

# UNFOLDING CASTE

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## THE DYNAMICS OF CASTEISM AND CASTE BASED DISCRIMINATION

Panel Discussion Proceedings

**SOUTH ASIA RESEARCH INSTITUTE  
FOR MINORITIES**



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July 2022

Panel Discussion conducted via Zoom App

On June 21<sup>st</sup>, 2022

Video Recording on YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SvVBFvMzpl0>

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# PREFACE

South Asia Research Institute for Minorities strives to bring together the voices from around the world and the region to discuss issues around social justice and human rights in South Asia, specifically minority rights. Caste is one of the forms of social stratification, unjustly determined by birth, which yields deep rooted inequality and discrimination. Caste as a social institution manifests itself in economic and political injustice. Despite being a lived reality for millions of people specially in South Asia and South Asian diaspora, questions and discussions around caste are tried to be whitewashed by denial of existence of either casteism or caste privilege. SARIM envisioned to bring into light the factors that contribute to the resilience of caste injustice and how it prevails in different shapes and forms to maintain the privilege of the upper caste and disadvantage of the oppressed caste.

Casteism exists in different forms, tones, and degrees in the south Asian region. Discussions around casteism in South Asia are largely occupied by the politics surrounding caste system in India. It was therefore a unique effort by SARIM to bring together a diverse panel, from around the region to discuss aspects of the issue at hand in each country.

The panel discussion, which was held online on June 21<sup>st</sup>, 2022, was moderated by US based Dalit activist Mr. Anubhav Singh, who is also a student at the Fletcher school of International Affairs, Tufts University. Anubhav moderated the discussion very well by asking apt questions from each panelist, to help the audience benefit from each of their experiences, academic work and analyses. Six panelists honored SARIM by participating in the discussion, including Dr. Ajantha Subramanian, Dr. Satish Deshpande, Dr. Thanges Paramsothy, Dr. Ghazal Asia, Arif Hussain and Rachana Sunar. Each one of them contributed valuably to the discussion. The discussion can be listened to by clicking on the YouTube link given in the initial pages. SARIM has published the proceedings so that the discussion maybe provided in a readable format as well, for the benefit of a wider audience.

The discussion was overall very constructive and resourceful. The issue of Casteism in South Asia was discussed holistically. The panel put forward their understanding of caste as a social institution of graded inequality, as Ambedkar has termed it. It was agreed that casteism is a contemporary phenomenon which is effectively used to maintain and reproduce inequality and potential for exploitation. Caste was seen as a socio-economic construct, evolving historically, to maintain the upper caste privilege. It was opined that Caste is not a static thing, it has changed through time. At the same time, however, it not a survival of something of past. It is a very contemporary phenomenon which cuts through religious identities as well.

Relationship of caste with religion and socio-economic factors were also discussed. Multiple aspects were brought in light which help maintain caste privilege or keep it static despite changes in other factors, such as occupational specialization and mobility. Relationship of cast inequality and neo-liberalism, invisiblization of cast also became the subject.



Rachana Sunar helped the audience understand the lived reality of being a Dalit by sharing her experience of facing caste-based discrimination. It was discussed whether caste should be seen as a religion specific problem, to which the panelists shared their thoughts. Dr. Ajantha and Arif Hussain opined that caste has stayed more important in caste-based discrimination or practice of endogamy than religion has. Other panelist pointed out that seeing caste as only a spiritual and ritualistic thing takes away our ability to see how upper caste privilege is maintained. Caste is a system which produces and maintains socioeconomic inequalities and is more about control over money, resources, and power than religion. The religious dogmas creating and maintaining caste stigmas were also discussed.

It was discussed how caste specific occupations have now changed so that more profitable occupations are appropriated, sanitized and fixed for the upper castes, such as the fields of medicine and engineering. So, in India one can see most Brahmin medical doctors, as it is no more about occupational specificity but about money and status. Similarly, Dalits are considered intellectually inferior to be fit for IT education and are kept away from it.

Furthermore, how state and state machinery has dealt with the problem of caste and what effects has it generated was asked. Satish explained how in India not only the colonial rule but also the post-independence electoral politics strongly influenced questions of caste. It was deemed that economic prosperity and later economic liberalism would solve the problem of caste. But it did not. Because market is made of society and society is not caste blind and the discrimination on bases of caste keeps alive in every system. It was also discussed how Hindutva is exploiting the promise of Dalit emancipation under the label of Hinduism to buy Dalits' support. They haven't yet fully gained it.

Impact of Reservation policy or affirmative action policies to help uplift lower caste were discussed in the end. Rachana explained how the state policy, though not perfect, has helped the emancipation of Dalits in Nepal. Dr. Paramsothy explained that there is no reservation policy in Sri Lanka as the general understanding there is, that it legitimizes caste itself. However, there are other general policies to help the poor. In the Sri Lankan context, he also explained how not talking about caste is the norm and the ongoing process of creation and recreation of caste identities. Dr. Ghazal Asif said that Pakistan has only colonial time laws left for the scheduled castes. She explained the problem of invisibilization of caste in the context of Pakistan.

Dr. Subramanian opined that reservation, as an affirmative action policy, is important and helpful but certainly not sufficient. She furthermore discussed how the students and overall, all Dalits are stigmatized for coming up the ladder of education and economic mobility by using the reservations. Dr. Deshpande explained how the issue of reservation is seen as a contradiction to merit, this is because caste privilege is made invisible, and it is assumed that the level playing field is equal for everyone. Furthermore, the hot debate on reservation takes up all space on the issue of casteism, leading to the ignorance of real issues of caste discrimination. Arif Hussain

pointed out that the Muslim *Arzaals*, the convert Dalits, are left out from availing the reservation policy benefits even though their status as untouchable caste has not changed. He also explained how the upper caste Muslims, the *Ashrafs*, strive to maintain their own caste privilege.

The discussion ended on a positive note with all panelists appreciating the effort by SARIM and showed their interest in joining in for further such discussions. We are thankful to our panelists for their contribution towards a resourceful discussion. SARIM is especially grateful to Anubhav Singh for his excellent moderation of the session. Furthermore, SARIM owes thanks to its own team which collectively makes an effort for successful events like these, including Najeeb Uddin, Rimsha Shahid, Heman Das, Purkho Esser Bhil and Faiqa Lakho.

Sumbul Yousuf  
Associate Project Director  
South Asia Research Institute for Minorities

## INTRODUCTION OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE PANEL DISCUSSION

### Moderator



#### **Anubhav Praktikant Singh**

Anubhav is a Dalit activist and thinker based in Boston. He has studied at the Fletcher School of International Affairs at Tufts University and at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, where he focused on the political economy of South Asian and the Middle Eastern countries. Earlier, he has worked under Professor Ayesha Jalal on the political economy, caste movements in India & on Caste and Hindutva politics. His research interests include Political Economy, Colonialism and Postcoloniality; Political Ecology; Space; Social Movements; Citizenship; South Asia; South Asian diaspora.

### Panelists



#### **Dr. Ajantha Subramanian**

Professor of Anthropology and South Asian Studies and Mehra Family Professor of South Asian Studies at Harvard University. Her research interests include political economy, ecology, colonialism and postcoloniality, space, citizenship, South Asia, and the South Asian diaspora. Her first book, *Shorelines: Space and Rights in South India* is about the struggles for resource rights by Catholic fishers on India's southwestern coast. Her second and more recent book, *The Caste of Merit: Engineering Education in India* tracks the relationship between meritocracy and democracy in India to understand the production of merit as a form of caste property and its implications for democratic transformation.



#### **Dr. Satish Deshpande**

An acclaimed writer and author and Professor of Sociology at Delhi School of Economics. His research interests include caste and class inequalities, contemporary social theory, politics and history of the social sciences and south-south interactions. He is the author of *Contemporary India: A Sociological View*. He co-edited the book *Untouchability in Rural India* (2006). He is co-author of a recent book *Sectarian Violence In India: Hindu Muslim Conflict*.





**Dr. Thanges Paramsothy**

PhD in Anthropology and Master's degree in Refugee Studies at the University of East London. He co-edited a book, *Casteless or Caste-blind*. He published peer-reviewed journal articles such as Caste within Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora and Inter-caste Marriage in Conflict Settings. His research interests include caste and class dynamics, the Tamil diaspora, conflict-induced migration, subaltern politics, religious transformation, and visual anthropology predominantly in Sri Lanka and Tamil diaspora localities.



**Dr. Ghazal Asif**

Assistant Professor of Anthropology at LUMS University. She received her doctorate from John Hopkins University. Dr. Ghazal is an anthropologist broadly interested in postcolonial regimes of legality and governance; domesticity, kinship, and sexuality; secularism, Hinduism, and Islam; and everyday life, memory, and identity in multi-religious and multi-ethnic societies.



**Arif Hussain**

Community organizer and researcher based in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Supporting anti-casteism and anti-racism work in the U.S., Arif also works with progressive groups in India who are at the forefront of workers and farmers' struggles for a just and equitable society. A graduate of Harvard Kennedy School of Government with a concentration in Democracy Politics and Institutions, Arif has more than a decade of experience of working with marginalized groups in the rural areas of India.



**Rachana Sunar**

Rachana Sunar is a Human rights activist, founder of IDEA Nepal a nonprofit organization working to end child marriage, violence against women and girls, eradicate caste-based discrimination and poverty. Rachana has been struggling for effective implementation of laws to end caste-based discrimination, with an experience of being at the receiving end of caste-based discrimination as she belongs to the Dalit community herself.

**Host**



**Sumbul Yousuf**

Associate Project Director at South Asia Research Institute for Minorities, M Phil from Area Study Centre for Europe and Master's in international Relation, University of Karachi.

# **Unfolding Caste: The Dynamics of Casteism and Caste Based Discrimination**

**Sumbul Yousuf:** Hello and welcome to the Panel discussion “**Unfolding Caste: The Dynamics of Casteism and Caste Based Discrimination**” hosted by South Asia Research Institute for Minorities. This is Sumbul Yousuf, Associate Project Director at SARIM. Thank you for joining us in today’s discussion.

As the world today grapples with increasing inequalities, for South Asia and South Asian diaspora caste inequalities and caste-based discrimination remains a daunting problem. The purpose of the is panel discussion is to bring to light the issue of casteism in South Asia with a diverse panel that helps us understand the different dynamics of the issue at hand in the South Asian countries.

It is quite clear that caste system has been resilient enough to survive across boundaries and religious identities and continues to create discriminatory environments for the so-called lower castes, both in the home countries and in the diaspora. Casteism, however manifests itself in different forms and degrees in each country of the region. We are very pleased to have a panel from across the region to shed light on the dynamics of the issue in each country. And this would be relatively unique panel for discussion on Caste, which presents a regional lens to the issue.

