

## The Resilience of Caste through Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir (2019)*

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**ENG Abstract:** India, the largest democracy in the world, has experienced important social advances since its independence in 1947, such as the abolition of untouchability, one of the oldest forms of social segregation and discrimination whose major victims have been the Dalits. The situation of Dalits has undergone a series of changes in the second half of the 20th century due to various phenomena, including the industrialisation of India, the influential social work of Dalit activists and thinkers such as B. R. Ambedkar, and the passing of legal provisions for Dalits' social inclusion, political emancipation and protection of rights. All these factors, along with a relative democratisation of education, have prompted this historically oppressed group to build a voice. Since then, Dalit literature has progressively become a platform through which past and present injustices committed against this community are exposed. Lately, the impact that democracy has had on the lives of Dalits has been a questioned topic and Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir (2019)* is an interesting gateway to it. The author's gender and geographical position and her particular experience with 'Dalithood' result in an unusual but necessary insight into Dalits' state of affairs in contemporary India. Thus, using Dutt's memoir as a lens, this paper aims to examine the conditions that led to the perpetuation of a learned helplessness among Dalits, the shortcomings of Sanskritisation as an escape strategy from casteist stigma and the implications of the reservation system set for India's Depressed Castes.

**Keywords:** Dalit; gender; caste; democracy; post-caste

### ENG La resiliencia de la casta a través de *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir (2019)* de Yashica Dutt

**ES Resumen:** India, la democracia más grande del mundo, ha experimentado importantes avances sociales desde su independencia en 1947 como la abolición de la intocabilidad, una de las formas más antiguas de segregación y discriminación social cuyas mayores víctimas han sido los Dalits. La situación de los Dalits ha sufrido una serie de cambios en la segunda mitad del siglo XX debido a diversos fenómenos, entre ellos la industrialización de la India, el influyente trabajo social de activistas y pensadores Dalit como B. R. Ambedkar y la aprobación de disposiciones legales para inclusión social, emancipación política y protección de los derechos de los Dalits. Todos estos factores, junto con una relativa democratización de la educación, han impulsado a este grupo históricamente oprimido a construir una voz propia.

Desde entonces, la literatura Dalit se ha convertido progresivamente en una plataforma a través de la cual se exponen las injusticias pasadas y presentes cometidas contra esta comunidad. El impacto que la democracia ha tenido en las vidas de los Dalits ha sido un tema controvertido en los últimos tiempos y *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir (2019)* de Yashica Dutt es prueba de ello. La posición geográfica, el género y la particular 'experiencia Dalit' de la autora dan como resultado una visión inusual pero necesaria de la situación de los Dalits en la India contemporánea. Así, utilizando las memorias de Dutt como lente, este artículo pretende examinar las condiciones que han conducido a la perpetuación de una impotencia aprendida entre los Dalits, las deficiencias de la sánscritización como estrategia de evasión del estigma castista, las implicaciones del sistema de reservas establecido para las Castas Deprimidas de la India.

**Palabras clave:** Dalit; género; casta; democracia; postcasta.

**Contents:** 1. Introduction; 2. The culturalisation and ethnicisation of caste; 3. Sanskritisation and its hidden agenda; 4. Quota system: A poisonous option; 5. Conclusion.

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## 1. Introduction

The caste system, deeply rooted in Hindu tradition, has historically segmented South Asian societies, particularly India, into rigid hierarchies, delineating occupations, customs, location, rights and social interactions. At the bottom rung of this stratified system lie the Dalits, who have endured centuries of marginalisation and deprivation of basic rights. With India's independence in 1947 and the advent of democracy, shifts in the socio-political landscape, including industrialisation of the labour market, activism by figures like Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar,<sup>1</sup> and legal reforms, have ostensibly improved the status of Dalits. However, despite claims of the caste system's demise (Gupta 2004, x), recent scholarship suggests its persistence in various forms, challenging the narrative of a caste-free society.

This paper aims to contend that, despite a decrease in adherence to ritual hierarchy and hereditary occupations—classical markers of the caste system (Bouglé 1971; Dumont 1980; Srinivas 2003)—caste continues to exert a substantial influence on India's public sphere, giving rise to different forms of hierarchy in social and political spheres (Rudolph 1965; Mitra 1994; Panini 1996; Bayly 2001; Jaffrelot 2003; Chowdhry 2007). It also seeks to elucidate why castes persist in the absence of a traditional caste system within the framework of modern democratic discourse. Central to this examination is Dalit literature, a powerful vehicle in exposing historical and contemporary injustices faced by the Dalit community.<sup>2</sup> Yashica Dutt's memoir, *Coming Out as Dalit* (2019), provides a poignant lens through which to analyse the endurance of casteism in India. A young journalist born into a Dalit family, Dutt unveils her lifelong concealment of her true identity and delves into the complexities of caste dynamics amidst urbanisation and modern employment. By drawing on Dutt's narrative, this paper argues that her experiences serve as compelling evidence of the enduring presence of casteism. Through her portrayal, the mechanisms by which caste influences individual and collective perceptions and actions in a modernised, globalised world are illuminated. Moreover, her narrative extends beyond personal reflection to encompass broader communal Dalit experiences, thereby inviting multiple avenues for critical inquiry into the persistence of caste dynamics in contemporary society.

