



Anti-Caste Lessons for Computing: Educate, agitate, organize

South Asian caste systems are one of the many forms of historical, social hierarchies like race, gender, sexuality, and disability that shape the worlds of technology and media. The experiences of Dalits in hyper-Brahmanical spaces show how caste needs to be navigated in worlds of technology.

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“Technology is our hope; it is a brilliant tool—but we also don’t trust the makers of it to do justice towards us because they are upper-caste.” This quote is from Sourav (pseudonym), a Dalit journalist from Uttar Pradesh, India who established his own YouTube channel after quitting a mainstream news channel. Sourav’s statement straddles the tensions of a prolonged and systematic neglect toward addressing caste in worlds of technology. Caste is often shrugged off as a thing of the past, especially by dominant castes in seemingly secular spaces of science and technology.

In the context of South Asia, and specifically India, historians have observed the emergence of a class system: Brahmins (priestly class), the Kshatriya (military class), the Vaishya (merchant class), and the Shudra (artisan class). This class system converted to ritual caste hierarchy, as the priestly class “socially detached itself from the rest of the body of people and through a closed-door policy became a caste by itself” [1]. This closed-door practice was “imitated” by other

classes, which further subjected them to differentiation of law and social division of labor, forming different castes. Thus, caste emerged as a system of graded hierarchy that has roots both in ritualistic Hindu scriptures as well as divisions of labor. Figure 1 shows one version of this caste system, specifically a “Brahmanical” version, where, following from the scriptural definitions, different castes emerge from different parts of the body of the Hindu god Brahma. Those higher

in this ritual hierarchy have more access and control over resources as well as power in society. People kept out of the ritualized hierarchy of the caste system, referred to as “out-castes,” are the Dalits (Scheduled Castes) and Adivasis (Scheduled Tribes). The local and historical nuances of the caste system may not follow this pyramid across different geographies of South Asia. Yet, the division of labor, as well as laborers, underwrite differential power in different caste-based communities

across religion, as does untouchability. Caste as a social order continues to organize South Asian societies both implicitly and explicitly while also being the source of violence in these communities.¹

The different waves of human-computer interaction (HCI) have slowly but steadily oriented the world of computing to different understandings of the “human” in HCI [2]. Beginning with human factors and cognitive psychology, then human actors and information processing, to ubiquity and culture, these waves have drawn from a wide range of artistic, humanistic, and socio-scientific disciplines to build a multifaceted understanding of humanity and its relationship with technology. Recent HCI literature has brought forth an analysis of social hierarchies, ethics, worker rights, sustainability, sexu-

ality, disability, and more. Intersectional and justice-oriented work on broadening participation, e.g. critical race theory for HCI [3] and decolonial computing [4], are vital turns that question normative racial or geopolitical sensibilities and practices in computing. In the context of anti-racist computing, Ogbonnaya-Ogburu and colleagues argued, “It is not that racism has reappeared, as much as that ongoing racism—that never went away” [3]. In a similar yet slightly different vein, this article points to the persistence of casteism within worlds of technology by centering anti-caste narratives of Dalits within worlds of technologies.

Therefore, this article situates itself in relation to and builds upon other critical computing work that asks *cui bono*, who benefits? [5] In particular, thinking about recent themes of diversity, equity, and inclusion in computing, a missing piece in this puzzle is the question of caste. Specifically, even though South Asians are broadly well-represented in the fields of technology, the absence of discussion of caste in worlds of technology has fueled the myth that the “human” in South Asian worlds of technology is “casteless.”

1 The authors have chosen not to explain the multifaceted, complex historical and present-day context of caste oppression. We invite readers to engage in critical caste scholarship and urge them to spend time educating themselves on the subject. Here are some reading lists to get you started: <https://www.equalitylabs.org/research/reading-list/>, and <https://www.criticalcastetechstudies.net/syllabus>.