We are very much looking forward towards learning from our distinguished panel on how casteism plays out, the factors that keep the status quo of casteism intact and a way forward in the anti-caste struggle.

First and foremost, I am pleased to introduce our moderator for today’s discussion, Anubhav Singh.

Anubhav is a Dalit activist and thinker based in Boston. He has studied at the Fletcher School of International Affairs at Tufts University and at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, where he focused on the political economy of South Asian and the Middle Eastern countries. Earlier, he has worked under Professor Ayesha Jalal on the political economy, caste movements in India & on Caste and Hindutva politics. His research interests include Political Economy, Colonialism and Postcoloniality; Political Ecology; Space; Social Movements; Citizenship; South Asia; South Asian diaspora.

Thank you, Anubhav, for the time and effort you are putting in for the discussion.

Let me now introduce you to our wonderful panel. Our first panelist is Dr Ajantha Subramanian.

Dr Ajantha is Professor of Anthropology and South Asian Studies and Mehra Family Professor of South Asian Studies at Harvard University. Her research interests include political economy,

ecology, colonialism and postcoloniality, space, citizenship, South Asia, and the South Asian diaspora. Her first book, *Shorelines: Space and Rights in South India* is about the struggles for resource rights by Catholic fishers on India's southwestern coast. Her second and more recent book, *The Caste of Merit: Engineering Education in India* tracks the relationship between meritocracy and democracy in India to understand the production of merit as a form of caste property and its implications for democratic transformation.

Thank you, Dr Ajantha, for joining.

Dr. Satish Deshpande is our next panelist. Dr. Satish is an acclaimed writer and author and is Professor of Sociology at Delhi School of Economics. His research interests include caste and class inequalities, contemporary social theory, politics and history of the social sciences and south-south interactions. He is the author of *Contemporary India: A Sociological View*. He co-edited the book *Untouchability in Rural India* (2006), and he is co-author of a recent book *Sectarian Violence In India: Hindu Muslim Conflict*. Thank you, Dr. Satish, for sparing time for us.

Next panelist is Dr. Thanges Paramsothy. Dr. Paramsothy received his PhD in Anthropology and Master's degree in Refugee Studies at the University of East London. He co-edited a book, *Casteless or Caste-blind*. He published peer-reviewed journal articles such as *Caste within Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora and Inter-caste Marriage in Conflict Settings*. His research interests include caste and class dynamics, the Tamil diaspora, conflict-induced migration, subaltern politics, religious transformation, and visual anthropology predominantly in Sri Lanka and Tamil diaspora localities. Thank you Dr. Thanges for joining.

Our next panelist is Dr. Ghazal Asif. Dr. Ghazal Asif is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at LS University. She received her doctorate from John Hopkins University. Dr. Ghazal is an anthropologist broadly interested in postcolonial regimes of legality and governance; domesticity, kinship, and sexuality; secularism, Hinduism, and Islam; and everyday life, memory, and identity in multi-religious and multi-ethnic societies. Thank Dr. Asif for sparing time for us.

Our next panelist is Arif Hussain. Arif is a community organizer and researcher based in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Supporting anti-casteism and anti-racism work in the U.S., Arif also works with progressive groups in India who are at the forefront of workers and farmers' struggles for a just and equitable society. A graduate of Harvard Kennedy School of Government with a concentration in Democracy Politics and Institutions, Arif has more than a decade of experience of working with marginalized groups in the rural areas of India.

Last but not least, our panelist is Rachana Sunar. Rachana Sunar is a Human rights activist, founder of IDEA Nepal a nonprofit organization working to end child marriage, violence against women and girls, eradicate caste-based discrimination and poverty. Rachana has been struggling

for effective implementation of laws to end caste-based discrimination, with an experience of being at the receiving end of caste-based discrimination as she belongs to the Dalit community herself. Thank you, Rachana, for joining us.

I would also like to welcome and thank our audience who are listening online. Let's move on to the discussion. Over to you Anubhav!

**Anubhav Singh:** Hello everyone to this unique panel where we will be discussing the dynamics of caste and class-based discrimination across South Asia, while also capturing how diverse this institution really is and how it varies from region to region, state to state, country to country. What the word caste really invokes, in my opinion, is constantly the idea of privilege, and of late, it has emerged as a hotly contested site of protection of that privilege, so I'd like to start with the first question. I want to begin with Professor Subramanian here.

To what extent has discourse around caste or the very concept of caste been successful in describing the operation and inequality in a region as diverse as South Asia? What do we lose in subtlety and nuance if we do away with this framework?

**Dr. Ajantha Subramanian:** Thanks Sumbul for the invitation to participate on this panel. As you said it's unusually diverse in terms of the membership on the panel, so I'm really looking forward to this conversation.

This is a huge question. I think one way to start an answer is just to point out the only way to understand the dynamism of caste. The dynamics of caste, its transformations across time and across various contexts, is to see it as inextricably linked to broader economic and political dynamics. We can't understand its dynamism if we think of it purely as a religious or a ritual category. One way to think about this is, Sumit Guha, the historian who's written this marvelous synoptic account of caste that was titled '*Beyond Caste*'. He distinguishes between the field view and the book view of caste. He says that the book view is one that would reduce caste to a kind of Hindu scriptural order, based purely in purity and pollution, and that this doesn't really account for the prevalence of caste across religious affiliations, across religious boundaries, and the fact that social precedence or social ranking has never been just about purity and pollution. It's never been simply based in ritual status.

Caste has always operated as a means of establishing relative rank, what Ambedkar referred to as 'graded inequality'. It's always been a kind of mechanism of producing and reproducing graded inequality but forms of status that are claimed are not based purely in ritual. There are all sorts of other bases for establishing precedence, including for instance labor right. What is the work that one does so occupational specialization has been a really important basis for establishing rank?

So, we have to both attend to the fact that caste regardless of context and regardless of time period, has been a mechanism for producing reproducing inequality. But that the basis on which claims to status are made are remarkably variable. Also, that across regions and across sub-regions we have different configurations of caste. Which also has to do very much with its historicity. You don't have the same spectrum of caste groups in every region. So, I think all of that complexity can only be captured if we think about caste as social, political and economic, as well as religious phenomenon, all of these things at once. And we have to be very careful not to

reduce it to a purely scriptural form of classification. If we think of it in that way, we're basically sort of adopting a kind of Brahminical view, we are substituting a Brahminical view of social order, for the actual social complexity of class.

**Anubhav Singh** - Thank you Dr Subramanian and I'd like Satish to come in here and present his remarks on this very question right.

**Dr. Satish Deshpande** - Thank you and like everyone else I am grateful to SARIM for this opportunity, in particular to Sumbul and to Anubhav for organizing the event. To start with Anubhav's question and your observation that you felt that caste was about privilege. I would amend that slightly to say that caste is fundamentally relational, as a concept and as a reality it is relational. So, it's about more about a relational sense of privilege. In that sense it is fundamentally hierarchical and is always with reference to someone else. This word might not extend across the entire subcontinent but at least the northern part of it there is a word called, *auqaat* which very well captures this idea. A single person or a lone individual cannot have *auqaat*. *Auqaat* is always in relation to others, it is status in relation to others, so caste is fundamentally about this kind of relational status.

The second thing I would like to say is that caste is very much a phenomenon of today. We must not think of it as a survival of something ancient. Of course, in one sense it is that, but to think in those terms does not help us to understand what caste is nowadays. Today it's a very contemporary phenomenon and it's a very adaptable phenomenon. The whole point of it is to maintain a certain broad hierarchy and to maintain relative positioning of different social groups. In this process, various kinds of ritual rules and scriptural pure ideas about purity and pollution have been completely set aside. On the other hand, the fundamental idea of 'I am better than you' – within a kind of 'graded inequality', as Ajantha was also saying, remains quite central and quite alive and well. So, these are the things I would like to emphasize. Caste is not only Hindu, as Ajantha has already said, it is a subcontinental phenomenon. It is about mutual status or relative status and is a very adaptable and modern thing. We may be using the same name, caste, to refer to something that existed many centuries ago as well as it exists today, but today caste is fundamentally about managing material status in relation to other groups. So, it's about opportunity hoarding and maintaining relative status things.

**Anubhav Singh** - Thank you Satish and I'd like to move to Ghazal first for this to get a regional perspective since we are talking about South Asia.

**Dr. Ghazal Asif**: Thank you. I'd also like to express my thanks to SARIM, the organization, and to Sumbul and Anubhav for organizing this. Thank you, Ajantha and Satish, for your very insightful comments. I mostly agree with what they've said. just to add one of the things that the question about caste, that keeps coming up is its tenacity and its very slipperiness. If we acknowledge that caste changes regionally, it also has to change historically. It is not the same thing historically as Professor Deshpande said. Once we start tackling that historicity, as opposed to seeing it as something from another time, it actually helps us grapple with what the stakes of caste emancipation or the stakes of moving beyond caste are. Because it is an enormously slippery thing and I say this from the perspective of Pakistan as my research is in Pakistan, whereas caste is very much everywhere you look and yet it is officially not there. Because when we reduce caste to something Hindu only, then it would stand to reason that caste does not exist



in Pakistan and that is obviously not the case. Once we start tackling with what does caste look like in Pakistan, where it is not just a Hindu thing, where it is something more. Yet even the state sees it as something that does not exist in practice. Then we can understand how tenacious and how slippery it is, by looking at it, as it changes regionally and historically through time. That's what I would just add to the very insightful comments already presented here.

**Anubhav Singh:** Thank you Ghazal for your comments and I'd like to move to Rachana for your comments on caste in Nepal.

**Rachana Sunar:** Thank you Anubhav for asking this question. Today I am participating in this event not to talk about caste system (in terms of) when it started and how it originated. I am here, to tell my own experiences, how it feels being a Dalit and how it feels being raised as a Dalit child in my community, as a Dalit student in my school, and as a Dalit worker in my workplace as colleagues, how it has affected my well-being and how it could be different for my self-esteem, how would I feel different if I wouldn't face this caste-based discrimination.

