

ONLINE EVENT SERIES APRIL 2021:

# INTERSECTIONALITIES: WHEN CASTE, CLASS, GENDER AND RELIGION COLLIDE

Organized by  
**South Asian Scholars and Activists  
Solidarity (SASAS Germany)**  
in cooperation with

**ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG**



India as a nation is known to the world for its diversity, rich culture, divisions between rich and poor, and recently, it has become famous for the art of yoga. However, among all these aspects that resemble India, one reality that affects every Indian and many South Asians is Caste. Caste is a social system operating in India, which divides every person and the occupation they perform, where and how they live and are perceived by the society, by a person's birth. Generally, it is assumed that caste was a matter of the past! It does not exist in India today! As much as one wants to believe it, this remains untrue, as caste still adversely dominates the lives of various marginalized communities in India, especially the lower-caste communities like the Dalits. While being born as upper-caste gives an individual the social, economic, and political capital, birth as a lower-caste deters an individual from accessing even fundamental human rights. Thus, the caste-based social system created by humans to determine that some communities enjoy the privileges and those privileges remain intact only within and for these communities still structures every individual lives in India. To keep this system intact, inhumane and brutal crimes are committed against the lower-castes, especially the Dalits and Indigenous communities. While there are constitutional provisions to protect these communities and increase their representation in the state and educational institutions, they remain dominated by the upper-castes communities. Dalits also resist the social domination practiced by the upper-castes; however, they often get more victimized in fighting for their rights and against caste dominance. But the struggles of Dalits are continuing despite the backlash.

## WHAT IS DALIT HISTORY MONTH?

The system of "caste" is based on the premise of structural social inequality. Consequently, Dalits (formerly "Untouchables") are relegated as inferior human beings and are ostracized socially, politically, and economically. This is not just a South Asian phenomenon; it affects approximately 260 million people worldwide. Experiences of caste-based discrimination among South Asian migrants in the UK, Europe, and North America have been surfacing within the public domain as Dalits increasingly assert themselves.

The month of April is celebrated as Dalit History Month, in honor of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar—dedicated human rights activist and founding father of modern India. We aim to bring Dalit voices to the fore through the commemoration of Dalit History Month. Our effort is to foster a discussion about the long struggle of Dalits and their discourses.

On the occasion of Dalit History Month, the South Asian Scholars and Activists Solidarity (SASAS Germany), in cooperation with the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, are organizing a lecture series which aims to underline the various dimensions related to Caste and Dalits. We invite five Dalit and anti-caste scholars and activists from India to share their research work and thoughts on Caste.

**Dr. Rupali Bansode** shall address of of the fundamental questions around Caste and examine the historically practiced gendered nature of sexual violence against Dalit women by the upper-caste men. **Ms. Swati Kamble** shall trace the impact of Dalit women's activism on the policy process in the Indian state of Maharashtra. In her presentation, **Ms. Christina Dhanaraj** shall highlight the Dalit community's heterogeneity by discussing the rich histories of Dalit Christians of India. **Aroh Akunth** will shed a spotlight on the legacy that **Dr. B.R. Ambedkar** has left behind for Queer movements. Dr. Gajendran Ayyathurai will focus on the deep history of the casteless Indians and their resistance against the Brahminical system.

**RUPALI BANSODE** is a PhD in Sociology from Indian Institute of Technology Delhi

**FRIDAY, APRIL 9, 2021 | 18:00 CET**

### CASTE AND CASTE-BASED SEXUAL VIOLENCE

What is the caste system? Does caste still exist in India today? If yes, in what forms? How are Dalits exploited and humiliated in the Caste system? Is Dalit the only community that gets exploited in the caste system? How does caste interact and relate to other forms of inequalities like race and gender? What is Caste-based Sexual Violence? How and why are Dalit women are vulnerable to certain forms of sexual violence? These are some of the fundamental questions around caste, which I shall be addressing in this presentation to underline the necessity of studying and fighting against caste-based exploitation in India and elsewhere.

Moderator **Christina Dhanraj**

**SWATI KAMBLE**, Ph.D. the University of Geneva. A Dalit-Bahujan activist and intersectional feminist. Her research interest involves studying the marginalized communities with an intersectional and reflexive lens and commit to bringing their narratives at the forefront both in academia and policy. These narratives are created collaboratively with the marginalized communities being the active agents and in charge. As a person coming from a marginalized community, she finds it of utmost importance that her research practice stems from social justice and not that of misappropriation of the knowledge emerging in the communities. Her research focuses on studying the impact of Dalit women's activism on the policy process in Maharashtra. Dalit women's engagement in anti-caste feminist history has created valuable knowledge that can be instrumental in making the Indian policy process equitable and intersectional. Through her qualitative research, She aims to put forth recommendations to the state government to formulate policies with an intersectional framework.

