

From the Social to the Clinical: Towards a Psychopathology of Everyday Casteism

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Abstract

Caste has predominantly been understood as a social problem. It is understood as a form of discrimination embedded in the Hindu society that promotes Brahmanical supremacy which, in turn, is founded on the ostracization and dehumanization of the Dalit subject. The great bulk of the existing scholarship on caste has been dedicated to exploring the history, politics, religiosity, anti-sociality and illegality of caste. This article is an emphatic attempt to redirect the field of Dalit studies from considering caste—casteism, to be more precise—as a social problem to defining it as a medical or clinical or psychological problem. It introduces the reader to the neglected trend of research on the interface between caste and mental health and advances the radical possibility of understanding caste as a form of psychopathology. It makes use of the relevant psychological and psychoanalytic concepts from Sigmund Freud, Carl Gustav Jung and Jacques Lacan and proposes to define casteism in conjunction with the psychology of racism as theorized by Franz Fanon and David Livingstone Smith.

Keywords

Caste, casteism, Dalit, mental health, psychopathology, racism

Reformulating the Caste Problem: From the Social to the Clinical

Caste is not a thing of the past. It is a part of the socio-political reality of the twenty-first century Indian subcontinent and the Indian diaspora. Caste atrocities are alarmingly on the rise. As of 2020, every 10 minutes a crime is committed against a Dalit and every day 8 Dalit women are subjected to rape (GoNews Desk, 2021; Jyoti, 2021). Murder, lynching, arson, massacre, genocide and rape are some of the daily occurrences of injustice done against the Dalits. In addition to these, workplace harassments, economic exploitation—88% of Indian population living below the poverty line are Dalits and Adivasis (Teltumbde, 2010, p. 156)—social ostracization and ghettoization, violent response to inter-caste love affairs and marriage, exclusion of Dalits from the religious places, verbal abuse, online maligning and

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hate campaign etc. are daily experiences of humiliation suffered by the Dalits. Caste-based discrimination is also detected in the Indian diaspora living around the world, particularly in the USA (Correal, 2021; Iyenger, 2020). In other words, Indian caste has become a global problem.

The question we need to ask today is obviously no longer whether or not caste is worth discussing in the twenty-first century. On the contrary, we need to ask: why is it that caste-based discrimination continues and is on the rise despite measures undertaken at diverse levels by various bodies in the last one hundred years or so? To develop on the thesis of Anand Teltumbde, author of *The Persistence of Caste*, we need to answer the question—why does caste persist? Or, revisiting Ambedkar's project, one needs to ask—why has caste not yet been annihilated? Karl Marx famously claimed that capitalism would bring an end to caste defined as a feudal attitude (Marx, 1853). Indeed, modern technological inventions like the railways put an end to the practice of untouchability in railway compartments, for instance. The Constitution of India, drafted under the worthy chairpersonship of B. R. Ambedkar, declared untouchability as an illegal practice and included measures to not only empower the Dalits socially and financially but also instated bodies and laws to prevent caste-based atrocities. Anti-caste movements by Dalit groups have been continuing for about 150 years now. Several strategies such as religious conversion, illegalization of untouchability, affirmative action, dropping of surnames, inter-caste marriage, political resistance etc. have been undertaken. At a global level, United Nations have implemented several policies to eliminate caste discrimination (European Union, 2012, 2013, 2020). And yet, caste atrocities, instead of ceasing to exist, have been persisting and alarmingly increasing every day. It is in this context that this article proposes to redefine the problem of caste. Maybe it is time to look at caste from new perspectives rather than continuing to examine it as a predominantly social problem informed by political, legal, historical and religious dimensions.