In Nepal it started, when *Jayasthiti Malla* divided into four varnas and 36 caste groups, on the basis of their works and their occupations. This is how discrimination between different classes started and division of the caste into upper caste, middle caste, and lower caste. I belong to lower caste as a Dalit, so-called untouchable caste, which I feel is totally an injustice and it's the violation of human rights. Nobody should be identified as untouchable human in 21st century when we talk about human rights. Our community needs to know more about this caste system and how as an individual we can eliminate these harmful practices of caste-based discrimination. Our constitution in Nepal says that discriminating people on the basis of their caste and religion is punishable but in real life in our society, it happens every day. It happens at home, at the community, at workplace, at school. And it doesn't happen so directly that you can go to police and file a report against it. The discrimination happens indirectly, you get the sense of discrimination, you feel like you are being treated differently, as less valuable than the other people in the circle, but you still you don't get a direct proof for fighting your rights. This has affected my well-being and as a child when I used to go to school, I was punished often by my teachers just because of my caste. Even though my answer would be correct, my teachers would cross my paper and they would throw my copies away. They would physically punish me so badly; they would give me more punish than all other students and even though I would come up with like brilliant ideas but still I would be scolded. That's how my childhood was. Then as we went to bring water from the community water taps, we were so called untouchables, so we were not allowed to be in the queue and fetch the water. We had to get there first, even though we had to stay till the end, only after when the so-called upper caste finished, I would get the privilege to fetch water. Many times, I would miss my school because I wouldn't come home early, waiting there for hours. So, these actual things still exist. Two years back in Nepal, there was a massacre just because one Dalit guy fell in love with a girl belonging to upper caste and not only him, six of his friends were also killed by the whole village. They were chasing them, throwing stones on them and finally they had to jump in the river to rescue themselves, but unfortunately, they got drowned. It feels very inhumane behavior to me. As a human being we should get equal rights to live in the society and to get that respect whatever occupation we belong to. We have should get respect, we should be safe and have safe space in our workplace and in school and nobody should be made to face this just because of their caste. We have to raise our voice to break the silence, wherever we are working either through NGOs, INGOs, government, or civil society we

have to work together to unite our common goal, to provide the rights for the people. Today I commit that I will give my time and effort and I will talk about Dalit rights, and it has to end, and everybody should live their life equally. Thank you.

**Anubhav Singh:** Thank you so much for sharing your experience with us Rachana. It unfortunately resonates with me, the kind of experience that you've shared, and I think more than any academic discourse it is the lived reality of caste which actually tells us how essential a framework it is for studying South Asian society. Once again, Thank you.

I'd like to move to Dr. Paramsothy here, could you please share your view about the framework of caste and how important you feel it has been in your work and capturing its lived reality and the kind of iniquities that you've experienced in your own society?

**Dr. Thanges Paramsothy:** Thanks for organizers and the panelists. I basically agree with all of the panelists, particularly Ajantha's understanding of caste, how the other factors such as socioeconomic material factors are playing a crucial role in ranking caste, rather than only looking at religious aspect of caste and also the Satish's understanding of caste as a modern concept. These are very interesting arguments. Talking from my own experience and my fieldwork studies, I understand particularly in Sri Lanka coming from Tamil society, where the caste is a kind of silent subject, saying its internal, we call it *pesap porul* meaning don't talk about caste. But we see how caste is important in every aspect of life, how it's evolving in everyday life and when it comes to religion, when it comes to socio-economic development and even during the conflict how caste is playing a role, how succession and the divisions is systematically and invisibly playing the role. That's a very important aspect that we have to look at when it comes to the caste, that it is not always visible, such as the discrimination is not visible, it's always functioning in a kind of latent manner.

What I understood through my own experience that caste is a kind of individual factor, its unbound rather than a system working in a traditional society. Even though we call as the so-called lower/ oppressed caste, we don't have a kind of institutional aspect of caste as you have, for example the Dalit movement. We in Sri Lanka don't have a kind of movement which is organizing the oppressed caste groups. Even the oppressed caste group feel themselves as individual groups, always looking forward and mobilizing to the upper ladder, rather than keeping themselves as an organized group. I called it as unbound reality rather than a bound system, so this is I think very important aspect to look at the caste in the modern society. I just want to add this aspect of my understanding while agreeing with other panelists.

**Anubhav Singh:** Arif would you like to add in please?

**Arif Hussain:** Thank you much Anubhav, thank you Sumbul and thank you SARIM for inviting us for the panel, very interesting discussion so far. I don't think we should be raising this question again and again, whether caste is limited to this religion or that religion at least in South Asia. One very popular way, a lot of people have seen it, is to just open the matrimonial page of any newspaper in any part of south Asia. I have at least seen in India from Goa to Kashmir and from Bengal to Gujarat, any region, any language you will see the prevalence of caste. We have data that I think more than 94% of marriages in India still take place not just within the same caste but within the same sub cast, and across religion, meaning that cuts out religion so that is

one thing. I find it little bit problematic by bringing the question of caste in domain of an organized religion, because it helps strengthen this binary, at least in India we can say binary this Hindu identity and a Muslim identity, and of course there are smaller minorities of Christians, Buddhists, and others. Because somehow it makes it sound that the religious identity is a more fundamental identity and when I say religious identity I mean a very organized religious identity, as we have seen in the subcontinent, in barely 120 years. It started in later 19th century, the project of having very strict religious identity as against a very fluid religious identity, that has a long history in our past. For example, even in India, I come from Bihar and there's a significant *Yadav* population. So, *Yadav*'s are basically shepherding, and cattle-rearing population and trade is basically milk and other milk products. Then the Muslim equivalent, you can say so-called Muslim equivalent, is *Gaddi*'s. When I look at a *Gaddi* folk and a *Yadav* folk, almost hundred percent of their lifestyle is very similar. In the past few years, you will see more *Gaddis* having beards and stuff like that which they did not used to have. Some of them had as an identity mark, that has come up. The point being that their caste occupation takes over their whole life and we have this vision of religion, that the *Yadav*'s call themselves Hindus and *Gaddi*'s have started calling themselves Muslims, that has become something significant. So, we need to be careful about that and I think it also gels with what Dr. Subramanian was talking about and referred to Guha's book about the field reality and the book reality. So, this is the field reality that if you look at people on the ground, then it looks very similar. Also, this classification in different castes, especially not just caste but broader categories is very fluid. Like you will see so in northern Bihar on the borders we have a small tribal population, they come in scheduled tribes, as but you cross the border into Uttar Pradesh and many of them are considered scheduled castes. There is no line as such, but just in Uttar Pradesh they will be scheduled caste and there are many castes in many states who are called OBCs. you cross over there somewhere is schedule caste and then this kind of switch happens. So, there is no such like strict boundaries. As Dr. Deshpande was saying that this is a recent phenomenon which is very true actually, this kind of fixing. Just to end, this also has great political implications, bringing caste into the realm of religion and one particular religion. For example, the whole project of Dalit-Muslim unity, that said that okay somehow Dalit is one segment and that is in a different religion and Muslims are the complete different category, without any caste system and they can come together we saw the experiment in parts of Maharashtra and some parts of Telangana. The problem is that when you say 'Dalit', you can completely leave out the *Arzaals* which are the Muslim Dalits and Muslim tribal. And then you also try to mix oil and water, like Muslim being a religious identity and being a caste identity and you're trying to bring it together, papering over all the differences within the Muslim community, people who profess to be Muslims, and you try to bring them together. Of course, it's not going to work, and it actually helps the other side of the political spectrum by saying that these 30% people are against us and now we can bring the rest 70% percent into our fold and that's the fight and that's an unwinnable fight. So, it has many big implications but my primary concern here is that in using the terms, in this kind of debate, reinforce the religious identity and the binary of religious identity, which actually does not help progress. Thank you.

**Anubhav Singh:** Okay thank you Arif for your insights about Bihar, India and how caste functions and how it varies from region to region. And that really sets up us for our second question for this evening. Should caste be just examined and looked at as a “Hindu Problem” with a religious sanction and Brahmanical structure or should it be examined as Dr. Ambedkar said a system of “graded inequality” where vertical mobility is constrained by its specific characteristics like notions of “purity and pollution”, endogamy and heredity? How is it produced, reproduced, and reinforced in other religious and ethnic groups in South Asia?

I'd like to start with Arif first and then we'll go around, so that Arif can share his experience in respect to the *Muslim Pasmanda Movement* in India.

**Arif Hussain:** I'll be quick and give you a short example, like the issue of minority institutions, like look at the AMU, a very prominent example is Aligarh Muslim University. I am using the example of AMU for various reasons, one also being that it has been one of the major intellectual centers of the Pakistan movement, which was based on creating this binary of Hindu and Muslim. Because Aligarh Muslim university has a constitutionally provided minority status, they don't adhere to affirmative action, the procedures and rules laid down by the constitution, so what happens is that they say that we are a minority institution, and we don't give reservation to OBC's but what happens is that it's not just OBCs of other religions, but the biggest victims are the OBCs and the *Arzaals* of the Muslims themselves. If you go to the Aligarh Muslim university today and few more institutions like that, it perpetuates most of the Muslim kind of elite. I'm not saying most of the Muslim elite, the south is a little bit different, but north India is particular in this case. Because that was the institution started by Syed Ahmad Khan, as a kind of a finishing school for the landlord, the landed Muslim elite of UP, what at that time was United Provinces. But that institution has become a very good mechanism of excluding Muslims of lower class and of course lower castes from other religions. The Sachar commission report is very clear on this, that over all Muslim representation is way disproportionate, lower to their population. But if you just look at the *Ashraaf* Muslim or the upper caste Muslim, they are way over-represented in terms of their population, not over-represented or at par with say Brahmins or those what we call the *savarnas*, definitely not, Because a large segment of the upper-class Muslim elite migrated to Pakistan at the time of the partition, so that group lost it. But even then, compared to the rest of the Muslim population, they are way over-represented. We have data on the board membership of major Indian corporations and we see that who are the people in board membership, that trend works but the same time of course, not to the same extent as it happens with the *Brahmins* or the *Banyas* or the *Kshatriyas*, because of not just reduction in number, but direction of power which was caused by the partition of India in a large segment of the Muslim upper caste landed gentry chose to go to Pakistan. So, through educational institutions, whatever businesses they control, their social statuses in separate places. There was a very heart-wrenching story from Bihar which came out from the Bhangla district, actually from the dome community which basically are the manual scavengers, and there are Muslim domes and there are Hindu domes, they were Muslims nominally and they had a separate graveyard. Of course, the upper caste had a separate graveyard in the village. What happened was, as we know that North Bihar is a very flood prone area, so there was a time of flood, and the dome graveyard was flooded, and an 11-year-old girl died

because of snake bite or something. So, they wanted to bury her in the other side of the graveyard, they paid the *gorkand* (gravedigger) of another caste which is the gravedigger caste of the Muslim gravediggers. They had prepared the grave, but then the other side resisted, and they didn't allow them to bury their girl there. This is a very recent thing, in the past few years, so there are various things through educational opportunities, land ownership and wherever they have access to corporate roles, it perpetuates. I'll stop here.

