

Studying and Teaching Gender-Caste Histories in India: Problems, Possibilities, and Pleasures

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KEYWORDS

Caste
Classroom
Dalit
Delhi University
Gender
History
Pedagogy

ABSTRACT

Amid a larger context of political and social changes in India, this article reflects on a personal-academic trajectory and the problems, possibilities, and pleasures of teaching and researching histories of gender and caste in modern India at the University of Delhi for more than three decades. As a feminist historian, the author first points to some of the limitations in her early years of teaching courses on gender, where she occluded caste as a category of analysis. However, an examination of the conjunctions between anti-caste thought and gender through a Dalit feminist pedagogical lens led to shifts in her curriculum and academic scholarship. The article goes on to discuss how preparing and teaching courses on gender-caste histories pose many challenges in terms of queries from the university administration, curriculum design, pedagogic practices, and student responses. Classroom spaces are highly politicized in India, with pronounced gender, caste, class, and linguistic identities that often overlap with each other, which has implications for teaching and research. Finally, the article deliberates on the creative possibilities of such courses and pedagogical strategies, as students critique the crafting of mainstream history writing, feel drawn to new theoretical tools and methodologies that rely on different archival registers, and question the erasure of caste as an analytic, in the process also making the classroom a more democratic space.

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1. Particularly pioneering were Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds, *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989); and Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, vol. IV.2 of *The New Cambridge History of India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

2. This resulted in a monograph: Charu Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims and the Hindu Public in Colonial India* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

3. Sati is a former practice among Hindus in India, whereby a widow threw herself on her deceased husband's funeral pyre.

4. The term "Dalit," literally meaning "crushed" or "broken to pieces," signifies a radical identity of ex-untouchables in India. Various terms like "depressed classes," "Harijan," "scheduled castes," and "outcastes" have been used for them in colonial and present-day India, and all are ideologically loaded words. For a critique, see Anupama Rao, ed., *Gender and Caste* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003), 1–47; and Sharmila Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios* (Delhi: Zubaan, 2006).

5. Sumit Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames: Relocating Post-Modernism, Hindutva, History* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002), 61.

6. The Mandal Commission granted 27 percent reservations to "Other Backward Classes" (OBCs) in all government jobs, thus making reservations for Dalits, Tribals, and OBCs a total of 49 percent.

When I began studying as an undergraduate student of history in the early 1980s at Delhi University, India, teaching gender as one rubric in Indian history courses was considered more than enough, as most courses were political or economic-centric in nature. Slowly, however, just as Marxism had done earlier, feminism came to provide much of the critical theoretical paradigms for researching and teaching history, and some rich histories, particularly of modern India, came to be written, with a distinct feminist perspective.¹ Greatly influenced by them, and inspired by my teachers like Uma Chakravarti, Prem Chowdhry, and Sumit Sarkar, I was deeply attracted toward the broad themes of and courses centering on women in colonial India and gender in history. Taking these themes forward, when I later began my doctoral research, I became keen to examine the gendered nature of pre-partition religious tensions and thus explored the interface between Hindu nationalism, gender, and Hindi print-popular archive in the early twentieth century.²

However, there was a critical gap in the way I, along with many other feminist scholars, designed our courses and did our research. It mirrored some of the problems of the early women's movement in India, which, while critiquing Eurocentric paradigms of the international feminist movement, implicitly adopted the same lens within. Thus, while dealing with questions of patriarchy and oppression and positing social difference of religion as an enduring aspect of modern gendering, much of my research and teaching focused on and addressed representations of and by dominant-caste, middle-class women. There were also three main axes of gender-centric courses of modern India: first, social reforms and debates on sati, widow remarriage, and age of consent; second, women's participation in Gandhian movements; and finally, the gendered nature of partition.³ Some categories and identities that did make an appearance were peasant and working-class women. However, "caste" as an analytic category was occluded and remained uninterrogated. Gender history courses tacitly implied that Dalit women did not merit a separate study, since they were subsumed within the category of "women."⁴ One reason for this perhaps was also that the concern of most social reform movements was largely about Hindu middle-class women rather than caste.⁵ There were of course other problems with the courses, as the category of "gender" was taught as meaning women and questions of queer politics or masculinities were ignored. Amid a background of larger political and social changes in India, this article reflects on my personal and academic trajectory of teaching and researching histories of caste and gender in modern India.