This article proposes to reformulate caste as a medical or clinical problem emphasizing the interface between caste, psychology and mental health. It emphasizes the need to understand how caste-based discrimination derives from a pervert, deep-rooted and unconscious mind-set and leads to pathological consequences to the victims. Something is rotten at the heart of the caste Hindu society, once could say, and that is caused by the disease of caste. And caste atrocities are symptoms of that sickness. Some writers have already described caste in terms of medical and clinical vocabulary. For instance, Kancha Ilaiah described caste as a cancer without diagnosis (Bhattacharya, 2018). Like cancer, caste has no answer—no one knows when an antidote to caste will be invented and when caste will at all be annihilated. Jeya Rani describes caste as a virus that is more dangerous than coronavirus because the coronavirus does not discriminate—anyone, irrespective of caste, class, race, religion, gender and sexual orientation can be infected by coronavirus—whereas the caste virus is all about discrimination (Rani, 2020). Chandra Bhan Prasad describes caste as a genetically transmitted neurobiological disease requiring the attention of the medical experts and brain scientists (2006). With particular emphasis on caste being a mental disease, a series of observations have been made. The earliest perhaps is by Ambedkar who in a 1936-talk described caste as 'a state of the mind' and 'a disease of the mind' (Ambedkar, 1936). He even indicated that the caste problem could be linked to deeper parts of the mind when he gave a psychological explanation of caste and explained that caste-segregation originated from the 'endogenous enclosure' introduced by the Brahmins and unwittingly (in Freudian terms 'unconsciously') imitated and reproduced by the non-Brahmin classes (Ambedkar, 2014, pp. 3–22). Ramaiah (2007) has described caste as a form of 'delusion' whereas Chandra Bhan Prasad (2006) has described the perpetrators of caste as suffering from 'Dalit phobia' and in need of 'Dalit therapy'. Jiloha (2010) has drawn attention to the caste-induced 'mental health strains' and psychological vulnerabilities suffered by the oppressed castes and Pal (2015) has defined caste-based stigmatization as 'socio-psychological constructs'. Sushrut Jadhav, perhaps the most important Dalit cultural psychiatrist of today, has discussed

the need for a ‘mental health theory...informed by local suffering, caste included’ (Jadhav, 2012) and has described casteism as ‘psychological ethnocide’ (Jadhav, 2021). There are other writers (Geetha, 2009; Jaspal, 2011) as well but this list should suffice to make the following two claims—first, that the interface between caste, psychology and mental health needs to be recognized as an emerging area of research—almost a subfield in Dalit studies; and second, caste needs to be medicalized or psychologized at length to generate an effective approach and devise an innovative strategy, in the context of the limited success of the old ways, to annihilate caste.

Psychopathology of Casteism: Laying the Framework of a New Approach

This article intends to push the boundary of the subfield on caste and mental health and proposes that caste should not only be psychologized but quite emphatically be pathologized in the sense in which Sigmund Freud uses the term psychopathology—the study of somatic or physical symptoms (in our context, caste atrocities, for instance) rooted in mental disease. To pathologize a behaviour is to treat it as abnormal at the psychological level. To pathologize casteism would imply that there is nothing normal, natural and logical about casteist behaviour. In this sense, any kind of casteist behaviour could be considered as abnormal and in need of analysis, rectification and treatment. Psychopathology, following Freud, refers to pathological behaviours which have roots in the unconscious mind, usually connected to some trauma from the past. How could we understand casteism in this context of psychopathology? Some of the authors, as mentioned above, have hinted at the possibility of studying caste in terms of psychopathology. But none of them have delved into this possibility in detail nor have they explored the potential and implications of such a thesis. To develop a preliminary framework of studying caste in terms of psychopathology, I propose, first, that the term casteism should be used instead of the term caste in the kind of theory I am developing. Whereas caste refers to a hierarchical social system promoting Brahmanical supremacy and ensuring dehumanization of the Dalits, casteism would refer to the mentality that perpetrates this system. Casteism, analogous but not identical to racism, is first and foremost a form of prejudice and hatred nurtured in the deepest corners of the mind. Second, I claim that casteism is a potential mental disease rooted in both the individual and collective unconscious. This is where Sigmund Freud’s revolutionary theory of the unconscious of the individual human subject as well as the concept of the collective unconscious theorized by Carl Gustav Jung can be of great help. Third, casteism needs to be understood as being both symptomatic and asymptomatic (asymptomatic in the sense that every Savarna is potentially a casteist and might show symptoms of casteism at moments of conflict or crisis vis-à-vis the Dalit). I borrow this formulation from David Livingstone Smith’s theorization of symptomatic and asymptomatic racism (Smith, 2021, pp. 17–18). Fourth, psychologizing of casteism must be carefully carried out because of its pronounced differences from the mechanism of racism. It is important to engage as well as disengage with the most relevant work in this context, namely Franz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*. And finally, I propose that the psychopathology of casteism ought to be studied in two complementary ways (a) by locating the unconscious roots of casteism in those who can be described as perpetrators of casteism and (b) by studying the pathological consequences of casteism in the victims who are on the receiving ends of casteist behaviour. As a matter of fact, I believe it is as important, if not more important, to study the psyche of the perpetrators as much as it is necessary to provide mental support to the victims. Whereas the casteist behaviour of the perpetrators could potentially be pathologized, the victims of casteism experience caste-induced trauma, depression, alienation and anxiety. These effects could be described as pathological consequences of casteism. Casteist drama is played out in the open at the conscious level for the Dalits but not for the Savarna subject for whom