**Anubhav Singh:** Thank you, Arif. And I'd like to bring in Professor Ajantha for her work in South India, with respect to Christians. Professor Subramanian, if can you please share your thoughts.

**Ajantha Subramanian:** Similarly, to what Arif and Ghazal were saying about the persistence of caste within Islam, you see that very much to be true within Indian Christianity as well. And you know in part this is because conversion to Christianity typically happened on a mass basis, people converted as castes. This was not the model of the individual convert; it was typically the model of the collective group conversion. And the irony is that often oppressed castes sought conversion as a means to escape the disabilities of caste stigma, but they carry caste with them into their new faith, so there's a sort of continuity of caste across conversion, pre and post conversion. This reproduction of caste happens in all sorts of ways, through endogamy, so there's very little marriage across caste boundaries, even within the Christian community. In fact, if you look at the case of the *Nadars* community, for instance in Tamil Nadu, there's more marriage between Hindu and Christian *Nadars*, than there is between Christian *Nadars* and other Christians. So, caste remains more consistent basis of endogamy than faith and religious identity. As Arif was saying you know, this is not just about marriage or occupational specialization, caste travels with you into death, so there are still caste specific graveyards and there are caste specific churches. So, it remains a sort of fundamental structuring principle of Indian Christianity. But when it comes to an official designation, and this is also something that I have pointed to the perception, especially for Dalits, that conversion out of Hinduism is an escape from the disabilities of untouchability. So, Christian Dalits are not classified as scheduled castes, they fall under the OBC category and not the SC category. So, there is a sort of assumption that conversion brings certain benefits and certain advantages, that you wouldn't have within Hinduism, which have not been borne out. In all of these ways, it's quite apparent that caste is not just a Hindu phenomenon. One more thing, I wanted to say is about occupational specialization, and I think this is part of the slipperiness that Ghazal talked about, is that it's not that castes have been occupationally static, they have not. One interesting thing is also something that people who work on the pre-modern period have written about, is that often a change of practice could lead to excommunication from caste. So, if you took on practices that were deemed ritually impure or inappropriate for your caste for your caste you could be excommunicated. Now that is almost hard-pressed to find instances of that today. One has to also keep this in view as this is part of the dynamism of caste. If you take Brahmins for instance, there was a time when taking on something like tending to the body, tending to bodily fluids, would lead to excommunication. That does not explain why there are so many Brahmin doctors today. Even dealing with you know the technical forms of labor, which was seen as sort of less

honorable, but you have tons of Brahmin engineers. So, there's a kind of dynamism to the relationship of caste and practice. When you think about occupational practice as the basis of caste you don't see that there's been an increasing accommodation of a whole range of occupational practices within the same caste category, to a degree that was not the case before. I think that's also important to keep in view.

**Anubhav Singh:** Thank you Dr. Subramanian for your comments. This really sets up us for Ghazal's views on her work in Sindh, with respect to Dalit Hindus and her experience with how caste functions in the state of Pakistan. Ghazal, please go ahead.

**Ghazal Asif:** Your question is very timely. Whether caste is a Hindu phenomenon or not is something of immediate relevance and has been since 1947 to the Pakistani state's understanding of how it is to deal with caste. Because logically if caste is just for Hindus or just a Hindu phenomenon, then the creation of Pakistan would mean that it is not a problem that the state of Pakistan needs to deal with, in a state setup to free everybody ideally from the yoke of Brahmanical Hinduism etc. That founding principles has not been borne out historically. Anubhav mentioned my work, in which one of the things that I showed is that right from independence, 1947 onwards this was actively something that the constituent assembly in Pakistan struggled with. The objectives resolution which is the founding document of the current constitution in Pakistan says that we are bound as a nation state to work for the upliftment of the, and after a lot of fighting they used the words, 'backward segments of society'. And it was not clear whether that was specific to caste or are we just talking generally about the poor in Pakistan. The aspects of how you are supposed to interpret that, have been constantly rehashed and hashed over again and again, up until 1971, the liberation of Bangladesh and the preceding civil war. Until then it was a very important question, especially in east Bengal, because east Bengal is where the majority of Dalit Pakistanis happen to live. Where the Pakistani scheduled federation had its headquarters. After the liberation of Bangladesh, what was happening that in West Pakistan, the pre-caste functions very different and as Arif has mentioned that it is in many ways a bureaucratic category, who gets qualified as OBC in one province, who gets qualified OBC in another place. OBC is not a category that exists in Pakistan, schedule caste is. Because schedule caste as we know is a colonial category it started in 1935, which is why in Pakistan it still exists, OBC is a post-independence category, and it does not exist in Pakistan. So those whom the British qualified as scheduled caste is still scheduled castes in Pakistan but people who were Dalit Muslims, Dalit Christians, whom the British did not qualify in those ways fell through the cracks. So, in Pakistan what are we supposed to do in a country that is supposedly ideally for Muslims what are we supposed to do with Dalit Muslims, who do not fit into the schematics that have been inherited by the colonial states and also do not fit into the ideological schematics of the new nation today. One of the ways in which that question keeps recurring, just to return to the original question, is whether we are supposed to think of caste as a Hindu category in Pakistan. Or there's a very simple straightforward thing that we identify the Hindu Dalits, that's a complicated question instead because caste is a fairly fluid and complex system, or do we think about the existence of the clear existence and prevalence of casteism within Pakistani Muslims,



and what is to be done bureaucratically about that. I wouldn't say there is an easy answer for that. I'll stop here.

**Anubhav Singh:** Thank you Ghazal, and I'd like to bring in Satish please go ahead.

**Satish Deshpande:** In my opinion, the need to worry about caste as a phenomenon derives from its oppressive potential and its oppressive practices, which are fundamentally social. There are claims made about caste being founded on religion, where Hinduism is obviously in a special position, but we should not be confused by this. As such this thing called Hinduism, is today involved in a much larger power game, to do with the largest country in the sub-continent. We should not get confused by that when we are thinking about caste, because the main reason we need to worry about caste is because it is one of the most stable mechanisms for the maintenance and reproduction of inequalities, and it has immense potential for exploitation. In this sense I think, it is a south Asian phenomenon, and there is not much point trying to say whether it is more in X religion or less in Y religion. Obviously, it takes different forms. But it's quite remarkable how even the occupational anomalies that Ajantha was mentioning, remain very consistent with status. Whatever is high status and high income is appropriated by the upper castes. Even the profession of surgeons, who put their hands inside other people's bodies and touch their bodily fluids – which was considered the most degrading and horrifying form of pollution – is today appropriated and almost monopolized by Brahmins and other high castes. Why? because it's high status and high status usually goes with high income and if you look at it that way it's extremely consistent. You never say Brahman surgeon, because it is expected, it is status-consistent. It's the mismatched or unexpected status, like say Brahman peon or a Brahman sweeper, which will get an article in newspaper. Whereas a lower caste sweeper is considered normal. So, in that sense I think it's primarily about the management of people's life-chances. It's essentially about the transmission of privilege inter-generationally, despite all its myriad regional variations. So that would be my take, that focusing on religion when we are talking about caste is not particularly helpful.

**Arif Hussain:** Anubhav I can just add a small anecdote on what Dr. Deshpande was saying?

**Anubhav Singh:** Please go ahead.

**Arif Hussain:** So, in terms of status but also, it's about money, as Dr. Deshpande was saying. My uncle in Jharkhand, my ancestral village, used to be a small-time trader of leather. So, he would collect raw leather from nearby areas and transport to Calcutta to a big guy who was a *Marwari*, and the *Marwari* has been in the leather business for various generations. Some people know that *Marwaris* are so specific about vegetarianism, not eating meat, they don't even eat garlic and onion. He was such an expert at leather like just by touching he could tell. My uncle used to always make fun of him that you are a *Marwari*, you don't even eat garlic and onion and you touch cow leather, that too raw cow. My uncle's name was Murtaza, and he would respond, "Murtaza bhai! I don't touch leather, I touch money!" That's what he always used to say, and he was a multi-multi-millionaire. Thank you.

Anubhav Singh: Thank you Arif for that anecdote! Thank you very much. Dr. Paramsothy, can I bring you in please for your comments on this question and about your work in the Tamil community in Sri Lanka?

**Dr. Thanges Paramsothy:** I understand the other factors functioning in the production, reproduction and a kind of reinforcement of caste. But when it comes to Tamil nation and society, religion is particularly playing a major role. At the same time, we can see other aspects of socioeconomic material factors. Particularly when it comes to Sri Lankan society where they recast the caste, particularly when it comes to caste dragging. Bryan Pfaffenberger, who studied about Tamil society in 1970s and 80s, has talked about *Sutra* agriculturalist domination in Sri Lanka and particularly in Jaffna where they re-casted the classical caste ranking. How *sutra* became higher caste rather than the Brahmin, that was the case in India. How that was possible? Because of the Willard agriculturist, they are fundamentally classified as a *Sutra*, by building their own temples and bringing Brahmins to work in their own temple, as a servant. The kind of relationship between Brahmins and the *Sutra* is that *Sutra* became master, and the Brahmins become their servant, by working in their temple and getting salary from the *Sutra*. That kind of relationship is a reclassified or kind of recasting the entire caste concept of India. So, that basically followed by all other caste groups as well, particularly after the prolonged armed conflict, it induced many people to move overseas in western countries. It has created enforced structure of opportunities, for all caste groups. Particularly, so-called upper caste, by using their socioeconomic network initially moved to affluent western countries, then the oppressed caste groups also migrated overseas. So, after moving to affluent countries, the oppressed castes somehow managed to build their own temples. Building their own temple massively and building caste marked symbols throughout the Jaffna peninsula, utilizing their overseas remittances, rather than building access to the so-called upper caste temples. This mobilization and the investment of oppressed caste in religious to my mind is not only reshaping material development of religious places, but also support their effort to live with dignity, respect, and great autonomy in the religious domain. This very practice of rebuilding and renovating temples throughout the Jaffna peninsula by different caste groups, led to the reproduction of caste and consolidating caste identity. Initially the oppressed caste groups had their own temples which were non-agamic. Initially they have the full ownership of the temple, they are the priests at the same way they are the participants. After building the temple massively in the Agamic way of building temple, they bring the Brahmins to the temple, and they ask the Brahmins to perform their rituals so then they are away from the interior part of the temple and bringing the religious aspect of caste relationship within the temple. So, by building their own temple, material, they are developed, and their houses are built and particularly when it comes to the religious domain, they are kind of reproducing the caste system. It's not only done by the so-called upper caste but also the oppressed caste as well. It's a kind of reconstructing identity by different caste groups by following the same the practice which has been followed by so-called upper caste, historically. So, that is an important aspect as to how the reproduction happens. When it comes to the religion, the people converted from Hinduism to Christianity, so they also built their own church rather than winning access to the existing church. So, churches in Sri Lanka, particularly in Jaffna, belong to different caste group.