In the 1990s, some critical shifts occurred, which slowly came to affect teaching and research on caste. First, with the meteoric rise of Dalit politics and assertion of Dalit voices, particularly in north India, the discipline of history, while late in comparison to say sociology or anthropology, was forced to acknowledge the question of caste in a central way. Second, with the Mandal Commission, a new caste discourse emerged in the political-public arena.⁶ It also pushed caste as a key issue in higher education. Significantly, Delhi University, with its vast network of undergraduate colleges, where young people from the North poured in for higher studies, was the epicenter of the anti-Mandal protests. Slowly, thus, history courses were designed that not

7. These were also the central themes in most of the research on anti-caste histories, which the courses reflected. For some of the works, see notes 8 and 9. Ambedkar was a jurist, economist, social reformer, political leader, head of the committee that drafted the Constitution of India, and the preeminent, towering Dalit leader of the twentieth century.

8. Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (Delhi: Sage, 1994); Eleanor Zelliott, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (Delhi: Manohar, 1996); Christophe Jaffrelot, *Dr Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analysing and Fighting Caste* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004); M. S. S. Pandian, *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin: Genealogies of the Tamil Political Present* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007); and V. Geetha and S. V. Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Das to Periyar* (Calcutta: Samya, 1998).

9. For example, see Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religious Rebels in the Punjab: The Ad Dharm Challenge to Caste* (1982; repr., Delhi: Navayana, 2009); Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal 1872–1947* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997); Saurabh Dube, *Untouchable Past: Religion, Identity, and Power among a Central Indian*

only incorporated caste but also made it their focal point.

However, here too there was a reverse, yet mirrored, problem. These courses invariably centered on major anti-caste movements and figures, public participation and politics, questions of education and employment, and Mahatma Gandhi–B. R. Ambedkar debates.⁷ They were, of course, rich and insightful in their own right, particularly in terms of providing perceptive regional histories of anti-caste movements, critical redemptive narratives of Bahujans and Dalits, and an Ambedkar-centered historiography. Just as Bengal had provided much of the early paradigms for studying gender in colonial India, perhaps because of the presence of stalwarts like Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar in the region, with the important figures of Jyotirao Phule and Ambedkar, Maharashtra, and to an extent Tamilnadu, rightly came to embody our theoretical exemplars of anti-caste histories. The pioneering works of Rosalind O'Hanlon and Gail Omvedt, among others, on Maharashtra and Ambedkar and M. S. S. Pandian and V. Geetha on E. V. Ramasamy (popularly revered as Periyar) and the non-Brahmin movements of Tamilnadu became integral to our teaching caste histories.⁸ Other incisive studies on anti-caste movements in other regions also appeared.⁹

Yet most of these too missed the gender dimension, and histories of Bahujans and Dalits were predominantly taught as male-centric. Further, the courses focused on the political-public sphere and cataclysmic events, as opposed to the ordinary, the mundane, the intimate, and the anecdotal in everyday lived lives of Dalits, where women were much more ubiquitous. Equally, they often left unexamined dominant-caste privilege, designed as they were around Dalit protests and struggles. Caste was seen as a synonym for Dalit, as a burden and concern of Dalits alone, which did not impinge on the lives and histories of dominant castes.¹⁰ To put it crudely, it was as if gender history had to be taught from the rubric of women of middle class, upper caste, while caste had to be studied around Dalit male arenas. The allusion was that in colonial India, almost all women were upper caste, middle class, while virtually all subordinate castes and Dalits were male.¹¹ In other words, while both “gender” and “caste” are forms of social difference and systems of exploitation that work in inextricable ways to reinforce patriarchy and perpetuate inequalities, they were typically addressed in most Indian history courses until the late 1990s in isolation from each other and treated as distinct categories. The intersections between them fell through the cracks and signposts of gender and Dalit historiographies.

Moreover, while caste was perceived as a uniquely Indian form of hierarchical stratification with religious-ritual sanction, to be treated empirically, gender was studied as a universal-conceptual category, central to the reproduction of patriarchies. While caste was provincialized, scholars of non-Western gender faced the opposite problem, of challenging the Euro-American dominance and the geo-historical universality imputed to gender.¹² This may also explain why India's official and diplomatic discourse has refused to consider caste discrimination as a global malaise. Critical caste studies does make a universal claim about caste as a theoretical tool. It also offers an analytic framework that brings caste to the realm of the political. The entanglement of caste, a ritualized bio-power, with gender (and race) opens new possibilities amid constant erasures.

