actually bothering to place their demands, by way of 'gender empowerment' within the broader stretch of connections that limit female lives, choices and mobilities. Women from upper and dominant castes might still have to negotiate respect within marriage and families and to keep themselves free from violence. In this sense, perhaps, we might want to think of the relative autonomy of the gender question.

Editors: *In your 2016 book titled* Undoing Impunity,[5] *you have argued that the state is complicit in creating sexual impunity. How does this get translated when looking at cases of violence against women? And particularly Dalit women?*

VG: *Undoing Impunity* is actually all about civic impunity – and how state impunity with respect to crimes against women mirrors the latter, even as it protects it. Having said that, it is evident that the state, whether it is the criminal justice system or the individuals who run it, plays an important role in either marking a case of violence as illicit, or as permissible. And here, much hinges on the caste, class and increasingly, the religious identities of the perpetrator and victim. If the former is from a

[5] V Geetha, *Undoing Impunity: Speech after Sexual Violence* (Zubaan 2016).

dominant caste, and with enough leverage to influence the workings of the criminal justice system at the local level, and the victim is Dalit, then the process of working the system becomes much more difficult for the victim, and often she finds herself at the receiving end – as when the perpetrator attempts to criminalize her, by getting a case filed against her. Or it could be that the process of justice is not even put in place, until and unless the poor and the oppressed take to the streets, as happened with the infamous Khairalanji murders[6] and sexual assault instances.

At other times, even if the perpetrator and the victim are from the same caste, gendered authority invested in the perpetrator, often underscored by political and social power, might be seen to work against the victim's rights of redressal and justice, as we see with respect to some other cases, most recently the Unnao rape case.[7]

Also, we might want to understand how state institutions work in matters relating to violence against women. Often they work their way through the justice system not only because they view their roles as important and central and their officers as being committed to justice, but also because they imagine that their role is to uphold the sovereignty of the state – rather than the rights of the people. This is something that we witnessed with respect to the possible rape and murder of two young women in Shopian in Kashmir, where the CBI, which in some other contexts has been able to essay a fair and neutral role, resorted to asserting the view of the state establishment and refused to even acknowledge that a monumental crime might have taken place. Given the fact that the Indian state defines its sovereignty in terms of how it handles its 'right' to govern Kashmir, this is not to be wondered at.

Elsewhere, where questions of sovereignty are not at stake, the CBI has played a different role, upholding the rights of wronged victims, as we saw with respect to its work in the Vachathi case in Tamil Nadu,[8] which saw for the first time ever the sentencing of over 260 people with regard to a case of mass assault of Adivasi women. The sessions court produced a judgment that fixed command responsibility, so to speak, for the sentenced included senior officers of the Indian Forest Service as well as high ranking policemen.

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[6] Anand Teltumbde, *Khairlanji: A Strange and Bitter Crop* (Navayana 2008).

[7] The Unnao rape case refers to the gang rape of a 17-year-old girl on 4 June 2017 in Unnao, Uttar Pradesh, India. The main accused in this case is a local BJP leader, who was able to put tremendous pressure on the victim and her family. When they refused to 'settle' the case, police arrested the victim's father and caused his death in judicial custody.

[8] On 20 June 1992, the tribal village of Vachathi, in Dharmapuri district, Tamil Nadu was raided and destroyed by the Forest Department and the police. A team of 155 forest personnel, 108 policemen and six revenue officials entered the village searching for smuggled sandalwood and to gather information about Veerappan, an infamous brigand. Under the pretext of conducting a search, for two days, the team ransacked the villagers' property, destroyed their houses, killed their cattle, assaulted around 100 villagers, and raped 18 women. After several years of efforts, a trial was held at Dharmapuri Principal District Court. All the 269 who were accused were sentenced on 29 September 2011. Of the 269, 54 died during the trial. Of the remaining 215, 126 belonged to the forest department, 84 were policemen, and five were revenue officials. Out of the 17 rapists, 12 were sentenced to 17 years imprisonment and five received five years of jail time. The rest of the accused were sentenced to one to two years in prison.

The state's sense of its own prowess, and its reading of its role are often defined by how those who run the state, either legislators, bureaucrats or those in the judiciary view their relationship to the people of India and their sense of constitutional morality. If they remember that it is the people who are sovereign and not those who govern them, and that the latter cannot be identified with the state or the people, then there is a chance that justice might be easier to access. And if they imbibe the spirit of the Constitution, especially the values defined in the Fundamental Rights, and the judgments that have upheld these, in a variety of ways, one might expect a reasonably just approach.

