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Svensson, Ted

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00



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Humanising the subaltern: unbounded caste and the limits of a rights regime

Ted Svensson*

Department of Political Science, Lund University, Sweden

This article critically explores the implications of the recent turn to transnational efforts in activism that seeks to counter caste-based discrimination. In particular, it analyses the consequences of mobilising a concept of caste that is sufficiently expansive to accommodate occupation- and descent-based discrimination globally, and which primarily frames caste in terms of human rights. To what extent is it possible to maintain a nuanced conceptualising of caste and of what it means to occupy the margins of the caste system, if efforts to influence the workings of global governance institutions divest caste of its regional and local distinctiveness? The article demonstrates how, even though Dalit (‘untouchable’) activists have been successful in bringing attention to caste as a global concern, present endeavours, on the one hand, reinforce the marginalised identity that they seek to overcome and, on the other, fail to recognise the diversity and situatedness of the Dalit experience.

Keywords: global governance; transnational activism; caste; human rights; Dalits

Introduction

The soul is polluted; the oversoul is polluted; the body is full of pollution.¹

Something has happened to caste. That which was contained in the concretely local, perhaps regional or national in its extension, is now conceived of as global. That which has been depicted as a ‘hidden apartheid’,² a highly ritualised yet subtle practice, and as a modality of stratification and discrimination particular to India, is now portrayed as perceptible in settings that disregard the national as its exclusive container. Caste has, in other words, acquired a new ‘situated-ness’ and is increasingly grasped in terms of international rather than national ‘practices’.³ It is diasporic, international, global. Caste is said to be

*Email: ted.svensson@svet.lu.se

‘universal’, not ‘subcontinental’,⁴ and caste-based discrimination and human rights as a corrective measure are its distinct containers.

The past decade has borne witness to a significant rise in activities aiming to add considerations of caste to global governance agendas. Activists made serious attempts to include it in the ‘Declaration and Programme of Action’ that was adopted at the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR) in Durban in 2001,⁵ Universal Periodic Reviews have since 2008 made extensive references to caste and, in October 2013, the European Parliament agreed on a resolution that caste should be acknowledged as ‘a distinct form of discrimination’ and that the European Union should ‘include, where relevant, a “caste-based discrimination clause” in all trade and association agreements’.⁶ A new historical chapter has seemingly been opened, one that projects caste-based discrimination as global in scope and, hence, in need of global commitment. Political mobilisation that seeks to engage global governance institutions and to adopt transnational relations as the point of departure is deemed to be a viable strategy and undertaking.

The above international or transnational efforts to counter caste-based discrimination are above all framed in terms of human rights advocacy, thus mirroring broader trends towards a convergence between the ‘discursive commitment to human rights’ of civil society organisations and global governance institutions.⁷ Although Dalit (‘untouchable’) activism is now transnational and concerns for caste-based discrimination have expanded into contexts other than the Indian and South Asian, the concrete results of incorporating awareness of caste into state relations at the international level are elusive and, at best, meagre. The pressure exercised by international organisations on states has been ineffectual and caste has remained near-to imperceptible in international politics. Considering that caste-based discrimination is pervading the lives of hundreds of millions of people around the world, this is a puzzling indifference and omission – one that has not been fully addressed within the extant literature on caste. It is particularly surprising in light of the capacious concept of caste that is being employed by transnational Dalit activists. The present article, thus, explores the constraints of caste as a global concern by situating the analysis at the juncture between domestic and transnational expressions of Dalit activism.

Dalit sense-making

It is now commonplace to think of the Dalit movement and of Dalit activism as having a presence outside India, as well as in terms of an established visibility and participation in global governance arrangements. It is, moreover, widely recognised that caste is a common practice throughout South Asia and in South Asian diaspora communities around the world, and it is generally acknowledged that caste is not only a facet of the lives of Hindus, as it is operative also among South Asia’s other religious communities. As such, Dalit sense-making might be viewed as a viable political imaginary in global politics and as a possible interruption of entrenched social relations. If we return to the literature on caste and the formation of the Indian Dalit movement, we might, however, ask how possible it is – within this transference of national, regional and local issues onto the stage of the global – to retain a composite notion of caste. Can we speak of

legitimate representation and of acts of discrimination in a unified sense? After all, who are the Dalits? Most concretely the Dalits are ‘those who have been broken, ground down by those above them in a deliberate and active way’, and yet the Dalit stands for ‘an inherent denial of pollution, *karma*, and justified caste hierarchy’.⁸ Dalits are those who are made to inhabit the deviant or irregular, ie that ‘which most threaten[s] our social “purity”...[t]hat which [...] most clearly identifies us with nature’ and which, hence, is ‘inherently dangerous’ to ‘systems of classification’.⁹