## 2. The culturalisation and ethnicisation of caste

Education and the prospects of mobility and employment have fostered in Dalits a resolute self-worth that does not hesitate to call into question customary notions of servitude. Since the 1980s, however, a discernible trend of discrimination against Dalits has emerged, driven not only by Dalit political mobilisation and economic progress but also by a societal and economic desire to control and regulate their labour and social activities.

Born in 1986, Dutt reflects on how caste has coloured her view of the world, even when she did not know much about it, to the point that she “had stopped feeling its weight or recognizing its presence” (2019, xiii). Thirty years later, caste discrimination is still so common in India that, when Dutt first saw a Facebook post about the suicide of Rohith Vemula—a Dalit PhD student—she confesses she did not open the link because “He was not the first Dalit boy who had died and he was not going to be the last” (xiii). Her statement attests to a normalisation of casteism that has ended up penetrating the psyche of the new generation of Dalits such as Dutt.

Not even migration from villages to urban spaces has completely freed Dalits from casteist discrimination. In fact, the nexus between space and social stratification continues to hold significant political implications. While urban centres have been pivotal in fostering economic advancement and social change, they are also susceptible to pressure to perpetuate caste distinctions through spatial segregation. Urban displacement exemplifies this phenomenon: as Dalit families migrate from rural villages in pursuit of better opportunities in urban areas, they encounter new forms of humiliation, caste-based discrimination and exclusion. After the establishment of democracy, Dalits could not be prohibited from moving to neighbourhoods where upper-caste families lived—at least not openly; but the reality is that Dalits still depend on the goodwill of landlords to rent to them, as Dutt puts forth (2019, 79). Denied housing, rental accommodations, or certain job opportunities due to their caste, they are often relegated to marginal and neglected neighbourhoods, constituting true “socio-spatial peripheries” (Ayyar 2018, 226). Thus, segregation, limited access to essential services, the formation of caste ghettos, poverty, stigma and violence underscore the enduring nature of caste struggles for urban Dalits (226–27). In such circumstances, many Dalits have had to take a step further, leaving their lives behind and moving abroad where, at least apparently, caste was not an issue. Such is the case of Dutt who fled India to avoid her caste from coming to light. Despite living in a large and cosmopolitan city such as Delhi, she feared the possibility of her low caste being disclosed “because the demands of daily living and making ends meet were tough enough. Adding Dalitness to that could topple my already unstable life and threaten any opportunities that could come my way” (2019, 135). As she puts it, she was “too worried, too weak, too tired, to face the fallout” (135).

<sup>1</sup> Born in a Dalit family, B. R. Ambedkar was an important national leader and scholar who played a key role in the making of modern India, more specifically as one of the chief architects of the Indian Constitution. His fight for the annihilation of the caste system and the eradication of untouchability served as one of the main inspirations for the Dalit movement.

<sup>2</sup> The initial vision of Dalits as speaking in a monolithic voice has been increasingly questioned since the plurality of life experiences and perspectives that make up the Dalit community are often at odds with each other. There are not only fissures along the lines of gender and geography, but also class and education which call into question the umbrella term of ‘writing Dalit resistance.’ As Sarah Beth observes, “since all individuals hold multiple identities (class, caste, gender, occupation, location, religion, etc.), no one individual can represent the wide variety of identities held by every member of the community he claims to represent” (2015, 5–6).

Other public spaces such as educational institutions also serve as battlegrounds for contemporary Dalit youth. Classrooms often become arenas where young individuals from diverse caste and religious backgrounds intersect, yet where caste divisions persistently shape interactions, often escaping critical examination. Dutt contends the pervasive influence of casteism within universities. She notes: "Application forms get lost in the mail, theses are not approved in time and scholarships remain stuck in the back offices for months and even years" (70); "Allegations of discrimination and intimidation are not unheard of in educational institutions" (75) either; and all this "Ragging, institutional bullying and lack of support for Dalit students causes many of them to commit suicide, and discourages other Dalits from applying" (76). As she puts it, "This sends a clear signal to young Dalit aspirants that these prestigious colleges have no place for them" (76). Thus, when Dalit candidates do get the opportunity to study in a college or university, "they should be grateful for whatever crumbs they are thrown", "duck their heads, blend in and comply" (70).