But we also need to have a system of checks and balances – for example with something like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act,[9] or the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act,[10] there is very little to check the misuse of power, and this makes for a level of structural impunity, in addition to what the state's officers enjoy by virtue of their power of office, their caste and religious status.

On the other hand, we have a plethora of laws, including the Scheduled Castes and Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, that seek to identify the failure of state action as an offence, and these in some circumstances at least keep for a sort of check on the moral indifference of the state, and the impunity that accompanies it.

Editors: *While Dalit men are being killed for 'talking to upper caste women' on one hand, upper caste women are found at the forefront of rallies against 'Dalit masculinity' threatening the honor of upper caste women – as was seen in the Maratha mobilization after the murder of a Maratha girl in Maharashtra.*[11] *Are women complicit in perpetuating caste patriarchy?*

VG: The overturning of endogamous logic was viewed as catastrophic in a species of cautionary and punitive literature associated with Hindu law in the past – that is, the world was seen as all wrong, when people marry across lines of difference that are no longer held to be valid. One line of difference that is always sought to be held in place, is that which separates and blocks Dalit and under-caste men in general from having access to upper caste women, either personally, socially or otherwise. And one way of marking the 'upstart' nature of Dalit claims is to claim they crossed this line, whether they did or not.

Conversely, it is possible that in order to assert their defiance, individuals from under-caste groups do boldly proclaim their rights of access to upper caste women – as some of them did in the 1980s in Tamil Nadu, in the context of what is known

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[9] The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 gives unfettered power to state security personnel vis-a-vis citizens and has been used in areas of India designated as 'disturbed areas'.

[10] The Association for Protection of Civil Rights has moved the Supreme Court seeking directions to declare the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Amendment Act, 2019 'unconstitutional', as it confers power upon the central government to designate an individual as a terrorist.

[11] The brutal rape and murder of a Maratha community girl, ostensibly by Dalit youth in Kopardi village in Maharashra, triggered unprecedented mobilization of the Maratha community across the state. Siwan Anderson and others, 'Distress in Marathaland' (2016) 51(51) Economic and Political Weekly 14.

as the Bodinayakanur riots.[12] However, this latter is seldom an argument for mobilization nor does it have political significance, except in a rhetorical sense. On the other hand, the mobilization of upper caste women to proclaim violence against Dalit men and the Dalit community in particular has a long and hoary history – and women have fallen in line, for a variety of reasons, especially to do with matters of marital, family and caste honor. And we saw this most explicitly in Khairalanji,[13] where they were part of the crowd that cheered those who carried out unspeakably brutal and shameless acts of violence against Surekha and Priyanka Bhotmange.

Why do women consent to this vile philosophy of shaming, humiliation and violence against those deemed low in the caste order? Part of the answer has to do with women's sense of self, with their civic as well as individual identities, which are so closely linked to family, conjugal roles and the duty enjoined on them to preserve 'honor', whether of the family or community. Part of the answer also has to do with a complicated politics of sexuality, which both constrains them as well as enables them to access power over their social subordinates – a phenomenon we see also in the American South, and we were witness to in apartheid South Africa. They are bound to a restrictive world of desire and choice within the terms of their familial and caste or race spaces, yet get to exercise authority over their social subordinates, which means that in some circumstances, this power gets sexualized in complicated ways, and is set against what is perceived as under-caste masculine prowess.

Editors: *How do you see the evolution of the Dalit feminist movement in India? How has it impacted the trajectories of the feminist movement and the Dalit movement in India?*

VG: Dalit women have been part of all democratic and political struggles in India, whether led by the left, anti-caste political movements or environmental groups. For one, their labour and militancy render them agents of resistance, and for another, they have a lot to lose whenever access to resources is policed, labour is regulated and controlled, and democracy is in retreat: and so, they come into these movements in large numbers. Whether these movements nourish them, and grant them the place they deserve, or define their priorities based on what is due to them, and what they desire – that is another question altogether.