While exploring the move from the concrete to representations of a world of commonalities, we therefore need to ask: what is the history of Dalits and how has it been written? It is the history, so it is narrated, of the properly subaltern. Dalits are its archetype and embodiment.¹⁰ It is the history of South Asia’s most marginal communities, of the journeying of caste-induced discrimination through migration, and of the identification of caste-like identities and hierarchies in other parts of the world. A scrutiny of Dalit activism and its consequences is, consequently, both a study of the limits of what global governance can include and recognise, and an exposition that deals with the significance of subalternity, if transposed into and onto the international. It is the ‘sense-making’ and ‘situated-ness’ of transnational activism more broadly and of Dalit activism specifically that is interrogated here: the position from and the manner in which these are ‘enacted in and on the world’ matters.¹¹

The sense-making at work in this article is one that goes against the acceptance of an impression that what solely remains in the case of inhibiting and rectifying caste-based discrimination is a work of uplifting and improvement, of making those presently deaf to the needs of others listen. It opposes the claim that a solution lies in ‘making human’, in expanding the limits of our rights regime, in turning rhetoric into reformation and belief. As the excerpt from the Cokhamela poem that comprises the epigraph indicates, a forceful and entrenched conception of pollution that runs deeper than the mere erasure of ‘differences in degree’ is at work.¹²

There is a three-tier arrangement of this article. First, the intention is to explore what a close and careful reading of caste, the particularities of the caste system and the history of the Dalit movement might tell us. Tell us, that is, in distinction from those studies that end up emphasising the transnational expanse of Dalit claims to recognition of marginalisation and discrimination.¹³ What, in other words, occurs or transpires if we do not assume the mobilisation of ‘Dalit-ness’ to be already (or to be enacted as or contained in the) transnational or global? Second, if we assume that the Dalit represents the epitome of the subaltern, as has been theorised and investigated by so-called subaltern studies,¹⁴ what does it mean to speak of attempts to make visible, to acquire recognition and presence in settings beyond the nation-state? Especially if such efforts are comprehended on the basis of how Dalits as such stand for that which is rendered less visible, less cognisable. What does it mean to deliberately fight caste *with* caste, if this very ground for categorisation is what reproduces inequalities and hinders social mobility? Or, phrased differently, if caste itself is sought to be overcome? The Dalit movement, by navigating this indecisive terrain, might be seen as a real test of what might be achieved through the activation of the transnational and global for the purpose of gaining visibility.

The third key aspect of the article is the entanglement of these (the nuances of caste and the postulated subalternity of Dalits), ie the reasoning about what the translation into and onto the transnational implies for the possibility of retaining a nuanced view of caste, a view that is firmly embedded in and draws upon research on caste and the caste system. The expansion of caste beyond the context of South Asia and its consequences are, accordingly, traced beyond its traditional linkage to 'casteism' and the caste system, and beyond its concrete expressions.

Encoding human rights

In assessments of the aforementioned shift, the Dalit movement has been depicted as having experienced both a 'breakthrough' and 'consolidation'.¹⁵ The breakthrough is seen as consisting in increased recognition and presence of the specificities of caste within broader human rights concerns, in the establishing of a consistent and cohering transnational dimension, and in bringing the most palpable embodiment of the subaltern into global governance. Persistent arguments or experiences of injustice within individual states are now portrayed as equivalent to 'internationally cognizable human rights claims'.¹⁶ It is maintained that, by inducing an expanded consciousness regarding caste, Dalit activists bring attention to how the treatment of Dalits is often incongruous with the assumption 'that all human beings are equal and deserve the same respect, dignity, and rights'.¹⁷ Their combined work also challenges the strange yet persistent hope of caste becoming obsolete together with the 'traditional' more broadly.¹⁸ The consolidation, on the other hand, is a reference to how these developments reflect conscious organisational, agitational and conceptual endeavours by, in particular, Indian activists, at least since the time of India's independence.