casteism remains an unconscious phenomenon. This is similar to the psychopathology of racism as theorized by Fanon.

It may be mentioned that the expression ‘psychopathology of everyday casteism’ is a direct reference to Sigmund Freud’s 1901-masterpiece *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (Freud, 1981) and is thereby an attempt to position the anti-caste discourse within the psychoanalytic tradition. To put it in a nutshell, Freud’s book is known as the ‘mistake-book’ because Freud theorizes what James Strachey has translated as ‘parapraxes’ or unforced blunders that we make on a daily basis, like forgetting names, mislaying an object, slips of the tongue, and bungled actions. Every error that is unforced is motivated by the unconscious intentions. The kind of errors Freud refers to, happen on a daily basis and are usually considered to be unintended blunders. But Freud argues that these may be unforced but not unintended. The intention could be located in the unconscious mind which is a reservoir of repressed desires and anxieties. The error happens because it is connected to some traumatic moment from the past which the subject does not want to face or revive. For instance, we fail to remember a proper name because it might be associated with a person who caused us trauma at one point in time. Freud considers such blunders as everyday pathological affairs though these do not necessarily threaten the psychical stability of the subject.

Throughout his other works—such as *Interpretation of Dreams*, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* and case histories—Freud would develop further on other forms of psychopathologies. These have been described by Jacques Lacan as the ‘formations of the unconscious’ (Lacan, 1957–1958). As a matter of fact, Freud theorizes four such formations—parapraxis (as already discussed), dream, joke and symptoms. Each formation is a product of some elements in the unconscious mind. For instance, according to Freud, every joke facilitates the articulation of something that cannot otherwise be said in politically correct ways. Every joke has a relation to the unconscious thought process; the choice of certain jokes and the person cracking the jokes or laughing at them can be clinically defined as characterizing the way the human subject secretly feels about a particular topic. Casteist jokes can thus be connected to the Brahmanical unconscious. Casteist atrocities can further be defined as ‘symptoms’ in the Freudian sense—the somatic/physical manifestation of deep-seated Brahmanical aggression. One is reminded here of Freud’s theorization of war as a sadistic manifestation of ‘death drive’ or *thanatos*—the drive to assert one’s existence through the destruction of others.

However, it should certainly be added that Freud’s title *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* cannot be stretched beyond a certain point in the current anti-caste theorization. This is because ‘everyday casteism’ is absolutely contrary to what Freud understands as little blunders of everyday life. Everyday casteism is not just some naïve slip of the tongue or forgetting the name (ignoring the significance) of a Dalit subject in a casteist space. This too can have far reaching consequences, in the sense, for example of invisibilizing the Dalit subject in a given place and time. But casteism is an everyday affair in the precise sense that it is a daily phenomenon involving grave injustices and atrocities in the form of murder, massacre, lynching, sexual abuse, suicide, social ostracization, economic exploitation etc. This is why it is important to talk about the psychopathology of caste-based atrocities not in the simple sense of parapraxis but in the graver pathological sense of ‘symptoms’ that require clinical interventions for both the perpetrators and the victims. This article argues that it is important to delineate the symptoms of casteism in pathological terms in order to develop the discourse of psychopathology of everyday casteism.

Caste-Induced Pathologies: A Few Instances

This section is an attempt to map a few caste-induced pathologies, namely, psychological essentialism, alienation of the Dalit subject, caste atrocities as symptoms, lynching and sexual abuse as specific

collective catharsis, and Dalit suicides. These are only a few pathologies because the article intends to initiate a discourse of psychopathology of casteism and is in no way an attempt to articulate every aspect of it in an exhaustive and comprehensive manner. This is also not practically possible due to the constraints in word limit. The examples are arranged and divided into two categories—pathology of the perpetrators (psychological essentialism and atrocities) and the pathology of victims (alienation and suicides).