Religion again is a matter when it comes to the caste, how caste is functioning in different religions. Initially they had some issue of converting themselves from one caste group to another caste group, because there is an aspect of understanding that in order to overcome the caste, they may convert themselves into another religion. But that is not true, what happens is a kind of reproducing the same caste system, by building their own church. It's a production and reproduction and changing and evolving and one particular caste becoming another caste. It's always happening in Jaffna, but that might be the case in other southeastern society as well. I believe religion plays a crucial role, that we can't avoid, but at the same time we have to understand how other aspects of inter-caste marriage, material development, economic status, educational status, also overlooking this difference in everyday life. Thank you.

**Anubhav Singh:** Thank you Dr. Paramsothy for your comments and I'd like to bring in Rachana in now. Rachana can you please share your experience with respect to religion and caste in Nepal?

**Rachana Sunar:** I would like to share how the caste system is being constructed in Nepal through religion. As I said earlier the whole caste system was divided into four *varnas* and 36 *jati*, which is caste, so somehow Dalits were those people whose occupation was to make pots, shoes, jewelries, or tailoring, also building the temples and doing arts and crafts and making statues and all the god figures. Those people were so-called untouchable caste, like impure untouchables. If Dalit people would touch Brahmin families, they would become impure and they have to go to the temple, and bathe for three times or seven times just to make themselves pure again. When we look in the past to understand how our society has developed the sense of discrimination by blindly following the religion. Even though in *Ved*, it is not written that Dalits should be discriminated, and they are impure or untouchable. It's not written but some of the priests or religious leaders, took advantage of this, and they translate it into their own for the benefit of their own. They would convince the society that *Sudras* are only meant to serve us, they are not equal to sit together with us and they must show respect, as they are considered as the feet. So, the feet must be down, and they must serve us, as they are in the ground, and we are higher than them. We should not let them in our home, we should not eat and drink the things they touch, so this is how people have been perceiving about caste discrimination. And later on, it is related to marriage, the Dalits are not allowed to marry from upper caste and then the whole social relationship is being disturbed because in the Hindu religion, in many temples still in rural areas, Dalits are not allowed to go to the temple because if they go in the temple god will get mad, it will be big scene and the whole village or villagers have to sacrifice, this is so out of sense to me. How can educated people still believe in these things. I would have understood, if we go back to the 19th or 18<sup>th</sup> century, maybe it was possible because people were not educated, maybe it was possible because people had no rights of speech or freedom of religion or because they were ruled by some cruel regime or maybe it would be possible to believe because they were guided by the religion, and to think I am from Brahmin I should not let Dalit come in my house, because everybody will disqualify my caste status or maybe I will even go down the caste. But now in 21st century when all are educated and when people are talking about the caste rights and rights for people, still when we go to remote areas, people still blindly follow, and

they discriminate Dalit people. I did a field research, I asked people why would you believe that you have to discriminate Dalit people, what would happen if you let them in your home and a very innocent woman said that if I let Dalit people in my house, god will get mad and my buffalos and cows, they will climb in the tree and they will stop giving milk, so I don't want this to happen, therefore I stop them from coming in into my house. They have been told and raised their whole life this way. Other answers were so funny to me and still they believed, I was not there to tell them that it is wrong, I was just there for the research, and somebody would say if they sell their milk to Dalit families and if the Dalit families drink the milk, then suddenly the cows and buffalos would stop milking, or they would not give any milk. Other answers were like if they marry some Dalit people, their status will be lower and all the other so-called upper caste people will discriminate them and they would have to label down off their caste status, so they wouldn't dare. There were other things like if Dalit people would touch some plants like fruit plants or veggie plants, the plants would dry, which wouldn't make any sense, why they would still believe in those spiritually misleading teaching practice of the religion.

I am not here to blame Hinduism or Islam or Buddhism because religion is the faith, and the faith never discriminates people, based on their caste or religion or status or color. It is because of our culture, I would say, culturally how people make up the social phenomenon and how we are sharing our relationship and how we are forming the social norms and our rituals and our festivals. All I can say is it's our behavior and practice, what we have heard and seen and what we have been taught from our parents, our family, the society and from everybody else in the community, and we try to believe in those things, and we say yes, it's the right things to do, I have to make a distance and I should never marry a girl from the lower caste. One of my lecturers, who's highly educated, fell in love with a girl from lower cast, and he was sharing with us that even though he loved that girl so much, he couldn't convince his family and parents to marry that girl. So, this gave me a big shock that, as a teacher, a lecturer, if he is unable to convince his family and his parents, then from whom we can expect to change the whole cycle. Even the highly educated professional people are struggling to change these stereotypes, then for whom we wait for. So, it's all about our behavioral practice, our cultural practice and religion also plays the role to discriminate people based on their caste.

**Anubhav Singh:** Thank you Rachana for your comments. Ajantha, you had your hand up a while back. I'm sorry I kind of missed that, did you want to come in at some point?

**Ajantha Subramanian:** Yes, during what Arif was saying probably, the point I wanted to make was just to reinforce what Satish said about it, was making the distinction between labor segmentation and occupational specialization. So, it's not that people have maintained the same occupations across time. There's been lots of variation in what specific caste groups take on, by way of labor. But you still get labor segmentation which favors upper castes. So, Satish talked about the appropriation of lower- caste practices, medicine, technical crafts etc., that through these forms of appropriation you have upper caste taking on new forms of employment, but then engaging in precisely the same forms of opportunity hoarding, by trying to block other groups from entering those professions. So, there's a way in which these lower caste practices get appropriated, sanitized, accorded a new kind of status, and then hoarded.

To go back to something that Rachana said, which I thought was really significant, that there is something really to the extent that caste is static and that caste boundaries have been maintained largely unchanged over time, I think it's the touchability line which has remained much more static than other forms of status. There's much more sort of variability and mobility, the sort of intermediate rungs of the caste hierarchy, than there is at the very top and bottom. So, I think the touchability line is something that's key. But, having said that when you look at hyper modern institutions like engineering colleges, Dalits are stigmatized not because they're seen as ritually impure but because they're seen as intellectually inferior. So, there is a new basis for stigmatization. It's no longer a kind of ritual basis, it's a different basis for stigmatization. It's not that stigmatization has gone away, it's not that Dalit inferiority has gone away, as a kind of foundational aspect of caste hierarchy, but the terms that are used to refer to relative status, change all the time. So, I think that's important which is playing out not just within South Asia, but in the diaspora as well. In institutions like the most well-known companies in the IT sector whether it's Cisco or Google, have this effort to opportunity hoard, by not allowing forms of social mobility to groups that are seen as socially inferior. So, you look at the IT sector either within South Asia or in the diaspora and the managerial tier is still overwhelmingly upper caste. So, we have to think both about occupational diversification and labor segmentation, that both are happening in tandem, and both are happening as mechanisms of reproducing caste-based social inequality.

**Anubhav Singh:** Thank you Ajantha. That's indeed a very important point that occupational diversification and labor segmentation are together reproducing caste and reinforcing it in the modern world. Moving on and I'd like to bring in Satish here. We know that social identities and categories are not unchangeable. The institution of caste and its perception has formed over a period through a complex interaction of government (both colonial and post-colonial) policies, political machinations, and socio-economic developments. How has the institution of caste evolved in the post-colonial nation states in South Asia viz a viz the state and its socio-economic policies? Have the post-colonial nation states continued with the colonial policy of looking at caste through a religious lens to serve their own ends? Considering caste and class are inextricably linked in South Asia, can there really be social justice without economic justice?

**Dr. Satish Deshpande:** Thank you Anubhav, this is many different questions rolled into one. So, let's try and sort them out. The effect of colonial policies is arguably still felt. The shadow of what the colonial governments did still falls on things happening today. But I think the colonial influence is greatly over-shadowed and far outstripped today by the role – not so much of the state – but of electoral politics. I cannot speak for South Asia, but in the Indian case at least, we can say that electoral politics has probably been the single most important thing to have changed the discourse on caste. There have been many forms of mobilization around caste directly or indirectly driven by electoral politics. This was most obvious in the 1990s in India. This decade proved to be a very big turning point not only electorally, but interestingly, also intellectually. New and different kinds of intellectual work began to be done on caste at this time. The rise of the OBCs to the national center stage, during the 1990s, marked a major turning point in thinking about caste. So that would be my take. Yes, colonial policies did matter. Yes, it's arguable that

they continue to have a residual effect. But I think the vote, elections and postcolonial politics are far more important.

The other question you're asking about economic justice and social justice is very relevant. This is often a major stumbling block in arguments regarding caste in India, where economic status is seen as having the capacity to erase caste differences or to overwrite caste status. This is a popular upper caste prejudice – it is simply not true empirically. On the one hand, it is quite true that there has been sharp economic differentiation within every caste group – that is, there are rich and poor in every caste group. But on the other hand, it still remains true that in India, and I think in large part for other South Asian countries as well, the top and bottom of the economic spectrum are still fairly well identified and divided in caste terms. The vast majority of those at the top of the economic pyramid are from the upper castes, and the vast majority of those at the bottom are from the lower castes. This is a disproportionate distribution – that means that the upper caste share in the population of the rich is much greater than their share in the total population, while the reverse is true for their share among the rich. For the lower castes it is exactly the opposite – they have a disproportionately large share in the poor and a disproportionately small share among the rich.

This does not mean, however, that the dominant belief of the Nehruvian era, namely that economic development will solve the problem of caste, was right. Because we find that within all class forms, caste discrimination is still quite strong. So, for example, within let's say the set of rich people or within say top bureaucrats of the government, or within the IITs, as Ajantha's work shows, there is caste discrimination. The convertibility of economic capital into social or cultural capital is tricky thing. There is no easy or automatic way in which, for example, high economic status can be leveraged into high social status. So economic mobility does lead to some social mobility, but caste identities are never erased, so caste status always remains. This is why the standard argument for changing the basis of reservation from caste to economic status is fundamentally wrong and fails to recognize the distinctiveness of caste. What I'm trying to say is, that yes money matters, wealth matters. But it does not necessarily erase caste disadvantages – you have to look into specifics to see if that is happening, there is nothing automatic about it. So today we cannot afford to believe that economic development will solve the caste problem, because it won't. And history has shown that it has not.

**Anubhav Singh:** Thank you Satish. Just one more point that I'd like you to elucidate, India's neoliberal trajectory after the 1990s, how has that shaped the institution of caste and caste politics? Has it strengthened it further or has it weakened it? or has it entrenched it more?