According to many, the WCAR held in Durban in 2001 constituted a decisive transition. Indian and Nepali Dalit organisations, with affiliated groups, tried to put considerations of 'discrimination based on caste and social origin' on the agenda or, as an alternative, sought to broaden the category of "'work- and descent-based" discrimination' to include issues specific to those who experience discrimination actuated by caste.¹⁹ This represented the culmination of 'a series of interventions in the United Nations Human Rights bodies and in international meetings which were organized in preparation for the [WCAR]'.²⁰ Although there was ultimately no formal consultation on whether 'descent- and work-based discrimination' encompassed 'caste and caste-like social stratification',²¹ WCAR has been rendered 'the high watermark' and 'crescendo' of the Dalit movement's attempt to bring attention to the precarious and marginal position of those adversely affected by casteism.²² The integrated and cumulative work of an international network of Dalit activist groups jointly invigorated the project,²³ even though India refused to recognise the extensiveness of and its own failure to effectively work against caste-based discrimination. WCAR therefore became a site for making the unseen visible, the unspoken heard and the mute articulate.²⁴ However, WCAR has also been designated a 'setback' for the Dalit movement, since it never permitted a policy-influencing debate on caste discrimination as a core aspect of the UN's work on racism and xenophobia.²⁵

As a result of the conference and the preparatory activities, India found itself forced to maintain that it remained an unquestionable champion of the denunciation of 'racism, colonialism, apartheid', since, with the events in Durban, it was a position that seemed to be contested 'from within'.²⁶ In one of its renditions the Indian state's opposition to the internationalising of domestic critique insisted that the challenge sought to undermine the 'integrated family' that Indian 'nation and society' represented.²⁷ From the perspective of the Indian state mechanisms for the uplifting of those marginalised as a result of caste identity were already in place; these include an explicit abolition of untouchability and the *zamindari* system, legal equality for all irrespective of caste, and affirmative action schemes which prescribe that approximately 15% of government jobs, seats in legislative bodies and education opportunities should be earmarked for members of the so-called Scheduled Castes.²⁸

From the viewpoint of global governance as a congregation of intersecting and parallel undertakings, claims and mobilisations, the transnational Dalit movement is not necessarily a unique case. It might, conversely, be described as part of a wider trend of making international organisations more open to the participation of non-state actors.²⁹ The shift is nonetheless significant, considering that Indian Dalits today neither occupy a prominent position in the public debate nor have a leadership that manages to transcend 'caste and regional barriers'.³⁰ The coordination, maintenance and at least marginal success of transnational activism is thus functional even though the Indian context is not conducive to unifying tendencies. The same is true for other attempts at making nation-specific circumstances cohere, all of which are, however, quite distinct.

With the above groundwork in mind, it might be asked: what has happened to the core concepts at stake while trying to grasp caste? Is the Dalit as anomaly or aberration no longer specifically an aspect or product of Indian, or South Asian, systems of classification? Is 'Dalit' increasingly finding realisation as the 'confrontational and militant category' it always sought to be(come)?³¹ Is caste and hence the caste system not distinct and distinguishable by being principally entwined with daily and local interactions? Has, for instance, the village – as a space for the enactment of collective castigation of 'entire Dalit communities' and in its regulation of 'consensual participation' and 'self-legitimation'³² – undergone considerable transformation when it comes to the way it maintains the caste system and casteism as an ideology? These are questions that will be explored below.

We also need to ask, however, about how the subalternity is affected by the transference of mobilisation onto the transnational level. Since the entire impetus and rationale for such elevation is the wished-for ability of institutions beyond the nation-state to accommodate, promote and act on a desire to heighten the discernibility and influence of Dalits, questions regarding the boundlessness or breadth of, on the one hand, caste and, on the other, global governance ought to be posed. It thus seems imperative to ponder whether the ingrained inclination in South Asia to relate to Dalits as that which ought to be approached through muteness and disregard and, hence, as 'invisible as well as untouchable' has waned.³³ To what extent can it be said that the postulated grounds for Dalit dis-possession, ie 'low ritual status, appalling poverty, and powerlessness',³⁴ or the

view of Dalits as ‘triple disadvantaged’ – ‘socially, culturally and politically’³⁵ – hold once Dalit identity is conceptualised as transnationally relevant?