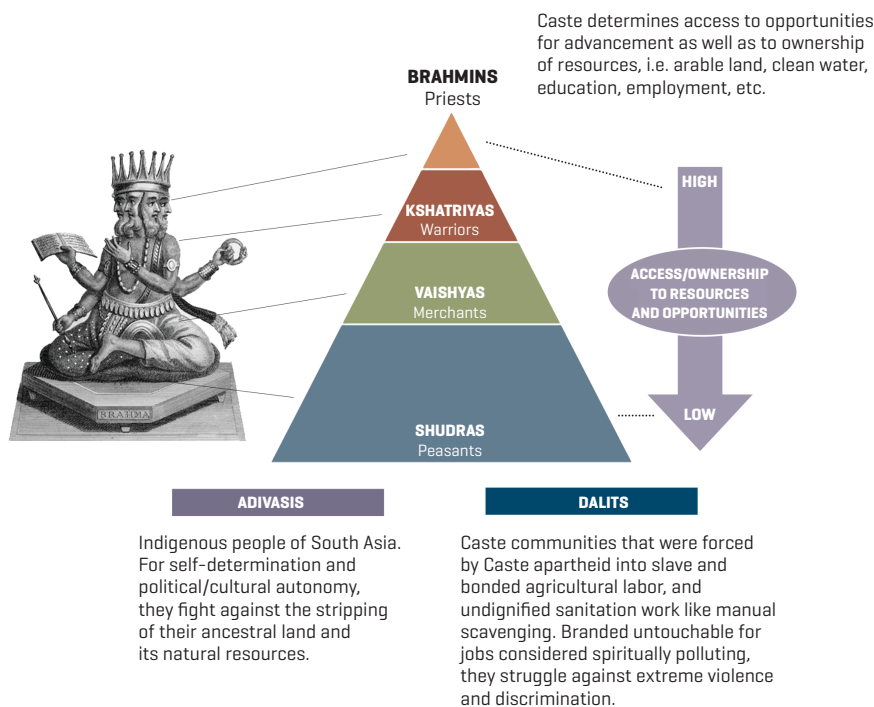
Recent work in HCI has dispelled the myth of castelessness in computing by showing how caste continues to persist and how Dalits need to be artful in navigating these spaces [6]. But how do Dalits build power and resistance in casteist landscapes like media and technology? We offer two different but interrelated stories from community-focused anti-caste research to draw lessons for building solidarity and resistance against historical oppression in worlds of technology.

TECH DESIGN AND RESISTANCE: “ALTERNATIVE” NEWS INFRASTRUCTURE

Sourav, who is in his mid-30s, grew up in a Dalit family in a small village and aspired to be a journalist. The road to journalism school was not easy, from working part-time in the fields to arranging fees and not being able to find accommodation near college—every step was hindered by his caste. Field owners beat him up, his mother was the sole earner in the family, tenants and roommates were not willing to share a home with a Dalit, and the list goes on. Despite this, he managed to complete school and get a job in a corporate news organization.

India’s news production network is one of the largest in the world with more than 100 satellite news channels and 70,000 newspapers, comprising national, regional, and local publications selling more than 100 million copies every day. With the rise of internet technologies, Indian news media consumption also witnessed

Figure 1. Brahmanical view of caste hierarchy. [Image Source: www.equalitylabs.org]





a shift toward digital news media. Bigger corporate news networks created YouTube channels, social media handles, personalized mobile apps, and more, which garnered millions of followers and viewership every day. Yet some journalists like Sourav could not find his own community's voices on news networks—the voice of Dalits. The Indian media industry is dominated by the privileged castes; a recent report from Oxfam India revealed there were no individuals belonging to the Dalit or Adivasi community in leadership positions at mainstream media houses [7]. The estimated population of Dalits in India alone is more than 200 million, with a significant number of them still living in rural India [8]. Sourav recalls multiple incidents of overt casteism while working for one of India's biggest news networks.

