

It is time for a new subfield: 'Critical Caste Studies'

The global academy is in need of a new interdisciplinary field, Critical Caste Studies, in order to rethink caste-power in civil society, state, and academy in India and overseas, argues Gajendran Ayyathurai.

Caste is a birth-based mode of segregating Indians into high and low categories. It has been valorised since the Vedic period (c.1000 BCE) of ancient India and continues to be a durable oppression even today. Recently race/racism has also come to be viewed through the prism of caste/casteism, as in Isabel Wilkerson's recent [Caste: The Origins of our Discontents](#) (2020). Nevertheless, problematising ideas and practices of caste mostly remains outside mainstream public discourse and academia. There is a long history of studying caste as a venerable social institution by overlooking privileged-caste-power on the one hand, and the anti-caste resistance of subordinated communities, on the other.

The movement for a Critical Caste Studies project has not gained traction because caste has never been adequately critiqued in academia. Instead, it has legitimised the self-privileging views of caste groups, such as brahmins ([Louis Dumont, Homo Hierarchicus](#)). Thus brahmin-power, which has religiously, culturally, politically, and economically propagated a caste-based segregation of Indian society throughout pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial history, has been ineffectively problematised. Most recently, Johannes Bronkhorst's study shows how the caste group 'brahmins', their brahmin male-centred 'stories' led to the foundation of *varna* and *jati*, i.e., enforcement of colour/race and caste divisions on non-brahmins in northern India and elsewhere in and outside South Asia, since the centuries before Christ ([How the Brahmins Won](#)). Paradoxically, such a caste-based religio-cultural structure has become a mainstay due more to academic recognition of caste-reinforcing categories, institutions and practices. Rather than considering caste as an archaic thing of the past, or something that is internal and indispensable to the Indian society, it is time that the academic community acknowledges the need for Critical Caste Studies.

What is Critical Caste Studies? It is an interdisciplinary field in which caste is seen as an entrenched social crisis. From its inception, caste has become a primary contradiction, i.e., *othering* fellow women, men and children. The voluminous literature on caste in India shows that the genesis of caste lay in the hands of those who self-privileged themselves as 'upper' castes. Subordination, exploitation and usurpation of labour, land and other resources from fellow humans they inferiorised as 'untouchables' and 'low' castes are central to the caste structure and hierarchy. Brahminical religious texts and practices mythologise, codify and control the social reproduction of caste-order with brahmins on top and untouchables at the bottom. Bodily violence and death are prescribed and practiced against the violators of this brahminical inegalitarianism ([Patrick Olivelle, Manu's Code of Law](#)).

Seeing caste as a social disorder, the field of Critical Caste Studies has two crucial trajectories: first, it is committed to examining diverse cultural, religious, political, and economic mechanisms by which caste-power is produced and dispersed through a putatively inviolable caste structure. Caste is, therefore, unwaveringly subjected to an interdisciplinary critique for its normativisation and naturalisation of domination and subordination. This is also vital for understanding the demands of reparation of the oppressed. And second, it is devoted to unravelling the discursive and non-discursive counter-caste practices of women, men and children as well as their organic intellectuals and movements of subjugated Indians. It is time this new field sees the caste-free and anti-caste cultural, religious, economic, historical, and cosmopolitan aspects of vernacular communities in India and in the Indian diaspora ([Gajendran Ayyathurai, 'Emigration Against Caste'](#)).

The Critical Caste Studies' *raison d'être* comes from the failure of South Asian humanities and social sciences to pin down caste/casteism as the self-privileging groups' invention and imposition of social supremacy. Furthermore such disciplines pervasively condescend *only* to see the oppressed Indians' 'pitiable' conditions but refuse to engage with such Indians' caste-free counter-cultural subjectivities and historically deep resistance against caste. This calls for a new field where one focuses on the centre of caste-power and its effects as well as the counter-power of casteless and anti-caste Indians.

Critical Caste Studies will critique diverse 'brahminical' discourses on caste. Sanskrit Studies, for instance, has largely failed to provide an unequivocal critique of caste-discriminating religious power, treatises and identities, i.e., religio-casteism of privileged caste groups ([Dorothy Figueira, *Aryans, Jews, Brahmins*](#)). In such largely brahminical studies, the philosophies of ethical humanism of the (oppressed) Indians, beyond caste, do not have a place. In contrast, caste-free and anti-caste philosophical traditions are crucial to Critical Caste Studies.

Colonial anthropology found it easy to grease colonial motives by relying on and endorsing pre-colonial brahminical caste ideas. In fact, the very first surveyor general of the British empire in India, Colin Mackenzie (1754–1821) was aided by 'Cavelly', 'Row/Rao', and 'Niyogi' brahmins ([Phillip Wagoner, 'Precolonial Intellectuals and the Production of Colonial Knowledge'](#)). Such collusion between casteists and colonialists led to the creation of captive armies of unfree-labour Indians by categorising them as 'untouchables', low castes and tribes. Puzzlingly, post-colonial anthropology and sociology of caste continue to remain caste-inflected studies; thus, understanding the caste-free realities of Indians is an anathema.

The predominance of brahminical perspectives also applies to so-called 'post-colonial theory', which has become a fashionable school of thought in the European and North American academy. Its contribution to the understanding of the problem of caste/casteism is abysmal. Post-colonial studies does not have the same motivation as Critical Caste Studies. Clearly, for Indian post-colonialists in the Western academy caste, unlike race, is largely not a crisis in their own life experiences. Their subjectivities and their theoretical proclivities are consequently geared towards seeing colonial racism and racial capitalism but not the collusion of brahminical casteism and capitalism with it ([Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'](#)). Critical Caste Studies critiques post-colonial theories and projects for failing to provincialise brahminism or critique the caste-biopolitics of the post-colonial state or critique the political economy of global brahminism. It views caste and gender as inseparable problems of Indian societies, and therefore views the discourses of brahminical feminism as a mimicry of brahminism itself. More importantly, Critical Caste Studies intends to unravel the Critical Caste Feminism of caste-based marginalised women (and men) as well as their caste-free universal sisterhood (and brotherhood).

In Critical Caste Studies the history of caste hegemony and the archives of the oppressed as well as caste-free and anti-caste memories and histories of Indian societies are a central concern. Oral and written, discursive and non-discursive, knowledge traditions and artefacts, which point to the historical sense of castelessness of diverse vernacular Indians are crucial to Critical Caste Studies ([Gajendran Ayyathurai, 'Castelessness'](#)). In addition, Critical Caste Studies also critiques statist and academic caste-based categories (such as those categorised as Scheduled Castes, Harijans, etc) which continue to freeze the oppressed into abjection, as does caste/casteism. In contrast, it unravels the caste-free languages, identities, cultures and histories of subalternised Indians. As an intellectual movement Critical Caste Studies insists on the hitherto overlooked intersectional aspects of caste, race, gender and class. Crucially, it stands for understanding the interconnections between the local and global counter-hegemonic movements of marginalised Indians, alongside Native Americans, Aborigines, Maoris, Black Africans, Afro-Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, Samis, and Romas.

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