Recast(e) as race

One way of cohesively engaging the above questions would be to enquire: what, if anything, is peculiar about caste, the caste system and caste-based discrimination? What do conditions that seem particular to the Indian context mean for the hope, inscribed into the activities of the Dalit movement as an ‘international human rights movement’, of arriving at a situation where ‘agency changes, the discourse changes, the levels alter and with it comes the possibility of a more effective politics of empowerment’?³⁶ Two key aspects of addressing these questions are, first, the structural inertia of and lack of social mobility within the caste system and, second, the manner in which assumptions about caste and status are tied into endogamous and often highly localised conventions. It might be maintained that we, at the core of the caste system, find ‘fixed civil, cultural and economic rights for each caste with restrictions for change’.³⁷ This applies also to those supposed to exist on its posited outside or conjured base, those whose lives are regulated and circumscribed by notions of pollution and untouchability. These are features that seemingly complicate the translation of the caste system and experiences of caste into notions of discrimination that are the product of and entwined with racism or xenophobia. It complicates matters since these are often contained in less rigid systems of classification.

At the same time it should be acknowledged that it would be erroneous to portray castes as ‘bounded groups with a fixed membership’, since neither ‘unambiguous closure’ nor ‘unambiguous hierarchy’ exist when we speak of caste and relations between castes.³⁸ The divisions and hierarchies embedded within what is referred to as the caste system – ie the amalgam of *varna* and *jati*³⁹ — are simply too intricate and crosscutting to be easily captured or represented. No universal model makes full sense.⁴⁰ We thus find ourselves at an investigative impasse: there is, in the specific instance of caste, both a prohibition of change, a forceful ascription at work *and* an indeterminacy involved in defining the exact place or status of an individual caste in relation to other castes. If both suppositions are true, as they seem to be, how can this be reconciled with a desire to find solutions via the internationalisation of the Dalit movement and the mainstreaming of caste-based discrimination? One reason for asking this question is that an expansion of the movement into the transnational, international and global – and the related anticipation of novel forms of contestation – should not be assumed to neatly correspond to concrete manifestations of caste; such an enlargement is, hence, simultaneously saturated by and devoid of caste.

According to Lindt’s attempt at theorising caste, ‘the institution of caste systematically connects the economic and biological livelihoods of people with a specific form of rationalisation’.⁴¹ The latter refers to ‘the competing rationales’ of, on the one hand, a ‘religious’ underpinning of the caste system (*varna*) and, on the other, a view that emphasises how caste equals a ‘kinship system’ (*jati*).⁴² It is not obvious whether a global approach to practices of untouchability and caste-based deprivation ought to address one or both of these possible rationales.

We therefore need to ask whether the notion of caste-based discrimination, as it is invested with meaning by the Dalit movement in its transnational manifestations, fails to take into account the 'nexus between economic and biological assumptions' and its distinctive character within the 'institution' of caste.⁴³ Does it downplay the close-knit, interwoven significance of 'inheritance and social separation on the basis of birth', prohibition against 'inter-caste marriages' and the function of the 'jati [...] as the basic unit for sexual reproduction'?⁴⁴ Is it possible to extend the particularities of these core elements of caste identity and casteism beyond the village, the urban locale or locality, India and South Asia without a regrettable dilution of their constitutive function?

One potential way out of this impasse lies in the claim, propounded by Dalit activists in Durban, that caste is equivalent to race.⁴⁵ There is, or so it was maintained, a 'structural resonance' between 'caste and race'.⁴⁶ As such, the conceptual conflation alludes to a revitalising of what Slate has referred to as 'colored cosmopolitanism'.⁴⁷ The resonance is said to reside in 'segregation', segregation as inscribed into 'deprivation and distance', and in the 'violence' that follows transgression and unsanctioned proximity.⁴⁸ Jadhav has similarly drawn attention to the possible symmetries between the 'psychological antecedents and consequences' of 'caste-ism and racism'.⁴⁹