The first casteist symptom relates to psychological essentialism. The Dalit subject is not just reduced to a few traits, like poor, ugly, dark-skinned, dirty, polluted, untouchable, associated with manual scavenging and other ‘lowly’ occupations, subhuman, dumb, uncouth, brutish, monstrous, animalistic and uncivilized etc. But as David Livingstone Smith contends with respect to the Black subject, it is not a trait or series of traits but a ‘subhuman essence’ that is associated with the Black subject (Smith, 2021, p. 27). And the same is true with respect to the Dalit subject. A Dalit like a Black subject is, in essence, subhuman. That is how he is perceived, conceived and treated—if not always articulated as such—in the public and private spaces by the Savarnas. Because he is a Dalit he must not be human or must be a vicious animal. Dalits and dogs are put in the same bracket. Dalits were designated as ‘Harijan’—children of God—by M. K. Gandhi. But as Ambedkar famously stated, Dalits want to be known as humans and not as God’s children and that they are not interested in being equal in the eyes of God but in the eyes of human beings (Ambedkar, 2004). There is however a difference between the Black subject and the Dalit subject and that is related to the question of the skin colour. As Fanon says, ‘Look, a Negro’ is enough to produce the guilt of existence in the Black subject and the skin colour is enough to stereotype and hate him as the ‘Other’ (Fanon, 1967, p. 84). But this is not the case with the Dalit. The Savarna subjects know that the Dalit is subhuman but has no idea about the exact look of the Dalit, or even if there is a Dalit archetype in the collective unconscious of the caste Hindus, they might be proved wrong while encountering a real life Dalit. I know from my personal experience that a fair, tall and handsome Dalit friend of mine was told by the mother of his Savarna friend—‘But you do not look like a Dalit!’ This begs the question—unlike the ‘Negro’ who looks Black, what does a Dalit, subjected to analogous discrimination, look like? One has to look for signifiers—the surname of the subject, for example or the family background. But look-wise, one cannot be certain. This problem is acutely captured in the short film *The Discreet Charms of the Savarnas* where the search for an actor who can play a Dalit character or who looks like a Dalit ends up in tragic failure (Rajamani, 2020). In other words, unlike the case of Black subject, the Dalit subject suffers from a more complex form of psychological essentialism—he is stereotyped in the collective Savarna unconscious in a rather amorphous and undefined manner. The Black subject is pinned down to his immediate physical reality, the skin colour, and is discriminated as such right away. The Dalit subject has to wait—until someone discovers that he is a Dalit by noticing his surname or knowing his family history and occupational background or discovering if he avails reservation in jobs and education. There is a moment for the Dalit subject till when he remains assimilated among the Savarnas and then there is a moment of Savarna epiphany that he is not one of them but rather a member of the erstwhile untouchable community. It is at that point of Savarna epiphany that the Dalit subject’s humanity is tattered and he is discarded by society.

A second way to pathologize casteist behaviour would be to define atrocities as pathological symptoms. Atrocities are on the rise, one could argue, because Dalits are advancing at some levels—educationally, financially and socially. Their advancement causes anxiety to the Brahmanical supremacists. Therefore, the threatened Brahmanical ego has to cope with the situation through manifesting violent reactions. Violence is usually understood as a natural means of self-preservation, according to Freud. When Dalits are gradually entering into the age-old Brahmanical spaces, Brahmanical subjects feel such Dalitization tantamounts to their destruction. Therefore, violence and aggression helps

to keep intact the 'narcissistic integrity' of the Brahmanical subject (Violence, Instinct of, n.d.). Atrocities are meant to destroy the Dalits physically and thus, in an eye-for-an-eye fashion, highlights the Brahmanical fear of the Dalits. This phenomenon, although in a different context, has been defined by Chandra Bhan Prasad as 'Dalit phobia'.