**Satish Deshpande:** That's a very interesting question. Many progressive thinkers and activists at the very beginning of the period of liberalization in India, people like Gail Omvedt believed that liberalization would be good for the lower castes. In the same way that perhaps colonialism is in many ways seen as being good for Dalits in particular. This argument has been made, that because colonialism is an overweening power over a long-established caste structure of power, it disrupts that caste structure of power and therefore provides opportunities to the lower caste that would not be available within a settled and very sedimented caste structure. So, a similar analytic



and analogical argument was being made about neoliberalism, that it would shake up the market and by extension Indian society and bring new opportunity, because the market is supposed to be caste blind. But this is what we have learned. The market is not caste blind because the market is embedded in society, like everything else is embedded in society. We have a remarkable, so-called private sector, the market sector in India which is perhaps the most resilient in terms of maintaining and reproducing caste differences. So, neoliberalism has only served to make caste divisions more rigid and enable the maintenance of caste hierarchies, even more than what the state was obliged to, by its by its own laws. Despite the fact that the laws most often remain on paper and their implementation leaves a lot to be desired, the fact that we had a so-called caste aligned constitution made the public sector to a minimal extent responsive. But neoliberalism has taken away the rights of labor and introduced precarity across the board and precarity has been, to no one's surprise, being handed out in caste terms. So, the most precarious jobs are the lowest castes, and the least precarious jobs are the highest. There are always exceptions, but by and large, that's the case.

**Anubhav Singh:** On that note I cannot help but ask, how does that play into the advantage of the Hindutva politics in India?

**Dr. Satish Deshpande:** Yes, that is actually, in the cliché terms, the morning question today. What we are witnessing today is that Hindutva politics is almost hegemonic. In recent times, the ideology of Hindutva has never been as close to achieving hegemony in the Gramscian sense, that is to occupy the dominant common sense of a society, where overt coercion is relegated to the background. And there appears to be a consensual agreement on a particular ideological framework. That's what roughly speaking, means when we talk about hegemony, and that is almost in place and the centerpiece of that, given the nature of Hindu society, is the ability of the ideology of Hindutva, to suggest to the lower castes, under this new ideology they now have the possibility of a new future, provided they join in the campaign against Muslims, and to some extent Christians. I'm putting this crudely, but it helps to keep things short, the lower castes are being invited to feel good that at least they are not Muslims. And conditions are being created for more and more people to feel happy or relieved that, at least they are not Muslims, but will this work? An invitation is being handed out to these lower castes, to join the Hindutva campaign, and there's an implicit return promised of a better status, improved status for them. But whether this invitation will be accepted fully, it has been accepted in part, there have been events and circumstances where it has appeared to be accepted, this invitation by the lower castes and also by tribals. But there have been other instances, where it has not been accepted. So, it's still an open question. It's not a done deal yet but this is the question on which I think the future of at least the Indian part of the subcontinent hinges if the lower castes are genuinely persuaded that they have a better future under Hindu in my opinion that's going to be a major change that's going to last for a long time. But it hasn't happened yet and as they say, *picture abhi baki hai* – the film/story has not yet ended.

**Anubhav Singh:** Thank you Satish, we tackled three of the most burning question vis a vis Indian Democracy in recent times. I'd like to bring in Arif here as I know he has something to say about it. Go ahead Arif.

**Arif Hussain:** I don't think anybody could put it better than Dr Deshpande and I totally agree, and he has also elsewhere written about how the upper caste converted their caste capital into modern capital under liberalism and that's how it has perpetuated and maintained the dominance but again going back up to the question of primacy of religion and within that framework it is being done right now. I mean the whole conception of Hindutva which basically goes back to, of course Savarkar and even before that, where this whole idea of bringing people into that umbrella came from. In a documented way, we can see that when brahmins started this campaign of bringing people to call themselves Hindu and the first instance we get is in 1909 when the Minto-Morley reforms, were brought in for more constitutional provisions and how to give representation to Indians, in local administration. Then the first world war happens, and it is formalized further and kind of refined further because now people realize that British empire can also be defeated or can be at least gotten into trouble, after first world war, and then comes the Montague-Chelmsford Reforms. Then they had the separate electorate, and we have the 1931 census, which is the only caste census we have had so far. It's been more than 90 years now. There were active campaigns then, not just by Hindu Mahasabha and the groups like Brahminical groups, but also by Muslim league in the 1931 census, asking people not to identify by caste but to identify themselves as Hindus or Muslims and that was very problematic. I'm talking about 1931, when a lot of people had trouble putting themselves down as Hindus and Muslims, because these terms did not mean much till that time in their day-to-day lives. Of course, there were communal violence, but outside of, say major cities and such industrial pockets, there was not much meaning of such an identity and the caste identity always took primacy. So, this whole bringing together people into this fold is an ongoing process. We saw that in US when the Irish labor got very much together with the Black labor to form very strong unions and started challenging the status quo then the Irish labor slowly turned white. Noel Ignatiev has a great book on it, how the Irish became white. Race is in many ways similar but in many ways different than the idea of caste too, and this is a constant process of bringing people into this fold. But the hegemonic power almost remains the same and everybody else is brought under that umbrella.

A little bit earlier, we were talking about professions and how that has changed. So, one thing within the Brahminical caste system does not change, is the status of the Brahmin or the Brahmins. Everybody can go up and down, like for example, we have many instances of Shudras becoming *kshatriyas*, most popular is *Shivaji* being a *kundi* and then given the status of *kshatriya*, we have the Om kings in the northeast, the Om kings basically came from what is modern day China and they were termed *Indravanshi* later and they were kind of Brahminized. Many other such groups like people trading, so they are becoming *Vaishyas* and Shudras owning land becoming *Vaishyas*. But it's again I think, as you wrote in the description, that we talk a lot about people who are victims of this system, or who are at the receiving end of the system, but we don't talk so much about who are the people who profit from this system and who benefit from this system, who get the privilege. So that remains similar. We talk about PSUs or socialist economies and mixed economies in India, it's very clear who are the beneficiaries of that system

as we talk about liberalism. It's almost the same people who have been the beneficiaries of the both the economic systems. Whereas the people who were at the receiving end, you can say that they had little bit, at least in theory, some sharp act like moving upward or betterment in their condition, but beyond that there was not much. I mean, if you look at the data from 80s and 70s of the PSU (Public Sector Undertakings) boards and the senior officials in the PSU, you will almost see the same people who you see today in private sector. One very good example is, as there is more research on banks, of those who have been the directors and of the PSU banks, who are the directors and senior officials of private banks, so we need to look more at this, and it remains the same. Thank you.

**Anubhav Singh:** Ajantha would you like to add in?

**Ajantha Subramanian:** I agree with everything that Satish and Arif have said. Yes, the market is not caste blind. Neoliberal change has, if anything, reinforced caste differences. This sort of perception that sedimented or entrenched forms of caste labor would be disrupted through neoliberal transformation, that has been sort of belied by the actual process of change. Stuart Hall and many people have talked about this in terms of the importance of ascriptive difference to the organization of capitalism. That there are understandings of ascriptive qualities, collective descriptive qualities, that have always been key to the way capitalism conscripts labor. So, all of this is true, and we are seeing it in the role of the private sector in retrenching caste hierarchies right, and there's much more sort of open discussion of you know which social groups are most suited to which forms of labor. These forms of things are so much more open now to say, that brahmins are better at conceptual work etc. We're seeing this everywhere in the world. There's a kind of disaffection with the idea of the state as an important mechanism of social equalization and redistributive justice, and a return to the market as the only sort of legitimate instrument for organizing society and economy. I think all of this is really problematic and doesn't sort of bode well for any kind of emancipatory politics, any kind of politics of equality. But I also want to caution against seeing all of this as somehow predetermined. In our conversations about the reproduction of inequality, often we sort of fail to attend to the counter currents, that make it necessary for elites to adopt new maneuvers to retrench their privilege. There's a kind of dialectics to these historical processes. Yes, maybe the same groups dominated the PSUs as now dominate private sector corporations, but why is it that elites found the need to regroup in the private sector? It's because there were claims on the public sector that were effective. There were claims and movements to challenge the entrenched forms of hierarchy, that again led to new forms of elite maneuver. So, I think we really have to think of these as dialectical processes in which the pushback, subaltern opposition, is as crucial to shaping historical change as the elite control of resources. It's a dynamic between the two things and often when we're talking about privilege, we lose sight of the highly effective forms of social mobilization that have pushed the elites to come up with new forms of political mobilization, like Hindutva politics.

So, the need to conscript the OBCs into the Hindutva fold and to make the argument that the only sort of axis of social difference that matters is the religious one, is an argument that had to be made in the face of OBC mobilization. Similarly in the US it's not a surprise that Trump followed the Obama presidency. It's not a surprise, if you go further back, that groups that were

seen as inferior races whether it was the Irish or the Italians, right after the 1920s became conscripted into the white fold. The only axis of difference that was made to matter and had to be made to matter, as it wasn't self-evident, was the one between black and white or between white and non-white. These are strategies that have to be adopted in the face of opposition. I just don't want us to lose sight of that because otherwise we're failing to give any credit to subaltern politics as being historically consequential.

**Anubhav Singh:** Thank you Dr Subramanian and on that note, I'd like to bring in Dr Asif from Pakistan with her views on how state policies and the outlook of the Pakistani state has shaped caste identity in Pakistan. Please go ahead.

**Ghazal Asif:** As I mentioned before, this has been an ongoing question in Pakistan, but I do also want to emphasize something that, Dr. Paramsothy mentioned is that caste is invisibilized in Pakistan also, as in Sri Lanka. So, when you have what amounts to essentially an invisibilization of caste, it comes out only in indirect ways or at the margins when considering religious minorities. The way that caste has taken trajectories in Pakistan post 1947, is very different from the Indian project, because we have not had those kinds of conversations or those kinds of systems that have been in place in India since 1947. So, we continue to have that conversation about invisibilization and what it means to have a state's notice of caste, is something at least I think, for the broader population is some way off in Pakistan. Where the scheduled category still exists in Pakistan or where it's measured and it is an existing category in specific bureaucracies, it looks like a colonial category, as it exists because it existed in colonial systems. So that necessary conversation post-independence about what it is that the state structures need to do, to think about caste has not happened in Pakistan for reasons that I had gone into earlier. So, I do think that it's interesting to compare those trajectories because one of the things that happens with caste, I think, is because often caste is a bureaucratic category if it is not mentioned and is a completely invisibilized term of sociality, it winds up looking very different. That's one of the things that while having these sort of cross South Asia conversations about this pervasive phenomenon, can help highlight.