Yet, above all, the semblance is assumed to be manifest in 'descent'.⁵⁰ According to such a construal, caste-based discrimination ought to be read as equalling 'work-and-descent-based discrimination'.⁵¹ If the suggested interchangeability – caste as race, caste-based discrimination as rooted in work and descent⁵² – turns out to be valid, an uncanny challenge, seen from the perspective of the Indian state, enters. By accepting the proposition and its implications, caste is no longer contained within, no longer 'an internal affair'.⁵³ It therefore represents a contrast to the Indian state's insistence that 'caste is a uniquely Indian social institution' and thus 'not subject to outside oversight'.⁵⁴

The above expansion of the relevance of caste beyond the specifically Indian or South Asian points to wider trends in transnational Dalit activism. For example, it coheres with the view that practices that name some occupations as 'unclean' transcend the borders of South Asia⁵⁵ – both on the basis of diasporic social formations and through a recognition of the assumed 'impurity' of groups that are not necessarily of South Asian origin.⁵⁶ One often reads about the Burakumin or Buraku Jumin in Japan,⁵⁷ and of a scarcity of mapping exercises when it comes to 'caste-based' discrimination and stratification in African states.⁵⁸ Consequently, caste is not – in the activities of the transnational Dalit movement – exclusively seen as an aspect of 'the Hindu cultural sphere'.⁵⁹ Caste now reads as more, and as more expansive, than 'the basic form and expression of *Indian* society'⁶⁰ – a trend that recent attitudes towards legislation against caste-based discrimination in the UK attest to.⁶¹ The actual and yearned for scenario can, in other words, be spoken of as a departure from a close and essential association between caste and India, India and caste.⁶²

In a more pragmatic sense it might be assumed that the effort to raise international awareness regarding the situation of Dalits in national contexts stems from the calculation that international organisations might be mobilised to push for individual states to redress or rectify injustices.⁶³ The activist endeavour, if viewed in this manner, constitutes 'a sandwich of the local and global to

pressure the national in certain directions'.⁶⁴ Moreover, the mobility and presence of Dalit activists in varying contexts have established 'a feeling of commonality', 'an identity-forming process', which goes beyond the national.⁶⁵ This is all part of a process where domestic activism has reached out in order to put pressure on home states, thereby ostensibly mirroring the 'boomerang effect'.⁶⁶ The Indian state has, conversely, consistently refused the underlying premises and implications of the called-for expansion through a three-pronged response: 'caste is not race', there are 'internal mechanisms' that can and should be utilised, and progress is being made, albeit gradually.⁶⁷ It is a tendency that is also perceptible in India's negative reception of the 2012 Universal Periodic Review of its human rights record, in which only two out of ten 'caste-specific recommendations' were deemed suitable for approval.⁶⁸

Nevertheless, what an approach insisting on caste's general applicability as a social category opens up is, first, an ability to recognise caste and casteism globally. Second, it makes it possible to put pressure on all South Asian states to promote and uphold the rights and welfare of Dalits. Since decolonisation in the region, Dalit rights and welfare have mostly been a concern attended to by India and more recently by Nepal.⁶⁹ Furthermore, the approach draws attention to what has been described as '*the* public secret of [Indian] secular modernity',⁷⁰ a concealment that hides the 'systemic injustices' and 'atrocities' that Dalits face,⁷¹ and the subtle yet forceful 'policing' that is at work when norms, customs and traditions regarding caste are disrupted.⁷² The widened exposure of what might be termed caste experience, in addition amounts to a refusal to gloss over the fact that India's disadvantaged people tend not to turn to the state and its representatives 'as a first port of call' in times of need.⁷³

Fighting caste with caste

We saw above how the Indian state insists on the existence of internal mechanisms that are constructed and deployed to counter discrimination and marginalisation resulting from the ascription or assertion of caste identity. A closer inspection of the Indian state's constitutional and bureaucratic promises to the Scheduled Castes regarding improvement reveals a tacit acknowledgement of caste as a 'benevolent exception', compared with other possible yet unused modes whereby equality and non-discrimination might be achieved, for example, reservations for women and religious minorities.⁷⁴ A consequence is that Dalit converts to Islam or Christianity are deprived of 'their entitlement under affirmative action programmes'.⁷⁵ The emphasis on caste as an overriding collective identification, moreover, effectively obstructs the possibility of referring or relating to Dalits in non-caste terms.⁷⁶ These tendencies of attributing Dalitness with unity and distinctness are not, however, limited to state practices.