The rise of Dalit Bahujan feminism, which made their oppressed identity an instrument of confrontation, not only underscored the conjunctions between caste and gender but also

Community, 1780–1950 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998); and Vijay Prashad, *Untouchable Freedom: A Social History of a Dalit Community* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

10. To state an obvious point, caste is not a monolith, and the way it is perceived by savarnas (dominant castes) and Dalits is vastly different.

11. For elaboration and critique, see Charu Gupta, *The Gender of Caste: Representing Dalits in Print* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 4–8.

12. Anupama Rao, "Caste, Colonialism and the Reform of Gender: Perspectives from Western India," in *Gendering Colonial India: Reforms, Print, Caste and Communalism*, ed. Charu Gupta (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2012), 239.

13. Uma Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste through a Feminist Lens* (Calcutta: Stree, 2003), 1–2.

14. Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste*, 107–11. *Peshwai* is the period of expansion of Maratha power under successive peshwas, with Pune as the seat of their power for nearly a century (1713–1818). Under the Chitpavan Brahmin Bhat family, the *peshwas* became the hereditary highest administrators and controllers of the Maratha confederacy.

15. Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009), 50–68.

16. Sharmila Rege, *Against the Madness of Manu: B.*

complicated and nuanced academic understandings, leading to serious thinking and a different set of moves. Dalit feminist interventions underlined that in a gendered politics of power, women are always subservient to men, but in a caste politics of power, dominant-caste, middle-class women often collude with men; a classical example was the anti-Mandal agitation in the university, in which some dominant-caste women students were among the protesters. Some of them held placards that read "We don't want unemployed husbands," thus conjoining caste and gender through a self-regulatory code that endorsed and internalized the ideology of mandatory endogamous marriages.¹³ They also appeared here as citizens and not necessarily as gendered beings.

Simultaneously, the intersections between anti-caste thought and gender became central in the work of some feminist historians, like Uma Chakravarti, Anupama Rao, Sharmila Rege, S. Anandhi, and V. Geetha, predominantly with a west and south India focus. Their works showed the stronghold of Brahmanical patriarchy and the ways caste radicals, be it Phule, Ambedkar, or Periyar, distinctly drew and challenged connections between sexual regulation and caste reproduction. For example, Chakravarti emphasized the intimate relationship between consolidation of Brahmanical patriarchy and traditional caste hierarchy during the Peshwai in eighteenth-century western India.¹⁴ Rao demonstrated the contradictory contours of sexuality, marriage, and family in anti-Brahmin politics of Maharashtra.¹⁵ Rege reclaimed some of Ambedkar's writings, which imagined new caste-gender codes and trenchantly critiqued endogamy, as feminist classics.¹⁶ And Anandhi and Geetha unveiled the radical embrace of marriage as a partnership of two political comrades outside family and contraception as a means of sexual pleasure by Periyar and the Self-Respect Movement of Tamilnadu.¹⁷ Yet they also emphasized that since annihilation of caste, rather than sexual freedom per se, was the focus of male anti-caste reformers, there was instability in the otherwise radical connections they drew, as they often limited themselves to marriage and its protocols. Moreover, although caste radicals challenged caste ideology, "they were by no means immune to the extension of novel patriarchal practices into their own households."¹⁸ Problems with social reforms, property relations, widows and remarriage laws, ingrained endogamy in practices of sati, enforced widowhood, and girl marriage came to be also highlighted from the perspective of caste.¹⁹

As an auto-critique and self-reflexivity shaped by and drawing from such anti-caste, Dalit, and feminist writings, in the second phase of my research and teaching, I have attempted to employ a Dalit feminist pedagogical lens and have moved to teaching courses that explicate the gender of caste and interrogate the caste of gender. My courses question both the presumptive upper casteness of many gender studies courses and the conjectural maleness of most Dalit studies courses of modern Indian history by pointing out how differentials of caste and gender between women and men, and among the colonized women and men, were critical in structuring patterns of domination and subordination. They thus posit how social difference has been an enduring aspect of caste gendering and why constructs of caste were refurbished and recast in colonial India to justify hierarchies. Through regional case studies, writings of anti-caste ideologues, vernacular literature produced by dominant and subordinate castes, popular culture, visuals, and documents of colonizers and missionaries of the period, the courses underscore how a contentious associational discourse around caste and gender developed among colonizers, nationalists, revivalists, reformers, and Dalits and permeated into the social fabric in contradictory ways. They reflect not only that caste and gender are constitutive of