Dalits spatial vulnerability extends within domestic and private spheres, which are fraught with issues of separateness and affirmation of difference. Dutt illustrates how caste identities permeate domestic spaces, from dietary practices to relationships and honour. As she narrates, private spaces especially houses are places where one's caste suddenly matters, where one is asked about their background and forefathers, all in an effort to pinpoint his or her caste (xviii), revealing the intricate web of "caste-mediated household space" (Geetha 2018, 105). V. Geetha contends that households play a pivotal role in sustaining caste hierarchies by regulating spatial use, intimacy and social bonds (96).

Today, it is widely acknowledged that the traditional system of assigning occupations based on hereditary status has significantly waned, except for certain artisanal and Dalit groups still coerced into performing demeaning tasks dictated by caste obligations (Klass 1980). This is partly true as Dalits now have access to professions previously considered beyond their reach. However, Dutt exposes the enduring reality that it is predominantly Dalits who continue to engage in manual scavenging, particularly cleaning dry latrines (2019, 41). Drawing on data from the 2011 Socio Economic and Caste Census, she highlights the stark disparity, with "1.8 lakh Dalit households manually cleaning the 7.9 lakh public and private dry latrines (not the modern flush one) across India; 98 per cent of scavengers are meagrely paid women and girls" (41). Even when they are not actively discriminated against for their low caste, the legacy of generations of being denied opportunities holds Dalits back from succeeding in their careers. Even after securing a job, Dalits are still discriminated, one way or another. Dutt points out that Dalits' lack of connections hinders them from accessing equal opportunities as upper castes, particularly in the private sector where networks play a significant role in job placement (103). This persistent barrier, coupled with ongoing societal prejudices, perpetuates disparities and impedes Dalits from realising their full potential in professional spheres.

There is, thus, a general agreement around the weakening of traditional power relations between dominant and subordinate castes in India and unanimity regarding the declining role of ideological beliefs in the legitimation and persistence of the caste system among low castes, attributed mainly to a growing awareness and assertion among them. However, several writers and researchers have attempted to make sense of the persistence of caste and the processes that help sustain it (Rao 2009; Teltumbde 2011; Vaid 2014).

Drawing upon the theory of social dominance (Sidanius and Pratto 2001) and the dual model of ideology and prejudice (Duckitt et al. 2002), Cotterill et al. (2014) claim that the Hindu belief of karma, together with hierarchy-enhancing policies, still functions as a legitimising ideology in the Indian context. In other words, karmic beliefs continue to be used as a tool to maintain one's dominance and authority over others. Ursula Sharma (2002) points out that it is the higher castes who mostly use karma whereas lower castes tend to take a sceptical view. This view is shared by many other theorists, such as Surinder Jodhka (2015) who argues that there would be very few Dalits today who would justify their low status on grounds of their misconduct in a past life.

In an ethnographic study about low-caste communities in South India, Michael Moffatt (1979) argued that a normative ideological/cultural consensus exists among low and high castes that maintains the caste system. He argued that they all share the basic assumptions and values of the caste system and "recreate among themselves virtually every relation and institution from which they have been excluded for the reason of their untouchability" (89). This of course would imply that low castes such as Dalits conform to the ideology that devalues them and participate in their derogation by, among other things, evaluating themselves negatively. Majeed and Ghosh (1989) agreed to this idea of 'negative ingroup evaluation' and attributed it to an 'affective syndrome crisis' or a deep-seated unresolved identity crisis.

Balmurli Natrajan argues that the resilience—or even revival—of caste in modern India is sustained along three axes: the political axis, which views caste groups as modern political competitors contributing to civil society; the economic axis, which sees castes as social capital facilitating entrepreneurial activities among same caste members and contributing to the development of capitalism in India; and the cultural axis, which perceives caste groups as seeking recognition for their cultural differences in a multicultural society (2012, xiii).<sup>3</sup> The logic of caste as culture stands out among these axes. Caste relations and identity are increasingly framed in cultural terms in contemporary India, emphasising differences in dietary habits, appearance and occupations. This new form of casteism, less reliant on biological descent and more on cultural differences, perpetuates the endurance of caste as cultural communities rather than as unequal descent-based groups

<sup>3</sup> Natrajan also puts forward a domesticated idea of caste as a private practice in the form of caste-endogamous marriages. Opposed to this 'benign' modality, he underlines the brutal-abnormal idea of caste wherein casteism is an exceptional and dramatic display of violence or 'caste atrocity' (xiii).