**Anubhav Singh:** Thank you Dr. Asif for your views and I'd like, to bring in Dr. Paramsothy here.

**Thanges Paramsothy:** When it comes to the colonial period there is an interesting study done by Dirks 'invention of caste', how the traditional occupations are more or less legitimized when it comes to the occupational setup by colonial rulers. For example, the pariahs traditionally did the scavenging work, but then the colonial masters particularly approached those caste groups to do the cleaning job. That has happened to the Indian neighbors, who were brought to the plantation sector in Sri Lanka where, they found different caste groups to manage the plantation sector and laborers from different caste groups, kind of reinventing caste, this was happening in the colonial period. But when it comes to the state policy in Sri Lanka, where we don't have a reservation policy, that you have in India, because there is an unwritten policy among politician and policy makers that caste should not be taken to the account of policy formation. Because if you give a particular reservation for a particular caste group, then we would more or less

legitimize the caste's hierarchical system, giving a meaning to that. That's the kind of an understanding among Sri Lankan policymakers. They don't consider caste as an element when it comes to the policy making. There is no such caste policy but there is an act called a social disability act, which was brought in 1960s, after temple struggle, led by left parties and oppressed caste groups, to access the so-called upper caste temples in Sri Lanka. Then there's a common policy like free education policy which help oppressed caste groups to get education up to undergraduate level. These kinds of policies help not particularly focusing on a particular caste group, but general policies, which is inclusive of all caste groups. So, the overall understanding is that bringing caste as an element in the policy formation is giving more legitimacy to the caste. Even many academics, whenever I talk to some academics in Sri Lanka, they see reservation policy as helping caste system rather than annihilating caste so that's the kind of understanding that we have. Thank you.

**Anubhav Singh:** Thank you Dr. Paramsothy. I've just been informed that one of our panelists Dr. Asif would have to leave. Please come in for your concluding remarks. Thank you.

**Ghazal Asif:** Thank you. I just wanted chime in and build up on what Dr. Paramsothy said and what I was saying about invisibilization. One of the things that I should have mentioned, is that those kinds of conversations about invisibilization and the state's policies, go do not preclude the maintenance of elite caste privilege by the state, which happens in Pakistan. You can see that at the top where those caste privileges are maintained by those who help form the state. So out of the things that gets invisible, is also the way that state's structures work to reproduce any privilege, which Dr. Deshpande and Dr. Subramanian were saying as well, that status and the long-term maintenance of status is one of the ways in which caste continues to maintain its hold over our societies today, even as it changes continuously, it does remain consistent in status. I'm not sure if I have any concluding remarks other than that, but I apologize very much that I must leave at this point but thank you so much. I learned a great deal from this conversation, from Dr. Subramanian, Dr. Deshpande, Dr. Paramsothy, Arif, Rachana and of course Anubhav, thank you so much for facilitating this. It was fantastic, thank you.

**Anubhav Singh:** Thank you Dr. Asif for your presence, we learned a great deal from your work and your remarks on the different questions that we had. Thank you so much. Rachana can you please talk about the policies of the state of Nepal towards caste discrimination and what steps it has taken to address that? Then we'll go ahead and talk about affirmative action policy with other participants. Thank you.

**Rachana Sunar:** Thank you Anubhav for letting me share the mechanism of casteism in Nepal. The fact is that Nepal has never been colonized, but we still had very cruel regimes, like the Rana regime, where Dalit people were meant as a third citizen of the country. They were not given access to their rights and later on after the start of the democracy in 1992, which was a great move of the country, when constitutional rights of the Dalits were given. From 1962 in Nepal the constitutional rights were restored, and it says the caste based discriminations are punishable and illegal in Nepal. Later, the constitution of Nepal in 2015 endorsed the rights and opportunities for Dalit people for uplifting their rights, to provide them opportunities and it also

provided them reservations, quota system, for upliftment of their social well-being. In 2017 National Dalit Commission Act was formed which enacted to ensure the rights of Dalit people in Nepal.

If I would say post the first public movement which established the democratic system in Nepal, it has played a great role. Dalit people have played a very important role in the Maoist armed conflict in Nepal for ten years and they have given their important contribution for fighting this social injustice and caste discriminations. The period of ten years, we could see the changes which could be vividly seen and measured, that many Maoists armed force together with those Dalit people's involvement, they were destroying the temples and even giving some consequences to the priests, to religious leaders who were misleading the society and who were discriminating the Dalit community with the power of their god's words. After the civil war in Nepal, the Dalit people have started raising their voices and organizations like private partnership like NGOs, INGOs have started working together with government. They started providing scholarships and quota systems and that's how the late movements arose, and the Dalit commission act was established.

These days we can see freedom of speech and the Dalit people ask for their rights if they feel being dominated or discriminated in the public area or even in their private properties, if somebody says that you were not allowed to touch and you were an untouchable or impure, they will actually get access to the police for filing their cases and also get the rights. But still we do have best constitutional rights and all the laws and provisions, but I would say that there hasn't been enough or sufficient implementation of those laws. They exist in statement in our constitutions but in real life, in real society it exists. Later, in 2011 the crime elimination and punishment Act was launched, if somebody discriminates based on the cast color or religion, it would be illegal and it is punishable. The second public movement in Nepal has restored the structure and framework and provided 30 percent reservation in the representative assembly. So, it is actually providing few rights to the Dalits, and this is a positive change and I really believe that things are changing and the situation of caste discrimination is not similar as in 19th century. I'm very optimistic and I'm hopeful, while I speak, that there would be positive changes, over the time. When people like us talk, we educate people and then we reform our policies, because policies are meant to provide the rights of people and things are changeable. All the social rituals, norms or practices are changeable. Because if we look back in the time, there was *sati partha* system in Nepal which means if the husband dies, the wife has to go and kill herself immediately. So, the *sati partha* was taking the rights of women, because their life span was in the hand of the husband, if husband dies at a young age, then wife was meant to die on the same day in the funeral. But this practice no longer exists. It was also a social practice which was harmful, which is against human rights and even their lives were in men's hand. But now no more *sati parthas*, that has been completely changed. So, I truly believe that casteism is also changeable. And without economic justice, social justice is not possible. Because in this federal government system, in the past years Dalit people are being elected and are getting involved in the politics. But I would say if they're economically empowered then they are confident about being elected and even in last five years when Dalits won the election, and he was the local

president of the ward. I see the strength in him because he was economically empowered. Economic development is the most important to let them get their social justice, we have to provide economic opportunities for those people giving them income opportunities and this is how we are going on manage or balance the social life and well-being of people, thank you.

**Anubhav Singh:** Dr. Paramsothy can you please come in so we can we take your concluding remarks and then we will open this discussion for questions.

**Dr. Thanges Paramsothy:** Thank you, all the panelists, Ajantha, Satish, Arif, Rachana and Asif it was all great to listening to you all and the panelists who managed to organize this event. I just want to finally say a few words based on the last question you formed about how the academia are successful in capturing essence of caste as a lived reality of millions of people in South Asia. What I see, when I did my field work in Sri Lanka, what we call and do as a field work and collect the data from people, by living with them, as soon as we leave the field, then we have that kind of discontinuity or disconnection. They don't know what is going to happen to the data, the information, or the story they shared with us. You know so that's a very big gap between the researcher and the participants. Based on this reality, I feel that it's very important to bring our understanding of reality into a normal world, so bringing that understanding to the people as well. So, based on this understanding it's always better to produce some visual project like documentary film, taking the interviews from people and digitalizing them and bringing that to a discussion within the community. That was very useful as I managed to produce a documentary film based on my field work. So that will help in having the continuous interaction between the researcher and the participants. When it comes to capturing the essence of caste as a lived reality for the millions of people of course, it's a very vast question and we can say how we can judge you, how that will be helpful, what can we give back. So, we can't say no we can say yes. With that note, thanks for everything, and thanks for all the panelists, and the participants, and the organizers, and thanks for inviting me as well. Take care, thank you.

**Anubhav Singh:** Thank you so much. Let's move to our question about the affirmative action policy in India, how useful has this affirmative action policy been as far as its end goal of ending or limiting caste discrimination through representation, is concerned? Has taken away the focus from the critical examination of the privilege that it accords to castes. In that sense what has been its impact on the politics of caste? Has it limited its scope, as far as social justice is concerned, to only safeguarding reservations rather than focusing on the annihilation of caste or for asking like say reparations to hold upper-caste accountable and is this a model that can actually be replicated across the subcontinent to achieve equity and Professor Subramanian I would like to start with you given your recent work about caste and merit? Please go ahead.

**Ajantha Subramanian:** Thanks Anubhav. It's quite clear that affirmative action has been hugely consequential for changing the social composition of higher educational institutions and of the white-collar professions. Tamil Nadu is a really good instance of this. As Satish pointed out caste is not reducible to class as such, it has to be an independent basis for legislating rights and affirmative action is one example of how this has happened. But you know it's not sufficient, it's both necessary and not sufficient for addressing enduring forms of inequality, both economic and social. In part this is because it's not really as far reaching the policy of economic redistribution, because of how delimited it is by its spheres of application. And this is more so when you consider that the private sector is the most rapidly expanding sector of the Indian

economy and affirmative action does not apply to the private sector. Even if it had a more far-reaching impact, at an earlier moment its impact is being reduced systematically. So, I don't think it's sufficient. The other thing I'll say is that in some ways, and again Tamil Nadu is a really important case of this, in some ways it has redirected the focus of caste rights politics. Two arenas that have been traditionally monopolized by the upper castes and it has largely left in place, a kind of a larger structure of a larger kind of hierarchy of value, where you know certain occupations are still seen as low status, as undesirable, so there's a mad rush to gain access to only those professions that are seen as high status. So, it hasn't helped to address that more fundamental question of the hierarchies of labor and value. Those are still in place; those still have to be addressed. The other thing, I think like electoral politics, affirmative action has been really consequential for just a kind of common-sense perception of caste. So, these categories of the general and the reserved, have become consolidated caste categories. People have started to identify on these grounds and the reserved, as a category, has become a new basis for stigmatization and we see this in the experiences of students who come in through reservations. This is more so in institutions of elite strata, where they experience stigmatization as reserve category students. So, this is a problem and I think this is a problem that that Satish has written about really powerfully, which is the invisibilization of caste when it comes to the makeup of the general category, that the caste is only visible on one side of the boundary and not the other. So, it seems to be a sort of illegitimate basis for access and opportunity. I think the only way to correct for that is to make it much more visible on the other side of the equation. To force people to recognize that the general category is itself rooted in forms of caste privilege. So, in all of these ways affirmative action is both necessary and inadequate as a kind of basis for a more wholesale transformation of social and economic hierarchies. There also needs to be a lot more political work done to illuminate the caste basis of social privilege, there needs to be much more work done. The scholarship is definitely tending in that direction. Scholarship on caste is no longer just scholarship on lower castes, which was the case for a very long time, but I think there needs to be a lot more work done on this.