**MONDAY, APRIL 12, 2021 | 18:00 CET**

### DALIT WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND THEIR INFLUENCES ON THE POLICY PROCESS

Intersectional analysis of Dalit women's activism and their influences on the policy process in Maharashtra In this paper, I aim to bring forth evidence of the influence of Dalit women's autonomous organizing on the policy process in the Indian state of Maharashtra using intersectional analysis. I will chart out the historical trajectory of Dalit women's activism and influences it has made on the recent public policymaking and implementation in the state of Maharashtra. Dalits in Maharashtra have had a long-standing religious-cultural tradition and political history that has fostered equalitarian aspirations. Dalit women have been an active part of this tradition, not only as followers but as active participants, leaders, and writers. With their political and literary expressions, they have made an influence on the democratization of Indian political system. However, in academia, the literature documenting the evidence of Dalit women as active agents of change especially in the policy context is minuscule if any. Dalit women are viewed as victims and disempowered entities by the upper caste male-dominated state and bureaucracy. The same bias is present in academia, which fails to understand the intersectionality of Dalit women's identity and their standpoint. Dalit women's unique narrative gets invisibilized. My attempt is to give visibility to this narrative.

Moderator **Rupali Bansode**

**CHRISTINA DHANARAJ** is a writer with 12+ years of corporate work experience in India, Singapore, China, the United States, and the Netherlands. She is a consultant for women and minority-led initiatives focusing on social justice, self-determination, and collaborative models of scholarship. She is currently an advisor for Smashboard. She was the co-founder of the Dalit History Month project and a volunteer for Dalit Women Fight. Her interests lie in the politics of identity, diversity & inclusion, mental health, and intersectional discourses between caste, gender, religion, race, and sexuality. She is based out of New York City. She tweets @caselchris1

**FRIDAY, APRIL 16, 2021 | 18:00 CET**

### DALIT CHRISTIANITY AS A PATH FOR SELF-DETERMINATION: CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

Research indicates that Dalit Christianity in India has had a long and a rich history, even predating Dr. B. R Ambedkar's call to conversion. Dalit Christians are also known to have contributed greatly to the early Dalit movements. Yet, in today's contemporary understanding of what constitutes Dalit progress, the Dalit Christian identity is often invalidated, citing the need to give up on religion as a pre-requisite

for true freedom from caste. This presentation will invite the audience to consider an alternative perspective, one that sees Christian conversions in India as not just a colonial project but a faith-based path that was chosen by many Dalit communities towards self-determination and dignity.

Moderator **Gajendran Ayyathurai**

**AROH AKUNTH** is a Dalit-Queer Interdisciplinary artist currently doing their Master's in Modern Indian Studies at University of Göttingen. Some of their collaborative works can be found at Dalit Queer Project and Dalit Art Archive.

**WEDNESDAY, APRIL 21, 2021 | 18:00 CET**

### READING: THE QUEER IN AMBEDKAR

On the 130th anniversary of Ambedkar, Aroh's presentation will highlight the legacy that Ambedkar has left behind for Queer movements. It would draw from arguments Ambedkar made that were inherently not only anti-caste but also critical of patriarchy, the room for queer interpretations of their laws, their decisions that can retrospectively be read as pro-queer, histories where anti-caste and queer movements have intersected, and most importantly, how Dalit Queer peoples have breathed a new life into Ambedkarite and Queer activism, academia and the arts.

Moderator **Swati Kamble**

**GAJENDRAN AYYATHURAI** teaches and researches at the Centre for Modern Indian Studies, Göttingen University, Germany. He has published on the culture, memory, and history of the casteless Tamils/Indians in India, Europe, and North America. He has initiated a new subfield, Critical Caste Studies, with scholars from India, Europe, and Germany. His forthcoming book is titled, Deep Resistance: Buddhism, Caste, and the Marginalized in Colonial India.

**FRIDAY, APRIL 30, 2021 | 18:00 CET**

### IN THEIR OWN TERMS, FOR THEIR OWN SAKE: THE DEEP VERNACULAR HISTORY OF CASTELESS INDIANS

Caste is not indigenous to India. It is the invention and imposition of migrant Aryans from outside. Sanskritists and historians show how the exclusionary group, brahmins, could spread caste/casteism from the North West to North East of India, and then eventually to many parts of South Asia and South East Asia, since the second millennium BCE. With the spread of brahmin-male power and brahminism pre-Indo-Aryan communities were subordinated, exploited, and dispossessed. Brahmins invented and

imposed untouchability and derogatory identities, such as Pariah/Bangi, on others through bodily violence and death, on the one hand, and glorification of their own casteism, on the other, through "Hindu" religious texts. Understanding the brutalities of untouchability and the caste-oppression is essential. However, stopping with such studies contributes to what I call a shallow history of untouchability. More crucial is, I argue in this presentation, understanding the deep history of the casteless Indians and their resistance against brahminism/casteism/caste for long. Furthermore I show how caste-based oppressed Indian communities' diverse linguistic sources and practices (vernacular) are vital for the reconstruction of their positive memories and histories outside brahminism/casteism.

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