Two specific kinds of atrocity may be considered here for further elaboration of this matter—lynching of Dalits and sexual abuse of Dalit women. In 2018, a horrific video of Dalit lynching went viral. One news portal described it thus: 'A man is bound by his waist with a rope looped through the handlebar of a door. Its other end is held by one of his four attackers. He howls in pain as two men take turns to whip him with a PVC stick' (Ghanghar, 2018). In 2021, a 40-year old Dalit man and two of his cousins were lynched by 17 Jat men on the accusation that he stole a water pump (Pal & Ali, 2021). In May 2022, 11 upper caste men lynched a Dalit sanitary worker suspecting him to be a thief (Express News Service, 2022). Obviously, more and more examples can be added. In many cases, Dalit men have been lynched and murdered because they wanted to marry upper-caste women (PTI, 2020). Lynching in all such cases is a response to something (an object) or someone (an upper-caste girl) allegedly being 'taken away' by a Dalit from the Savarna space. The Dalit has encroached into that space—how does he dare to do so?—and hence, he must be given exemplary punishment. The anxiety, anger and aggression of the Savarna collective must be released right away, in the most ruthless manner possible, on the Dalit subject. Lynching, involving physical force and beating, is a release of repressed sexual tensions. This is even asserted by Fanon who explains racial lynching as a product of the repressed sense of sexual inferiority of the white man. One can even link such tensions to the anxiety of maintaining the caste-based purity and sanctity of the endogamous segregation of caste groups. As Ambedkar argued, the very foundation of caste is prohibition of marriage outside caste group and the onus for this is mainly on the woman—the woman must not be moved out from her caste group to a caste group beneath her. That will be her fall and that will bring indignity to her caste. Woman is here reduced to an object—like any other object in possession of the Brahmanical groups—and she/it must be kept within her/its bounds. The moment she/it is taken away by a Dalit, this will destroy the purity of the caste and must be punished. Lynching the Dalit is a punishment deriving from the deep-rooted anxiety and insecurity of the Savarna mob. Related to lynching is sexual abuse and gang rape suffered by Dalit women. Mob lynching or gang rape, both are related to what Fanon defines as 'collective catharsis' (Fanon, 1967, p. 112). In fact, sexual violation of Dalit women is perceived by many as an attempt to settle 'political scores' against the Dalits and as a 'weapon to reinforce caste hierarchies' (Diwakar, 2020; Khanna, 2022).

A third point would be the pathological experience of alienation—a fundamental psychoanalytic concept—suffered by the Dalit subject. This experience of alienation is bound to happen when the Dalit subject is suddenly bereft of his association with the caste Hindu society. From his childhood, an average Dalit subject undergoes a subtle process of Brahmanization. Brahmanical deities, traditions, cultures, festivities, heritages, literatures, language (Sanskrit) etc. 'interpellate' him, in the Althusserian sense, as a Brahmanized subject. This is how he starts thinking and feeling and being like a Savarna and considers the caste Hindu society to be *his* society. And then, while coming of age, the Dalit subject discovers that he is Brahmanized, yes, but not quite a Brahmin. This is analogous to the plight of the colonized subject who emulates and mimics the white man but eventually realizes that though he behaves like a white man or has picked up his language and manners, he is almost white but not quite (Bhabha, 1994, p. 89). The Dalit subject realizes he has developed Brahmanical habits but he is not really treated as a Brahmin. This causes tremendous alienation to him, with pathological consequences. The Dalit subject might either have to isolate himself and suffer depression or, if luck and strength favours him, he might assert his difference or his Dalitness—yes, I am a Dalit and I refuse to be absorbed by Brahmanism or that I am not just non-Brahmin but I am anti-Brahmanical. In other words, the experience of alienation may either

lead to an experience of emptiness which can be suicidal or it may be an occasion to negate one's earlier Brahmanized identity and assume a new political selfhood, let us say, an Ambedkarite identity formed through an identification with the larger Bahujan political worldview. In other words, two points of identification, in a modified Lacanian sense, characterize the development of the Dalit subject (Mandal, 2018, pp. 56–57). The first one is a predominantly imaginary identification with the dominant world filled with Brahmanical images (heroes, deities etc.). This leads to proudly projecting oneself as a Brahmanized subject. This imaginary identification is shattered with the Dalit subject's 'encounter with the real', that is, he experiences marginalization, exclusion and rejection in the same Brahmanical society (Evans, 1996, pp. 25, 41, 163). The second one is a predominantly symbolic identification with the Ambedkarite politics, involving a negation of the earlier Brahmanical self. For Dalit subjects born within families carrying forward anti-caste legacies for generations, the rejection of Brahmanism may happen right at birth. But even for such families, there were specific moments in history when a transition from the Brahmanical to the anti-Brahmanical had happened. The Dalit subject, either at birth, in the case of exceptional and rare politically conscious families, or at a later point in life, in the case of an average Dalit subject, has to assert his identity through a constant negation of Brahmanical selfhood and through a certain amount of alienation from the caste Hindu society. Alienation thus constitutes the key psychological experience with potential pathological consequences for the Dalit subject.