R. Ambedkar's Writings on
Brahmanical Patriarchy (Delhi:
Navayana, 2013), 13–56.

17. S. Anandhi, "Women's
Question in the Dravidian
Movement c. 1925–1948," *Social
Scientist* 19, nos. 5–6 (May–June
1991): 24–41; and V. Geetha,
"Periyar, Women and an Ethic of
Citizenship," in Rao, ed., *Gender
and Caste*, 180–203. Periyar was
the head of the Self-Respect
Movement in Tamilnadu. It was
an anti-caste, anti-Brahmanical
movement, the aim of which was
to encourage oppressed and
backward castes to have self-
respect and fight for equal human
rights and dignity.

18. Rao, *Caste Question*, 53

19. Susie Tharu, "The Impossible
Subject: Caste and the Gendered
Body," *Economic and Political
Weekly* 31, no. 22 (June 1, 1996):
1311–15.

20. Gupta, *Gender of Caste*.

21. Informal discussions among
faculty colleagues and author in
2010 during course revisions and
drafting.

the social but also that caste is central to how gender is reproduced. Giving up chronology and linearity and, instead, juxtaposing a series of historical narratives, the courses endeavor to "unread" dominant inscriptions on gendered caste bodies, while highlighting the emancipatory possibilities through counter-voices and agencies. As a bolster, in 2012, five social sciences and humanities departments of my university for the first time organized a joint interdisciplinary course on caste for graduate-level research students, of which I was a part, which proved to be a unique experience. It emphasized the insights, advantages, and limitations of a particular methodology and disciplinary approaches to caste. I became more receptive to interdisciplinary and intersectional perspectives. The teaching of these courses has turned out to be a pedagogic turning point.

Alongside, I started researching for my monograph *The Gender of Caste*, which was published in 2016. In this work, I foreground "representations in print" as my critical tool, addressing print as a significant if ambivalent site for the reproduction, transformation, and contestation of caste and gender ideologies. Juxtaposing a series of historical narratives, I attempt to "unread" dominant inscriptions on gendered caste bodies while highlighting emancipatory possibilities through counter-voices and agencies. The book discusses representations of Dalit women as vamps, victims, and *viranganas* (heroic women) in a variety of print genres. Since the book is about the gender of caste, I also explore Dalit men as gendered subjects and address constructions of Dalit masculinities. Another chapter examines religious conversions by Dalit women to Christianity and Islam. The seemingly incongruous locations and subjects of the book are closely linked, revealing the entanglement and co-constitution of attempts to regulate Dalit bodies, the new socialities of caste, and the texts and acts of Dalit women's (and men's) self-expression, whereby representations of Dalits were both enabled and transformed.²⁰ These research arenas also became integral to my teaching of courses on caste.

In the rest of the article, I wish to reflect on some responses from university administration, faculty, and students while preparing and teaching these courses, along with some takeaways for studying and research. The administrative responses to these courses have been varied. Initially, they considered them not serious enough but let them pass with some mild objections. At the same time, when the interdisciplinary course was being taught, they refused to make it a credit course, with students only earning a certificate on its completion, thus blunting their desire to take it. The early biases of some faculty colleagues were also apparent when they considered such courses as not hard-core history, as not dealing with major historical events, as addendums, as "soft" and "easy," and as not serious or academic enough; some were skeptical about the readings prescribed, which according to one "lacked solid archival data."²¹ There was a reluctance to offer these courses as part of core courses, and instead they were listed in the optional category. While many others firmly supported the courses, it was often Dalit faculty members who were offering courses on caste, again implicitly reaffirming the belief that the burden of caste is of Dalits alone. A Dalit colleague at the university expressed serious, thought-provoking questions when he stated that he felt very self-conscious when teaching caste. As a woman, with a surname "Gupta," I am well aware that my ancestors directly benefited from caste hierarchies, and we continue to do so. At the same time, working on arenas not considered part of mainstream history has made me often feel excluded myself from the mainstream. I am often doubly self-conscious when teaching that I must not reinforce stereotypes of dominant castes

22. See also Eliza Kent, "Representing Caste in the Classroom: Perils, Pitfalls and Potential Insight," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 17, no. 3 (2005): 231–41.