Casteist incidents, discriminatory actions of his colleagues, and growing frustration with the caste-blind news coverage eventually got to Sourav. He decided to put his voice out on the internet with a YouTube channel. To protect himself, he posted videos with no name and face, just his voice. He started sharing stories of anti-caste activists and covering educational topics on caste, including incidents of caste violence. He did all of this while working his full-time job. Slowly, his videos gained traction, and after a couple of years, he decided to quit and focus solely on the YouTube channel. He decided to reveal his identity online and asked his viewers for donations to sup-

port his channel. The goal was to create high-quality videos with technical equipment like editing software, computer, camera and gears, audio tools, green screen, etc. After releasing the video revealing his identity and asking for support, he woke up the next morning in shock. In his own words: “I could not believe it; I felt so inspired and loved that people from the community gave me so many donations. It changed everything...”

Sourav's story of finding and raising his voice in a Brahmanical media landscape shows how he relates to “technology is our hope.” He not only used internet technologies to educate others about caste, but by organizing support for his channel he also enrolled others from his community to build resistance against the supposedly “casteless” infrastructure of media and technology (see Figure 2).

ANTI-CASTE SUBVERSION OF “MERITORIOUS” COMPUTING SPACES

Prakash (name changed) is a Dalit, cis-male and a senior technology leader at a multinational company in the U.S. He is in his early 40s and has been working in the industry for more than 15 years. Prakash's own journey into the world of computing was mired in navigating casteism and hyper-Brahmanical spaces dominated by the language of “merit” [6]. In his undergraduate institution, the infrastructure itself was caste-coded, to the extent that students from different caste categories were assigned different hostels and mess (food halls.) Merit in cultures of science and technology in India is seen as antithetical to the reservation system that exists in India, which could be described as similar to affirmative action in

Figure 2. Office space being set up by Sourav and his team.





the U.S or positive action in Europe. Studies have shown how Dalits and other caste-oppressed students tend to drop out of STEM institutions in India while others don't even pursue or get to pursue this degree [9, 10]. The landscape in these institutions, as well as in computing overall, tends to attribute this to reservations; reinforcing the idea that students who are "not good enough" make it into these meritocratic spaces because of reservations but tend to drop out because they cannot sustain the competition. There is an atmosphere of shame created in computing spaces for most of the caste-oppressed members who tend to shy away from disclosing their caste location to avoid being seen as incompetent or having made it into the world of computing only because of reservations.

Prakash dealt with this atmosphere in his undergraduate study, but when he was pursuing a master's degree the discourse and rhetoric of

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merit was all the more intense at a prestigious institution like the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Bombay. This is ironic because close to 50 percent of the population in IITs are from oppressed castes, but the casteism in the institution tends to leave them isolated. While discussing his experience, Prakash told us the following story of resisting the normative "castelessness" of the institution: "In the mess [hall], [a] lot of the mess workers who...cook food or, you know, serve food, are all from Dalit community. So they used to say 'we-here'² to each other every now and then. And we saw that.... So we also joined [in] saying 'we-here,' right? And so, every time we [would] go to the mess, the first salutation is 'we-here' right? and [it was] very loud ... because we know that ... all workers are 'we-here' ... that's how some of us knew that ... we were all 'we-here.'"

Prakash's voice was ringing with excitement as he shared this unexpected moment of finding other Dalits and this act of solidarity that completely transformed how he navigated the institution. The mess workers also told him that this was the first time they were

² We are using "we-here" as a code for the actual term and word that Prakash used to protect the tactics and signifiers used by the community in hyper-Brahmanical spaces like computing. The term used by Prakash is a slogan used by many Dalits, particularly from Maharashtra, to denote that we are here, we are the children of our Dalit ancestors. Thus, we use the code "we-here" to denote this slogan without sharing the real version.

seeing other Dalit students openly saying "we-here," which really made them happy. In a nominally "casteless" space like the IIT, which was in reality hyper-Brahmanical, it was incredibly powerful for Prakash and others to have this space of assertion and organizing.