As far as women's movements in India are concerned, they have, in their practical work, whether it had to do with family violence, rape, matters to do with health, such as forced sterilization and the use of injectable contraceptives, or with issues of labour or education or political mobilization around larger issues, such as land, had to reckon with caste and religious factors – and have been sensitive to them. This has

[12] S Ganeshram, 'Communalism in Tamil Nadu: A Study of Bodi Riots' (1989) 24(48) Economic and Political Weekly 2640.

[13] Teltumbde (n 6).

also meant that they take on board the realities of life as Dalit women experience them, and they have done this as well.

These matters have not gone uncontested, and there have been arguments, debates between Dalit feminists and others, which have led to a restating of our terms of understanding, analysis, and also what we want from the state and society. The right of Dalit women to organize separately even as they remained within the broad framework of the women's movement, the fact that they had to contend with a justice system that was shaped by caste and class realities and which demanded different strategies and approaches, and the insuperable reality of their lives having much more in common with the men in their communities than with the women who sought them out as feminist sisters, were all matters that Dalit feminists brought to the forefront of debates to do with gender – through the mid and late 1990s, the women's movement was richer for these debates.

And the point is that these debates and others that followed, point to the enormously complex realities that Indian feminisms have to grapple with. And the bar dancers' debate is a good example in this regard. The debates that arose with respect to the bar dancers of Mumbai city, saw Dalit and non-Dalit feminists holding very different positions. Bar dancing had been banned by the government of Maharashtra, and the question arose as to how women's groups ought to engage with the ban. Non-Dalit feminists were inclined to view the ban against bar dancing as a violation of women's right to labour of their choice. This understanding flowed from their larger understanding that all labour even that which is socially stigmatized or considered disrespectable is female labour and ought to be valued and respected. Dalit feminists on the other hand argued that the dancers were from castes and communities associated with stigmatized sexual labor and that their caste identities cannot be separated from their laboring selves, and that bar dancing in some respects was a continuation of a stigmatized profession and therefore it was alright to let go of it. While no easy accord was possible, the debates pointed to the civility that was required to broach complex questions of labour, sexual morality and gender – and Dalit feminists in this instance pushed non-Dalits to think through the relationship between caste, labour and gender in ways that they had not sought to. In short, they were asked to reckon with the politics of anti-caste movements and their visions of gender and sexuality. This has made for a sense of quiet humility at least amongst some sections of the women's movements in India.

Editors: *At the onset of the #MeToo movement in India, we witnessed a rift between the old and the new feminists.*[14] *Caste and generational issues came to occupy the center stage of public debate. What are your views on this?*

[14] On 24 October 2017, Raya Sarkar published on Facebook what later came to be known as the LoSHA (list of sexual harassers in academia). The list was compiled on the basis of women contacting Sarkar with names of their harassers. It finally had 75 names from approximately 30 colleges and universities across India, UK and the US. Soon after the list went online, *Kafila* published a letter signed by several leading feminists from Delhi who called for taking the list down and resorting to due process. Many conflicting questions of generational and caste differences surfaced in the debate that followed.

VG: Today, I would say that we made much of this generational difference, though at that time it appeared as if it were only that. In retrospect, we might want to think of other related matters: why has it not been possible for the work undertaken by women's groups, with all their productive and enabling aspects as well as their limitations, to find its place in collective memory? Why is it that as soon as a new generation of young people find their lives stymied and constrained and bruised by a brutal sex-gender system, they are made to feel that this horror is unprecedented, exceptional? What have women's groups failed to do, to keep alive in public memory the work done in the past, by themselves or by their forbears, to address persistent concerns to do with women's labour, sexuality, family and community? What sorts of linkages ought they have insisted on, and which would have kept their politics alive and sustained it, beyond the limited circle of individual groups and geographies of organizing? These are questions we need to think through, before we jump to conclusions to do with generational rifts and so on.

The caste question came up with respect to #MeToo, but as I have noted, this is not the first time that this has been brought to the forefront – there is an occluded history here as well. Caste realities have been taken note of by feminists, right from the 1970s, but the question is whether they have helped us rethink our concerns and priorities. And whether raising the caste question helped us position our roles, as women from privileged castes and communities more critically. And if thinking through caste and faith, we created enabling spaces and opportunities for Dalit and under-caste women to reorient our movements and feminisms? These questions need to be thought through and our own failures in this regard admitted to.

Today, Dalit and Bahujan women are a force in their own right, and they have a decidedly distinctive politics, which is likely to redefine feminist concerns and priorities.

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