23. For an overview, see Sudipto Mondal, "Rohith Vemula: An Unfinished Portrait," *Hindustan Times*, n.d., accessed January 15, 2017, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/static/rohith-vemula-an-unfinished-portfolio/>. His suicide also highlighted discrimination against members of the Ambedkar Students Association at the university. The assertion of Dalit rights and identity is often seen in universities as "politicizing the campus."

24. For a detailed analysis of threats to academic freedom in Indian universities, see Nandini Sundar and Gowhar Fazili, "Academic Freedom in India," *The India Forum*, August 28, 2020, <https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/academic-freedom-india>; and The Wire Analysis, "Six Tables That Tell the Story of Academic Unfreedom in India," *The Wire*, October 4, 2022, <https://thewire.in/rights/six-tables-that-tell-the-story-of-academic-unfreedom-in-india>.

25. Saikat Ghosh, "Decision to Remove Kancha Ilaiah's Books from Delhi University's Political Science PG Syllabus Is RSS-motivated," *The Leaflet*, October 19, 2018, <http://theleaflet.in/decision-to-remove-kancha-ilaiahs-books-from-delhi-universitys-political-science-pg-syllabus-is-rss-motivated/>; and Scroll Staff, "Delhi University Drops Dalit Writers, Mahasweta Devi's Works from English Course," *Scroll.in*, August

being indifferent to caste, when they are very much embedded in it.²²

In the wake of the devastating suicide of Rohith Vemula, a student of the University of Hyderabad, on January 17, 2016, which underlined how higher educational institutions can be hotbeds of caste-based discrimination and which sparked protests and outrage across Indian universities, courses on caste have come under increasing scrutiny.²³ For example, in the post-2014 revisions of courses at Delhi University, unprecedented objections were raised, particularly by Hindu right-wing supporters, to courses dealing with caste, revealing the complex ways caste-based power flows.²⁴ They attacked the courses for their alleged ceaseless opposition to nationalist ideology (read: dominant Hindutva perspective), their preponderance of leftist-Dalit perspective, and their critique of Brahmanical patriarchy, that is, how patriarchy is organized and perpetuated on the basis of caste. Each and every reading listed came under surveillance, and there were violent demands to, for example, remove the books of Kancha Ilaiah on the grounds that they were anti-Hindu and stories of some Dalit writers like Bama and of Mahasweta Devi from various syllabi, which was often endorsed by university officials.²⁵ It was also suggested, following directives from the government, that the word "Dalit" be discontinued in academic discourse. However, as a writer said, "So the term 'Dalit' can't be used but 'Brahmin' and 6000 other caste names can."²⁶ Significantly, the term "Dalit," literally meaning the "crushed" or "broken," has evolved over time and has acquired powerful political connotations and symbolic meanings, including self-respect, assertion, solidarity, radical movements, and opposition to caste oppression. While others humiliate, it is a word that empowers.²⁷

While I have been rethinking and recrafting the syllabus, a simultaneous process that has been occurring in India is increasing politicization of the classroom space, with fault lines of gender, caste, class, and linguistic identities that often overlap with each other. With 50 percent reservations, many students are coming from Dalit and "Other Backward Classes" (OBCs), challenging the social homogeneity of classrooms and academic bodies. However, there is also an underbelly of divisions and distinctions, as there is a nexus of networks of exclusion that operate formally and informally.²⁸ An extremely encouraging aspect of these courses has been that they have been a huge draw, attracting maximum students. To take an example, there were some forty courses on offer in modern Indian history over a year in 2018 at my university. Around 150 students had to pick any eight, and my course on caste and gender attracted 98, who listed it as their first choice.

At the same time, many students initially bring their own commonsensical notions and preconceptions, which clash with academically informed arguments in the classroom arena. For example, a few of the dominant-caste students began by positing that caste has been waning and has become redundant in everyday social life of Indians and that to talk of it is being not modern enough. It is thus important to underscore in one's teaching how not talking of caste is also a sign of dominant-caste privilege. Over the years, I have also seen that while caste has been the central arena in presentations, assignments, and research topics of Dalit and Bahujan students, for those from dominant castes, it has remained a marginal subject. In reverse, when Dalit students express their desire to work on something else, they are often told to work on an issue or subject related to their own community.