ANTI-CASTE LESSONS FOR COMPUTING

What do these stories teach us about power and resistance? Sourav, as well as some other Dalits we spoke with, continue to practice a healthy amount of skepticism for the technology industry. Since Sourav started his YouTube channel, he has received moral and emotional support from his community, but he is also very skeptical about social and technical support from the technology companies themselves. People like Sourav archive caste-based atrocities on a daily basis on YouTube, and the cost of that is online harassment and death threats. The basic technological infrastructure, like content moderation, also fails when it comes to casteist slurs. Sourav attributes this to a larger problem within computing spaces, and he focuses on who gets to make technology: "The reason why I have no hopes from the engineers and tech industry is because everyone working there is upper-caste... they do not understand our struggle or our life."

At the same time, Sourav also says, "technology is our hope," because it provides him a space to resist and document stories of his community with a hope for justice. Sourav defined tech-



nology as the only tool left for Dalits to fight for their rights and, hence, he also hopes that each Dalit child gets to learn technology. He underscored the importance of the internet as an archiving tool. His media archive serves as a collective memory inspiring hope. This reclamation of hope is integral to Sourav's and Prakash's assertion of their belonging on their own terms in the technology and media landscape. It is a reclamation of space and language. Sourav's story shows us what anti-caste reclamation of "news" looks like by centering Dalit perspectives and stories, and Prakash's story shows us how the power of organizing can subvert Brahmanical spaces that disavow casteism.

To distill these lessons into pragmatic engagement with caste, we offer Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's famous call to action to discuss what it could mean for computing and technology spaces. Ambedkar is a Dalit political icon, a visionary and a scholar whose work in the anti-caste struggle continues to be an inspiration for the movement. In 1942, the reception committee of untouchables (the former term used for Dalits) offered a speech exalting the dedication of Ambedkar's commitment for the emancipation of the oppressed classes (referred to as the "depressed classes" in the speech.) In Ambedkar's response to this laudatory address at the All India Depressed Classes Conference held in Nagpur, he asked his community for an assurance of strength and determination to stand for the rights of the oppressed

and not to give up until their rights have been secured.

"For ours is a battle, not for wealth or for power. It is a battle for freedom. It is a battle for the reclamation of human personality.... My final words of advice to you is educate, agitate, and organize, have faith in yourselves, and never lose hope" [11].

Sourav and Prakash's stories are glimpses into building hope through the Dalit reclamation of humanity in the technology and media landscape. For many people, a discussion on caste oppression is uncomfortable as it challenges the embedded Brahmanical normativity of "casteless" spaces. The first step then is to educate ourselves and each other via curriculum, dialogue, and research on caste in worlds of technology. We need to re-examine our pedagogy, language, and readings to support young students like Prakash within computing. Secondly, we need to agitate to resist the disavowal of caste by leaning on anti-caste education, by supporting and building solidarity spaces in the stead of Dalit and other oppressed caste members of the community. And lastly, we need to collectively organize against forces of oppression that are imposed on historically disadvantaged communities. Organizing across social differences forces us to think expansively about justice in the worlds of technology. Social and political struggles of marginalized people offer unique ways to understand how power operates and how it is resisted. These struggles are interconnected, like a necklace thread together. Each bead in this necklace is bound to cause discomfort to all of us, especially since we likely benefit from one or more of these systems. Caste is another bead in this necklace of discomfort. If we don't sit with this discomfort,³ we cannot empathize with each other's struggles and show up for each other. To wear this necklace is not an act of mere resistance, it is a necessary step to social transformation.

3 We are borrowing the analogy of "bead in the necklace" from Prof. Ather Zia (University of Northern Colorado.) It signifies the importance of forming a necklace by combining each bead of critical perspective to move us toward justice.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Sourav's story is part of ongoing research being done by Divyanshu Kumar Singh and Prof. Bryan Semaan investigating casteism in media spaces. Prakash's story is part of ongoing research being done by Dr. Palashi Vaghela on how caste operates in the global computing industry.

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