divided by hierarchy and status (5).<sup>4</sup> Natrajan further delineates two modes of neo-casteism built around 'difference': 'heterophobia', a psycho-social fear of 'difference' leading to social separation, annihilation or assimilation, and 'heterophilia', a preference for 'difference' resulting in the fetishisation of cultural distinctions (xvi).<sup>5</sup> In any case, both modes ultimately perpetuate casteist monopolisation strategies. However, the cultural terrain is not devoid of power dynamics. Claims to culture are entwined with ideologies rooted in class positions (xix), and this 'culturalisation' of caste risks normalising caste divisions as positive cultural diversity, undermining efforts to challenge caste-based discrimination and inequality (169). Thus, in a way culture aids the reproduction of social fragmentation and, in an era of global cultural rights, multiculturalism enables castes to be publicly and politically performed, expressed and recognised as culture or ethnicity contributing to social diversity.<sup>6</sup>

Scholars like Christophe Jaffrelot highlight the phenomenon of 'ethnicization' of caste, wherein castes begin to adopt characteristics typical of ethnic groups. Jaffrelot emphasises that ethnicisation implies the creation of alternative, non-hierarchical social identities, often accompanied by the fabrication of a distinct cultural identity and collective history (2000, 758). The concept of the 'ethnicisation of caste', as described by anthropologist Chris Fuller, portrays a shift from a vertically structured hierarchy to a horizontally fragmented ethnic arrangement (1996, 26). This transformation would imply the demise of the oppressive caste system, as noted by Dipankar Gupta (2000). Andre Béteille acknowledged the potential for viewing the caste system as a form of ethnic differentiation but cautions against equating the two entirely because, unlike caste groups, ethnic groups are not necessarily hierarchy-based and they may not always form a cohesive and unitary system (1971, 51). Similarly, Stephen Steinberg underscored the dynamic nature of ethnicity and its intrinsic connection to broader social processes, which is why ethnic patterns should be examined within the larger social context to understand their impact on consciousness and behaviour (1981, xiii). Thus, while culturisation and ethnicisation may seem as progressive steps, it is crucial to assess how they intersect with the reproduction of hierarchies and inequalities.

Yet, despite not retaining the same characteristics as in the pre-democratic era and adopting or morphing into the previously discussed modalities, casteism has managed to "fit into the modern post-Independence narrative" (Dutt 2019, 79). As Dutt argues, it is no longer about denying Dalits entry to non-Dalit homes, banning them from schools or from drawing water from upper-caste wells. On the one hand, casteism has become more subtle, operating mostly in non-binding spaces such as social circles and love relationships (xviii), but it has also accentuated its retaliation against Dalits as evidenced by the increasing number of gang rapes, lynching and honour killings (44, 166).

### 3. Sanskritisation and its hidden agenda

Confronted with the enduring grip of casteism, many Dalits have opted, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and also in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to conceal their identity by imitating the customs and lifestyle of higher castes so as to blend in more easily, a phenomenon referred to as 'Sanskritisation'.<sup>7</sup> For many, assuming a different identity became the only way to break free from the generational yoke that had been imposed on them and, more importantly, to secure much-needed economic stability. In essence, Dalits are driven to embrace Sanskritisation for two fundamental reasons. Firstly, it is a means of survival, offering hope for liberation from the cycle of oppression, domination and exploitation that pervades their lives. Secondly, many Dalits may not perceive their actions as reinforcing their own subjugation. This lack of awareness is facilitated by prevailing ideologies that normalise power dynamics, portraying the habits and customs of superior groups as epitomes of conduct and lifestyle. Such is the case of Dutt and her family who have attempted to hide their caste in every possible way to avoid oppression. As she describes it, it was a "curated performance designed [...] to break out from our lower caste" (Dutt 2019, 20). But it was not a choice in the real sense; they changed their last names so they could "get jobs and rent houses" (181). Plainly and simply, having a normal life depended on this so-called 'choice.'

Sanskritisation extends beyond the confines of private life. Dutt's experience exemplifies this phenomenon, as she was sent to boarding school with the explicit purpose of assimilating the mannerisms of her upper-caste peers. Sharing living quarters with girls from higher castes would familiarise her with their speech

<sup>4</sup> In contemporary India, caste identity often manifests under the guise of community, predominantly through the term *samaj*, which has replaced *jati* as the preferred term for caste in public and political discourse (Mitra 1994, 50; Fuller 1996, 14). This trend is exemplified by a notable instance in 2007, when the then Commerce Minister of the central government proudly extolled India's diversity by enumerating "4635 largely endogamous communities", implicitly referring to the approximately 3990 caste groups and 645 tribal groups in India (Lecture delivered by Jairam Ramesh at Delhi University, April 23, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Natrajan has termed this form of casteism as 'cultural' or 'differentialist' casteism drawing inspiration from Howard Winant's idea of "Differentialist racism" (Winant 1997, 212).