**Anubhav Singh:** Dr. Deshpande you'd like to come in please?

**Satish Deshpande:** I've been talking on this topic for nearly thirty years now. Let me put it down in point form. There are a lot of problems with the way that reservation as a word, as an idea and as a policy is received in the popular imagination. To start with, we have failed – we meaning intellectuals, activists, all those concerned with such questions – we have failed spectacularly to establish the primary meaning of the original reservation as a political reservation that was one of the foundation stones of the nation itself. If we had not had the original reservation policy which flowed out of the Poona Pact of 1932 as legalized by the 1935 Government of India Act, we would not have had India as the nation we recognize today. Our biggest problem with reservation is that, that word has in a sense been hijacked – it has been occupied by other meanings, but the outer word has remained the same. Later conceptions of reservation have been based on completely different ideas of backwardness or deprivation of some kind, ideas about welfare programs and so on, and the same word and the same policy framework has been used for such programs as well. This has made us lose sight of the original program which had nothing to do with backwardness, which had nothing to do with deprivation or nothing to do with welfare. It was about the legally forced inclusion of those who were forcibly excluded from our society. Because we forget this, reservation becomes almost a



millstone, it becomes a liability, because it sucks up so much of the attention and so much of the discursive space on questions of caste inequality.

Narrowly conceived, reservation today is popularly understood as a kind of welfare program or as a kind of handout. But this conception is completely unable to address the huge problem of caste inequality and caste oppression. Whereas it is seen in the mainstream upper caste imagination, since Nehruvian time, it is seen as the answer to caste inequality. It is seen as having settled the caste question, whereas it has done nothing of the sort. Another major disservice it does to the discourse on caste is that it encourages the dominant common sense understanding of reservation as an exception to the rule of meritocracy. As though, outside of the space of quotas and reservation, there is no caste inequality, and all competition is fair and equitable. Of course, this is never the case. Nevertheless, there's no doubt that as a policy it has had an enormous impact and our country would have looked very different if we had not had a reservation policy. But, having said that, at the ideological level especially, in the post-90s discourse, it has also had these major drawbacks.

The final nail in the coffin is the EWS reservation which makes mockery of the original *political* idea of reservation-as-cure-for-exclusion, by turning it into a sort of handout that anybody who can twist the arm of the state can get. That is why various dominant castes have been demanding reservation in different states – Jats, Patidars, Kapus, Marathas and so on. Because of this the word “reservation” often sucks up all the space for discussion. Whenever there is a seminar or public meeting organized on caste inequality, the first or the second question from the audience is about reservation, and then we argue endlessly after that on reservations and the larger issue of caste inequality gets forgotten. Including, of course, the important points that Ajantha was mentioning – caste privilege never figures in these discussions, because it is assumed that it is only within reservation that caste is relevant – the rest of the world is caste neutral! Whereas caste is even more important outside the world of reservation and the lower castes – it is the source of upper caste privilege. But we could not have done without the policy of reservation.

**Anubhav Singh:** Thank you so much Professor Deshpande. I think Arif has something to say and then we'll have this question.

**Arif Hussain:** I totally agree with what Dr Subramanian and Dr Deshpande said about this. We also need to look at kind of bringing it a little bit narrower of what Ajantha and Satish were saying that what has happened to this affirmative action, this affirmative action was funded totally by the state in the state institutions, we have the political representation and in jobs and in education, so one thing which they don't talk so much about are and there are no objections about is political representation. Because that is of course only for Dalits and they have kind of teamed it the team the system because of the first past the post electoral system we have and Kanshi Ram actually wrote a book about it you know back in 82, *The Chamcha Age: An Era of the Stoooge* that how these people who get elected on Dalit quota, are not able to do anything against caste, because they are actually at the mercy of the dominant caste, because of the way the electoral system is set up. Coming to the education and jobs, there were obvious obstructions and obstacles before, but since liberalization we have seen the withdrawal of the state from these sectors and of course in private sector, there is no affirmative action. At least I'm not aware of and so the pie is shrinking anyways. There is a big drawback or weakness of the groups who proclaim that they're there for social justice, that they never put up, beyond the 60s and 70s in a

very Indian socialist way, they could not never develop a proper economic vision. For example, we talk about groups like RJT, Rastriya Janta Dalit Bihar, in Bihar or Samaj Wadi party in UP or even DMK in Tamil Nad, the alternative economic vision is totally missing. Ultimately, they all fall into the basket of neoliberalism. They could be all progressive in terms of social issues and 70 percent affirmative action, quota but where is your alternative economic vision? Without that alternative economic vision, how you think that you will address this very pernicious, entrenched social issue, which again you need also a social vision to do that. And lack of economic vision, lack of social vision and we saw that what lack of social vision did to the movements of social justice, at least in North India, because these parties and groupings which came in the name of social justice, they did not have an alternative social vision and they did not have an egalitarian worldview. That's why, in Bihar the Brahminical forces cut out the extremely backward caste or *Mahadalit* out of that formation, and that's how they trip the whole movement or the parties who claim to act on social justice. We saw in UP how they carved out the non-*Yadavs* out of that formation, because actually there was that kind of domination by these particular groups, in administration, in governance once they took over. Because there was a lack of a social vision that we need to reach the last person in the hierarchy, the middle and upper OBCs, they managed to get power. So, I think affirmative action as Dr. Subramanian was also saying that it's necessary but of course not sufficient. But going beyond that, the people, the groups they claim to represent these interests and work towards annihilation of caste and works towards a more equitable society, they have totally failed in formation and development of an alternative vision, an alternative economic vision, an alternative social vision, and an alternative a political vision as well. Thank you very much. Thank you to organization. for this very interesting discussion.

**Anubhav Singh:** Thank you. I think Dr. Subramanian also to also leave. Please come in for your concluding remarks. Please go ahead

**Ajantha Subramanian:** I don't know if I have any concluding remarks. I think this was a really productive conversation, and I think we really need to have more of these conversations, that are not dominated by discussions on caste in India. I'm really grateful to have heard from Rachna, Ghazal, Thanges. Thank you so much for organizing this, Anubhav. It was great conversation and I'd love to continue it in some in some capacity, if we can have a part two you can count me in.

**Anubhav Singh:** Sure! Thank you so much Dr Subramanian for your comments, your presence and for doing this for us. Thank you very much.

I think there is one question for Rachna I believe, that is Rachna you talked about a Dalit being elected as a ward share in Nepal, and the point is that it was based on funds from local workers in the gulf. So, do you see this as an anomaly, or do you think see this as a positive development that is likely to continue?

**Rachna Sunar:** I take this example as a positive aspect of when Dalit people have economical standard, as they can get votes and they can go in the decision-making positions. So, I wonder if he wouldn't have that much of funds and economical power, then maybe he could possibly not get the tickets or not be elected and not get his rights in politics. I take it as a positive change that we have to uplift as a whole Dalit community and they should have access to their rights and if

they are economically secured and if they have power, they can go to the positions in decision making. so yeah.

On the quota system in Nepal, I would say that from the government side, providing quota system and reservation systems is positive and it also gives the affirmations to the people to utilize their quota system. But as you go in the public and as you see the view of the youngsters these days, they don't see it as positive because they are against the quota system, and they take quota system as making Dalit people more vulnerable and they feel like it's never going to be the same and they will never get equal rights. So, they take it as a battle and if the Dalit people ask for quota system and it simply is like holding the license to be dominated and discriminated by the society. People say so many bad comments in social media, like how do you ask quotas and how do you fight for reservation if you feel like you are equally capable, why don't you go and fight independently, because you were not able so you were still the lowest, you are still not fit or disqualified and how come you dream to come to the position or get all the reservation. If I see from the point of youth these days, the quota system is really making the hot debate in Nepal. Many of the people from so called upper caste, would go completely against this quota system and they say that it should be finished. But if we see some Dalit rights activists, they will still protest about it that it should be continued and the government should provide equal reservation and quota to Dalit students, by providing scholarship or building Dalit hostel. Imagine if there is a hostel built for only Dalit girls and boys, so they are started to be looked at as Dalits and started being discriminated, because they were in the Dalit hostel. Even before asking your name and surname they would understand that you belong to the Dalit as you were staying in the Dalit hostel, and they will start dominating.

**Anubhav Singh:** Thank you everyone who came here today and participated in this discussion particularly our panelists Satish was staying with us throughout, Dr Subramanian also for staying with us to the very end and all you know everyone in the audience. Thank you for all your patience.

I think this conversation has been particularly helpful as far as capturing the diversity of the concept of caste is concerned and how some of the questions that caste poses. If they can be answered, in what way they can be answered. We may at present may not have any sure answers, but I think what we've really been able to capture through Rachana is the lived reality of caste, particularly in Nepal which often gets sideline when one starts to talk of caste and caste-based discrimination. Because considering the size of India and the course that that politics has taken, we also often tend to lose track of how the institution of caste tends to work across regions, other than in India and for that I am very grateful for Rachana's comments and everyone else for inviting her.

I'm also very grateful to Sumbul for organizing this, for all the hard work that she put in, contacting panelists, and keeping in touch with me about anything and everything that I needed. Thank you so much Sumbul. I'm really grateful for all the hard work that you've put in thank you very much and I also thank SARIM for constantly taking an initiative to talk about caste-based discrimination in South Asia. I think it's one of the very few platforms that I've come across, which has taken such a keen interest and has constantly upheld this interest, as far as both the viewers the audience and as far as also the intellectuals and activists are concerned. So, thank you SARIM for giving us this opportunity.

**Sumbul Yousuf:** Thank you so much for such an invigorating discussion. It was very insightful, and I hope everyone learned as much as I did, it was really interesting. Also, the discussion opened new avenues for more discussions as Dr. Ajantha suggested.

I hope today's discussion would contribute in a constructive manner towards anti-cast struggle. Thank you, Anubhav, for moderating in such a well manner, you have really put in great effort for this which I'm in debt of you.

Finally, I would like to thank my team at SARIM here who have done all the 'behind the curtains' efforts, namely our IT in-charge Najib Uddin, our researchers Faiqa lakho, Heman Das, Rimsha Shahid and Purkho Esar Bheel and again thank you to all the panelists for their contribution with their insightful discussion and their research or from their experiences. We are very thankful and to the audience who have joined in. This is it from our side and we'll come with more such discussions in the future.





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