The final example of pathological act to be discussed would be Dalit suicides. Suicide may not in itself be pathological but it may very well be a result of pathological experiences. Jacques Lacan defines suicide as the only true and authentic act in the sense that the subject is completely in charge of this decision. Suicide is tragic undoubtedly. But it is probably the most courageous act and a most daring statement even though underlying this act is ultimately an attempt to alleviate anxiety. Lacan even described suicide as the 'only completely successful act' because it involves 'the conscious assumption of the unconscious death drive' (Evans, 1996, p. 2). The suicide note of the Dalit scholar Rohith Vemula included the following telling words:

I am not hurt at this moment. I am not sad. I am just empty. Unconcerned about myself. That's pathetic. And that's why I am doing this. People may dub me as a coward. And selfish, or stupid once I am gone. I am not bothered about what I am called. (The Wire Staff, 2019)

Rohith's suicide seems to be a calmly taken decision, at least at a surface level. His disillusionment with his political self and with the Brahmanical world in general, and of course his ever-increasing depression, led him to end his life. If Lacan defines suicide as the only 'successful' act then Rohith's death is perhaps the final heroic act of self-assertion. Be that as it may, the world that leads a Rohith to suicide is in itself rotten. The Dalit subject is not pathological—the world is a pathological or diseased space. This Brahmanical world, this virus of casteism, is what infects the Dalit subject and pushes him to commit suicide. Dalit suicides should, therefore, be pathologized in a more nuanced way drawing attention to the equivocation at stake—the potential self-assertion combined with acute depression suffered due to being completely discarded by the caste Hindu society.

Conclusion

The preceding discussion on psychologizing and pathologizing casteism should be accompanied by some supplementary and concluding remarks. First, as has already been stated, the attempt here has been to offer a few pointers rather than making an impractical effort to provide a comprehensive and

conclusive discourse on the subject. The aim is to generate further discussions and debates on this issue. Second, this article asserts that pathologizing casteism can help us diagnose why caste refuses to be annihilated. Because it is a mental disease, casteism needs to be addressed and removed through clinical interventions—at both individual and group levels. Efforts in this direction have already been started by at least one expert, namely, Sushrut Jadhav. But as Jadhav has repeatedly pointed out, Indian mental health sectors do not equip the practitioners to deal with the caste-induced pathologies. In fact, casteism is not even included in the psychiatry syllabi anywhere in the country. This article has, therefore, argued that the clinical space must be debrahmanized and must undergo a process of Dalitization. The disciplines of psychiatry and clinical psychology can be revolutionized through including the question of caste and opening up assistance to the larger society through, for instance, what Freud conceptualized as the ‘free clinic’ (Danto, 2005). More significantly, as I have argued, pathology of casteism should not be taken to imply only the Dalit victims suffering from mental health issues due to discrimination. One should also point finger at the Brahminical subjects too and make sense of the psychology of the perpetrators and devise ways to rectify them. This is why in the examples of caste-induced pathologies provided above, this article has addressed the issue both from the side of the Brahminical perpetrators and Dalit victims. Third, a new theoretical discourse needs to be framed and developed to define psychopathology of everyday casteism. And this can be done, as indicated above, through the consideration of key theories of the collective and individual unconscious and the relevant medical and non-medical discourses on strategies and measures. Finally, psychopathology of casteism can have a larger political purpose. By claiming that Savarnas are in need of therapy, they are the patients, psychopathology of everyday casteism can contribute to de-stigmatization of the Dalit and shaming the Brahminical subject. Rather than considering Dalits as worthless or less than human, such a discourse can help us expose the deeper monstrosity of the Savarnas who continue to dehumanize the Dalits.

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