<sup>6</sup> Natrajan adopts the concept of 'culturalisation' from Wendy Brown, who has illustrated how the notion of 'tolerance' can paradoxically sanction violence by framing power dynamics and actions within a cultural context. She argues: "The culturalization of politics analytically vanquishes political economy, states, history and international and transnational relations. It eliminates colonialism, capital, caste or class stratification, and external political domination from accounts of political conflicts or instability. In their stead, 'culture' is summoned to explain the motives and assumptions leading to certain conflicts" (Brown 2006, 20). This 'culturalisation' of caste was anticipated over 75 years ago by B.R. Ambedkar. He recognized that deeply ingrained beliefs in inherent differences fuel the instinctive reinforcement and performance of difference among individuals from different castes, while simultaneously acknowledging various caste groups as culturally and behaviourally different (Ambedkar 1987, 101).

<sup>7</sup> Sanskritisation is a process of social mobility coined by Mysore Narasimhachar Srinivas (1962) whereby the lower castes emulate upper-caste practices and cultural patterns in an attempt to escape the stigma attached to their lower status. In other words, it aims at social assimilation through anonymity.

patterns, hairstyles and even bed-making techniques (26). The meticulous attention to such minor details underscores the immense pressure exerted by her family on the young girl in pursuit of their social aspirations.

Beyond the palpable discomfort surrounding this issue, the constant facade of belonging to a higher caste in “nearly every breathing, waking and sleeping moment” (26) often comes at a high price. Alongside fostering an inferiority complex, this modern version of casteism has engendered a perpetual state of anxiety and psychological turmoil in those who try to hide their caste, particularly among the youth. Dutt elucidates the pervasive fear that comes with it; the fear of exposure, of losing friends, respect and employment opportunities (xv). In such circumstances, the act of pretense may seem futile; but it is a no-win situation as individuals are penalised for not exhibiting enough traits of ‘upper-casteness’ and for refusing to do so, either for overstepping or for being unworthy of respect (xi).

The incessant pressure to meet external and internal expectations can significantly erode one's self-esteem. Years of pretence led Dutt to doubt her own worth as a student and journalist: “For years after that, this sentiment persisted—no institution that accepted me could be all that good. I was never good enough for anything, and once I became good enough, it stopped being good enough for me” (36). Nevertheless, the damage extends beyond self-esteem; continually putting on that kind of ‘performance’ eventually disrupts one's sense of identity as well. To Dutt, it was a lie that she repeated so many times and with such conviction that it fooled not only her friends but also herself (xviii). This shows the alienating effect of Sanskritisation, which not only diminishes individuals implicitly but also fosters feelings of loss and in-betweenness. In Dutt's case, she no longer fully identified as Dalit, but neither does she belong to a higher caste. She compares this experience to leading a double life, crafting “masks to wear in each of your lives, and switch artfully between the two” (xi).

The emulation of upper-caste (Hindu) values also entails “a deeper subscription to Brahminical patriarchy and authoritarianism” (8). As per Dutt, this results in the imposition of even stricter constraints on women by their families, particularly impacting their educational pursuits, career path—if any—and choice of partner.<sup>8</sup> For instance, Dutt's mother's aspirations for her continued education faded after the engagement. Despite her middle-class background, she was not immune to domestic violence either. Dutt recalls instances of her father's physical abuse towards her mother, including one where her father slapped her mother so hard that “the impact punctured her eardrum” (6). When her mother confided in her own father about the abuse, she was advised to be a good wife and not report the abuse. So, instead of being able to leave the marriage, Dutt's mother was compelled by both her in-laws and her own parents to put up with it for prestige and honour. This only goes to show that while Dalit women may have more ‘freedom’ to fight back when abused, the retaliations against them are more severe, compelling them “to ‘fall in line’ with even greater violence” (156).

Aside from the intensified internal patriarchy, Sanskritisation fails to dispel the disturbing perception that Dalit women are more accessible than other women, exposing them to a particularly vicious form of patriarchal oppression. Dutt points out the alarming prevalence of rape of Dalit women in many parts of the country, a grim reality they often have no choice but to accept as part of their lives (143). She aptly describes it as “a catch-22 situation for the woman—no matter how she reacts to her rape, she is to blame” (143). It is undeniable, then, that inheriting a low caste in democratic India continues to entail a higher risk for women.

Sanskritisation has also impacted physical appearance. While modernisation and globalisation have somewhat diluted the traditional connection between caste and skin colour, skin tone still represents social status in contemporary India and, in following upper-caste values, the colour-coded prejudice increases. Dutt confirms that Indian society is still obsessed with fairness, both in terms of status and beauty standards. And, although the bias against darker skin affects both genders, women bear the brunt within the deeply patriarchal social setting. Dutt recounts how her mother was ridiculed by her paternal relatives for not being fair enough, despite sharing the same complexion as them (30). The incessant harassment drove her mother to try to experiment weekly with various ubtans—an ancient skin-lightening mask—in a bid to shield her skin from the sun's rays. This fixation on fairness permeated to Dutt herself: “I understood that I *needed* to be fair to be accepted, and not ‘Dalit-looking’” (30; emphasis in the original).