Significantly, unlike say in Jawaharlal Nehru University or the University of Hyderabad, students

25, 2021, <https://scroll.in/latest/1003743/delhi-university-drops-dalit-writers-mahasweta-devis-works-from-english-course>.

26. Jeya Rani, "So the Term 'Dalit' Can't Be Used but 'Brahmin' and 6000 Other Caste Names Can," *The Wire*, September 14, 2018, <https://thewire.in/caste/dalit-brahmin-caste-names>.

27. Adrija Roychowdhury, "Why Dalits Want to Hold on to Dalit, not Harijan, not SC," *Indian Express*, September 5, 2018, <https://indianexpress.com/article/research/dalit-scheduled-caste-information-and-broadcasting-media-5341220/>; and editorial, "What's in a Name? On the Use of the Term 'Dalit,'" *The Hindu*, September 6, 2018, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/whats-in-a-name/article59780463.ece>.

28. Sharmila Rege, "Education as *Trutiya Ratna*: Towards Phule-Ambedkarite Feminist Pedagogical Practice," *Economic and Political Weekly* 45, nos. 44–45 (October 30–November 12, 2010): 88–98.

29. For further details, see Shailaja Paik, *Dalit Women's Education in Modern India: Double Discrimination* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

30. A conversation with one of my Dalit women students in 2015, who completed her MPhil degree with me.

31. Rege, "Education as *Trutiya Ratna*," 89.

32. For details, see Charu Gupta, "Writing Sex and Sexuality: Archives of Colonial North India,"

of Delhi University can also write their assignments and dissertations in Hindi. Besides the overlaps with class, linguistic politics is intricately tied to caste, as there is usually an overlap between English-speaking and dominant-caste students and Hindi-speaking and oppressed-caste students. Those fluent in English are more self-confident and more likely to become class representatives, taking on the mantle of speaking for the whole class. A distinct hierarchy is observed over the years: dominant-caste man, dominant-caste woman, Dalit man, and Dalit woman, in that order. Hindi-speaking students, mostly OBC and Dalit, are at a disadvantage as there is much less material available in the medium; they often get lower grades; there is an absence of institutional efforts and mechanisms for them; and at times there is indifference, noncooperation, and active discouragement by some faculty members to supervise them. Language thus operates as a marker of power relations, subordination, and exclusion. Dalit women students, besides of course being among the most disadvantaged in relation to their access to higher education, have minimal access to networks that create social capital.²⁹ One of my Dalit women students, who did her master of philosophy with me, said to me once, "Ma'am, I often feel inferior in class. I speak and write in Hindi. Even if I have to put forth an academic point in class, I feel hesitant, not just because of my language, but also because of my dress, my lifestyle, my economic status. I sit in one particular place in the class with another Dalit woman student, a space where I feel the most comfortable. While other students are collegial, there is an implicit, underlying distance maintained."³⁰

Yet, as Rege has pointed out, for the first time, "those for long considered 'unteachable' are talking/writing back. This makes it possible to throw back the gaze of the students who have long been 'invisible' and 'nameless' in the classrooms on to disciplinary and pedagogical practices."³¹ Equally, as courses of caste-gender have evolved over the years, students have felt drawn to new questions and arenas of research, which are critical to crafting history as a discipline. There are many pedagogic and academic takeaways here. First, as students critique dominant historiographical approaches to both caste and gender, they also identify how the intermeshing of the two opens up new theoretical tools and methodologies. Perhaps an important contribution of the course has been that it has helped students to rely on different archival registers. The archive becomes not just an object of dominant casteism but also a subject of caste power itself. Thus, expanding their archives, they have unveiled new ways of gleaning, reading, and interpreting sources. Focusing on silences and erasures, they have sought to read between the lines and against the grain and to recover and record omissions.³² Drawing their theoretical tools from a cross-referential Dalit feminist counter-archive, they thus rely on different techniques of dealing with sources that determine the deep structures of historiography itself.