As previously discussed, Sanskritisation has often been used as a means to ascend the social ladder and, in the case of Dalits, to potentially escape the trauma inherent in caste discrimination. However, as the preceding examples illustrate, Sanskritisation merely perpetuates the oppressive structure idealised in Brahmanical discourse. Most significantly, it frequently becomes a traumatic experience in itself as Dutt vividly recounts a moment where she felt transported back to the discomfort of her teenage years, reliving the pain of caste-based discrimination: “in those few minutes as she waited for me to tell her what it was that was making me so nervous, I was fifteen again, back in that moment when my friend's parents had asked me about my caste. I was back in that school bus where my friend who had found out my caste was refusing to look my way” (132).

This exposes the shortcomings of Sanskritisation as a tool for cultural integration or social mobility across caste lines. Instead of challenging caste-based hierarchies, it paradoxically reinforces the caste system's

<sup>8</sup> The concept of ‘Dalit patriarchy’ has been debated among scholars, with some positing its distinct operation from ‘Brahmanical patriarchy’ while others argue that Brahmanical patriarchy pervades all caste groups, including Dalits (Chakravarti 2003; Rege 2006; Geetha 2007). While in some respects, Dalit patriarchy mirrors Brahmanical patriarchy, it is imperative to recognise that homogenising patriarchy across castes overlooks nuanced experiences and responses. Instead, emphasis should be placed on understanding the reception of and resistance to patriarchy, acknowledging the diverse strategies women employ in their struggles against caste and patriarchy (Rege 2006, 73).

logic while eroding Dalit autonomy and agency, constituting thus an antithesis of any anti-casteist initiative or Dalit counter-hegemony in effecting social change.

#### 4. Quota system: A poisonous option

One of the pivotal events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in India has been the implementation of the reservation system, also known as quota system. Its primary objective was to ensure equality and adequate representation of Scheduled Castes in every service under the state. This system aimed to facilitate Dalits' access to education, public employment and social representation. However, Dutt's memoir sheds light on the persisting caste-based challenges in contemporary Indian society. As she denounces, despite nearly a century since its implementation, many Dalits still encounter barriers in accessing certain educational institutions or employment opportunities and face discrimination even after gaining entry. To give just an example, while Dalit students are no longer forced to sit on the classroom floor, they are often "relegated to the back benches where they [can] be ignored" (Dutt 2019, 79).

The position among most upper castes is to view reservations as the primary catalyst for the persistence and politicisation of caste identity. They argue that reservations are responsible for their unemployment woes, asserting that the quality of education and efficiency in administration have declined due to the admission of reserved category candidates. Even the Supreme Court of India has ruled against reservations, essentially deeming them anti-merit and conflicting with national interests (Jogdand 2007, 321). Over time, the perception that reservations are unnecessary in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and that they exacerbate inequality if anything, has gradually spread, even among Dalits themselves. Dutt candidly admits that, like many Dalit students who have not been educated on the systemic workings of casteism, she too succumbed to and internalised the anti-reservationist narrative of "proving themselves without a crutch" (Dutt 2019, 60). She was hesitant to benefit 'unfairly' from resources, convinced that she did not need reservation (69).

If a student ultimately opts to tick the reservation box on the application form, they are permanently branded with the "quota student' tag" (60). Beyond the stigma associated with this label, it invites further oppression. Dutt condemns the pervasive 'whisper campaign' rampant in many Indian universities, wherein upper-caste students actively seek to identify beneficiaries of reservations—who would otherwise remain anonymous—with the aim of exposing them and taking revenge for what they perceive as 'reverse racism' (164). This escalation of social divisions and retaliatory actions dissuades Dalit students from revealing their identity or even applying for reserved seats. Tragically, this pressure and harassment leads many others to give up along the way, as was the case of Dalit university student Rohith Vemula who committed suicide on account of casteist pressure and bullying.