Second, as the course develops, the distance between creative and discursive writing diminishes. In histories of gender and caste, print is a significant, if ambivalent, site for the reproduction, transformation, and contestation of caste and gender ideologies. Social practices and relations left their footprints on print and the literary, as the two drew from and fed into each other. Anti-caste ideologues and writers made strategic interventions in the field of print and knowledge. As part of a vernacular reading and writing public, Dalit castes spokespersons, through their associations, journals, and tracts, started making forceful claims to rights. Many of the students have thus gone on to creatively deploy vernacular imaginative texts for retelling histories from below. The vernacular, after all, has often been the dominant public language for discourses on caste and a critical methodology of the marginalized. At the same time, in terms of literary

33. For further details, see Alladi Uma, K. Suneetha Rani, and D. Murali Manohar, introduction to *English in the Dalit Context*, ed. Alladi Uma, K. Suneetha Rani, and D. Murali Manohar (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2014), 1–9; and Rege, "Education as *Trutiya Ratna*," 90–92.

and caste politics, the vernacular is a malleable concept, whose meanings are contingent on its contexts. A vernacular signifying practice can have critical problems, for while acting as a vehicle of dissent, it can simultaneously uphold dominant and normative values.³³

Third, instead of grand theories, students learn to pay attention to quotidian practices of regulation of caste and gender and everyday resistances. The rhythms of daily life and the anecdotal, both in terms of writings and events, can be critical to the writing of history from and of the margins. Histories of caste and gender do not just entail a study of leading anti-caste movements, prominent figures, or writings of first-generation Dalit intellectuals, which are of course important, but much more. The routine, transitory, and what have been perceived as non-consequential histories thus become important, as caste is woven in our everyday fabric. Methodologically, the focus on the everyday is critical from a gender perspective. Dalit women, while often not vital players in many of the public, political, and evident struggles of the period, were ubiquitous subalterns in the mundane world of work, home, and family; in daily interactions in social, public, and ritual spheres; and in the figuring of sexualities and patriarchies.

Fourth, ideas of intimacy and body histories become significant to get at the terribly material, embodied character of caste-gender dynamics, its representational density, and its divergent receptions in public life. Intimacy provides us with a new way to talk about caste, not only through identity categories, politics, and structural and institutional inequalities but also as an idea made material through the physical body. It allows us to see the subtle manner in which caste functions as body history and body language, the politics of which permeates the most intimate spaces of our lives. Gender, in any case, brings our attention to questions of intimacy and the body. Dalit women are made to inhabit a social place of extreme moral ambivalence, and their bodies are repeatedly brought into focus through questions of sex and sexual promiscuity. Fifth, against the erasure of caste as an analytic, there is a recoding of caste that decenters the bourgeois subject, on the one hand, and divorces caste from a singular, monolithic history, on the other. Finally, students refuse the bio-determinism of caste and neat equations of gender with women; of women with upper caste, middle class; of caste with Dalit; and of Dalit with men.

To conclude, both caste and gender oppression historically are unfinished stories of the present and thus have contemporary resonance. Courses that underscore the intersections between the two can help us alter habits of historical narration and develop a critical analysis that can transform our perspectives of South Asian history and our teaching of the past. Refusing the ontologies of Brahmanical order, such courses offer an ethical scaffolding and pedagogies of survival and resistance. Giving way to a different symphony of sources and voices, they underline the divergent meanings of regions and languages, while rupturing singular, linear histories. They seriously question ideas of neutrality, unbiases, and nonpartisan and objective truth in the teaching of history, without any sensitivity to questions of power. The intersections between gender and caste not only enrich each other's histories but also can be a stepping stone to making education non-elitist in its orientation; to interrogating the normative, heterosexual, upper-caste, propertied, male perspective; and to reimagining a culture of pedagogy that is potentially democratic. Significantly, a study of caste also makes South Asia a central site of productive rereading, renewed energy, and affect-centered intellectualism.

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HOW TO CITE

Gupta, Charu. "Studying and Teaching Gender-Caste Histories in India: Problems, Possibilities, and Pleasures." *Proceedings of the H-Net Teaching Conference* 1 (2023): 26–34. <https://doi.org/10.33823/phtc.v1i1.172>.

Proceedings of the H-Net Teaching Conference is an open access journal from H-Teach, a network of [H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online](https://www.h-net.org/), and is published annually through the [H-Net Journals](https://journals.h-net.org/phtc) initiative. It can be found online at <https://journals.h-net.org/phtc>.