Despite legal provisions, the disparity between the legal equality accorded to Dalits and their lived reality is glaringly evident in the labour market. They are disproportionately relegated to menial tasks, as highlighted by the 2011 Socio Economic and Caste Census, which underscores that Dalits predominantly engage in the manual cleaning of public and private dry latrines across India (41), a reality that exposes the entrenched casteist bias and systemic disregard for Dalits' well-being and dignity. If they endeavour to pursue skilled jobs through reservations, they are often met with disdain and labelled as 'opportunistic', while their achievements are viewed as a 'sacrilege' (2-3). Their reservations are a "mass scale massacre" for upper-caste candidates, who bemoan having to compete "with hands tied behind" (86). Upon securing employment, Dalits are challenged every step of the way to prove themselves without the 'crutch' (3), often denied promotions and openly disobeyed. As Dutt fervently denounces, casteist biases persist in various sectors, including journalism, where individuals "are screened based on their caste" (159; emphasis in the original) and prejudices such as the perception of Dalits having limited proficiency in English are wielded against them (161).

This demonstrates that the politics surrounding reservation benefits certainly have notable implications for the heightened significance of caste identities. However, the correlation between reservation policies and the persistence of caste is problematic, as it implies that caste is an anachronism that is alive due to India's incomplete modernisation. But, as Surinder Jodhka notes, even in contexts where traditional socio-economic structures have undergone significant changes, caste continues to wield considerable influence (2015, xiv). Despite expectations that economic liberalisation would prioritise an individual's skills and efficiency over their caste identity, numerous studies have highlighted caste identity as an important factor in the urban labour market, including in highly qualified professional jobs (Thorat and Attewell 2007; Thorat and Newman 2010). As Christophe Jaffrelot points out, "India is witnessing a paradox of continued caste violence against Dalits and liberal urge to make caste invisible in public places" (2013, xi).

In fact, affirmative action has also become a catalyst for heightened violence and backlash, leading to a steady rise in atrocities against Dalits, evident in both rural and urban settings (National Crime Records Bureau 2013; National Human Rights Commission 2004). Teltumbde (2011) notes that alongside the alarming surge in caste-based atrocities, there has been a shift in their motives and intensity:

Earlier, atrocities were committed in the arrogance of impunity, for untouchables had no means of resistance; now they are committed in vengeance against Dalit assertion. Earlier, atrocities were a manifestation of contempt; today they are a manifestation of the deep resentment of the 'privileges' Scheduled Castes get from the state... [atrocities] tended to be casual, more humiliating than injurious. Today, they are far more violent, more physically destructive and more brutal than before. (31)

Therefore, contemporary casteism has morphed into a perilous amalgamation of overt physical violence and discrimination manifested in caste-based atrocities and insidious 'symbolic violence' that uses ideological and moral justifications to uphold traditional power structures in Indian society. The former encompasses not only acts of murder or extreme violence but also includes a range of offences such as verbal abuse, physical harassment, kidnapping, or public boycott. The latter is perpetrated through symbolic capital and power, nurtured at all levels by the system of graded inequalities in such a way that it naturalises it.

Dalits have been engaged in a dialectical process marked by ideological and political unity, yet often entangled in economic contradictions and social antagonisms. The socio-economic changes spurred by reservations—and Sanskritisation—have given rise to diverse Dalit realities, or 'Dalitnnesses,' which challenge their collective solidarity. Many Dalits and scholars alike emphasise the pressing need to counter the dominant and highly stereotypical narrative that has long been propagated about Dalits. They argue that this outdated discourse subjects Dalits to constant scrutiny and questions the validity of the suffering of those who do not conform to the biased stereotype, as exemplified by Dutt: "As an urban, English-speaking, educated millennial born into an educated Dalit family there was no reason for me to think that I belonged to this class" (2019, 136). As she puts it, it is as if one cannot be a Dalit without experiencing horrific violence, abuse or growing up in extreme poverty in a remote village (158). Through her memoir, she aims to bring to light the multifaceted nature of Dalit identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, underlining the coexistence of rural and urban Dalits, educated or not, impoverished or affluent, those who openly embrace their Dalit identity and those who prefer anonymity (ix).

Therefore, the idea that the urban labour market is devoid of caste-based prejudice and discrimination and the assumption that industrialisation and urbanisation have rendered casteism obsolete are thoroughly discredited. The hollow promises of the neoliberal regime seem incapable of dismantling casteist hegemony. Increasing wage disparities and the loosening of state control over public resources and capital continue to push marginalised groups such as Dalits to the brink of insecurity.

## 5. Conclusion

Independent India emerged as a democratic and secular state committed to rectifying the injustices of its discriminatory past through legal and social reforms. Such policies aimed at providing positive discrimination to the once-Depressed Castes, such as Dalits, granting them enhanced access to education and better jobs, political representation and social safety. The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed significant transformations in India, including economic liberalisation, political reorganisation and relevant social advancements. However, while modern democratic discourse has shifted the traditional paradigm of casteism, contemporary manifestations of casteism primarily revolve around maintaining social hierarchies rather than enforcing traditional practices of purity and pollution. Of the three core aspects of caste—hereditary occupations, hierarchical superiority and separation—only the latter remains deeply ingrained in present-day India. Its pervasive influence persists across various spheres of Indian society, permeating labour markets, educational institutions, housing and interpersonal relationships, often resulting in violence when caste boundaries are transgressed.

Dalit life-writings shed light on the enduring impact of caste-based discrimination on the Dalit community. Yashica Dutt's memoir serves as a poignant illustration, unveiling facets of contemporary life still deeply entrenched in caste prejudice nearly ninety years later, thus challenging the notion of a 'post-caste' society. Highlighting more insidious yet equally damaging forms of abuse, Dutt's memoir reveals how casteism continues to permeate the psyche of young Dalits, instilling in them the same inferiority complex experienced by their ancestors. This inherited sense of inferiority fosters a fear of retribution for 'trespassing' the boundaries imposed on low-caste individuals. This has transcended rural confines and infiltrated ostensibly liberal urban spaces. Various theories attempt to explain the survival of this system, ranging from the perpetuation of karmic beliefs to the tacit agreement between high and low castes on the principles underlying the caste hierarchy. Others argue that castes have appropriated notions of 'culture' or 'ethnicity' to justify their differences and legitimise their communities, enabling casteism to adapt to the dynamics of democratic politics. Hence, far from challenging the system of graded inequality, both culturalisation and ethnicisation seem to exacerbate division, sectarian interests and hierarchies.

Dutt's exploration also delves into the contentious concept of Sanskritisation, a process often encouraged and almost imposed particularly on low castes with the promise of achieving a better life through imitation. This agenda has not only proven to be flawed and harmful, especially on a psychological level, but has fragmented the Dalit community and has eroded its class consciousness. Dutt underscores the emergence of diverse and disparate Dalit realities which, while complicating unity and solidarity among the community, certainly need acknowledgment. More importantly, by highlighting the emergence of new middle classes along different caste lines, Dutt prompts reflection on the questioned legitimacy of middle-class Dalits to represent the interests and share the identity of less fortunate fellow caste members. As far as Dalit women are concerned, Sanskritisation has added or intensified layers of subjugation within already patriarchal family dynamics. Whether educated or not, living in villages or cities, employed or unemployed, most Dalit women continue to endure, in one way or another, the torments of double marginalisation.

The caste-based reservation policy stands as another important feature of contemporary socio-political reality in India. A major social justice initiative aimed at reinforcing the values of liberty, equality and fraternity, its efficacy in promoting social and economic mobility among Dalits remains a topic of intricate debate. While there is evidence indicating its positive impact, such as increased representation of Dalits in higher

education and government positions, concerns persist regarding its implementation and broader socio-political consequences, such as resentment from other communities. Dutt underscores the constitutional right of Dalits to education yet highlights the persistent disparity in *de facto* opportunities compared to higher-caste students and their undervaluation and harassment for using the 'crutch' of reservation. Similarly, while Dalits now have access to a broader range of job opportunities beyond historically marginalised roles, this has also given rise to new tensions and forms of 'othering' them. In such cases, caste-based stereotypes continue to hinder the recognition of highly qualified Dalit applicants in the labour market, impeding their ability to showcase their skills and achievements.

To conclude, this paper has aimed to demonstrate that, despite the aspirations of democracy and the liberal state model, Indian reality remains complex, with caste continuing to influence economic and social outcomes. What is undeniable is that there has been a shift in the configuration of political and economic forces, unsettling dominant groups and prompting them to vehemently defend their threatened power and status to such a point that casteist sentiment in contemporary India correlates directly with the growing voice and agency of Dalits. The fervour of Hindutva adherents to protect their cultural values has led to tragic consequences, including "the burned bodies of our children, suicides of our PhD scholars and college students, rapes of young girls and women, asphyxiation of our manual scavengers and 'honour killings' of lovers" (Dutt 2019, xi).<sup>9</sup> Additionally, the caste arrogance exhibited by sanskritised lower castes serves as a refracted ideology, contributing to the persistence of caste as an institution. It could be argued then that it is precisely the condition of passing as 'normal' what perpetuates the endurance of castes in contemporary India. This new caste system operates as a network of monopolies, exerting control over economic, social and cultural capital, while relying on assertions of 'difference'. This perspective could add to the explanation of the paradox of caste's existence despite the absence of a legitimising system. As Dutt puts it, "Two generations of [...] government jobs and concealed last names had somewhat diluted the obvious markers of Dalitness" (xii), but there is still a long way to go.

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<sup>9</sup> The resurgent Hindutva—a right-wing Hindu supremacist movement—in India presents itself as anti-casteist in its strategy of political unity, but nonetheless articulates caste along cultural lines of 'difference'—and social capital—and accommodates or revives anti caste-mixing strictures.



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