In domestic mobilisations of Indian Dalit activism we encounter a corresponding affirmation of the historical continuity and intactness of caste-based discrimination and caste identity, at times combined with the claim of a persistent disregard for one of India's 'most patriotic communities', ie for those who both before and after Independence 'provided the moral foundation' of and 'built' the nation.⁷⁷ These are ideas that also surfaced during the Constituent Assembly's work on the Indian Constitution.⁷⁸ It needs to be emphasised that

such insistence on a sustained lineage does not represent an attempt to attenuate the possibility of speaking of historical and contemporary experiences of caste *as* caste. Rather, it posits the caste system as immanent and totalising. Accordingly it reflects a long-standing, antonymic discordance between the diverging hopes of 'abolishing' or disbanding caste and of 'redress[ing] the disabilities of caste'.⁷⁹

Likewise the analogy between race and caste, principally articulated to a global audience, seems to falter if the unity of Dalits depends, on the one hand, on past and shared experiences and, on the other, on a demonstration of how these experiences are interwoven with nation-building in a specific context. It seems to represent a strategy and adjustment that is conditional on addressing an audience unfamiliar with or not interested in these entanglements. The mobilisation of a cohesive collective of Dalits, nonetheless, denotes a trenchant challenge to the caste system, as it seemingly destabilises a 'consciousness of caste' as the prerogative of 'brahminic upper castes'.⁸⁰ Dalit assertion, pride and influence in Indian formal politics are all indicative of this.

A pertinent area of enquiry revolves around the tendency in Dalit activism to rely upon 'caste based identity politics'⁸¹ and upon a 'politics of cultural rage' resting on a conception of the history of India as 'frozen in feudal time'.⁸² It generates anticipations of change that either point to the need to enact a 'destruction' that evolves into the 'rebuild[ing of] history' or welcome the 'arrival of a new society *sans* untouchability' in the form of an 'exodus' from 'village society'.⁸³ These are both extensions of the view – held, among others, by B. R. Ambedkar⁸⁴ – that 'adaptive movements' are not sufficient as vehicles of change,⁸⁵ and that an 'annihilation of caste' is necessary.⁸⁶ Both are, moreover, wished-for itineraries that rest on the imagery of entering modernity.⁸⁷ In other words, they are journeys that are not principally instigated by others' practice of 'suspension', 'excommunication' or 'outcasting',⁸⁸ but rather constitute conscious attempts to escape the 'stigma of untouchability'.⁸⁹

The mobilisation of opposition to caste *on the basis of caste*, through its reductive tendencies, entails a risk of neglecting 'India' as 'sometimes a lid on an immense and equally unacknowledged subaltern heterogeneity'.⁹⁰ We find one expression of this in the notion of exodus, as described above. It is an exodus which is based on the Ambedkarite position that Dalits do not have a place in 'Hindu social order' nor constitute 'a part of [...] Hindu society' and on Ambedkar's assertion 'that there is no Hindu who has not a caste'.⁹¹ Ambedkar's stance accentuates how Dalits signify the 'non-Hindu', ie that which becomes 'dehumanized through contact with caste Hindu ideology' and which is thereby regarded 'as negated existence'.⁹² The solution at hand is, thus, contained in an act of exiting. For Ambedkar and other members of his caste group (ie Mahars), it arrived in the guise of mass conversion to Buddhism.⁹³ As a strategy of escaping what Gupta has described as 'discrete communities' that strive to maintain 'distinctiveness [...] through endogamy, rituals and origin tales', the act of conversion amounts to an investment in becoming 'outcaste', and hence 'sociologically dead'.⁹⁴ And yet, at the heart of any effort to exit the caste system in this manner, the foundational tension between Dalit identity as desired unity or permanent suspension resides.

The resultant drawbacks of mobilising against caste on the basis of caste are that, on the one hand, this does not constitute an unequivocal disruption of or break with the ‘ethnographic sensibility’ of British colonialism, ie the view of caste as ‘the only relevant social site for the textualization of Indian identity’.⁹⁵ On the other hand, it is premised on abiding by the limits set by the Ambedkarite vision, ie the need to denounce a ‘traditional Dalit self’, a self ‘steeped, by and large, in the Hindu ethos’.⁹⁶ The second constraint results in the prevention of any form of constructive use of ‘the symbolic and religious life of the lower castes’⁹⁷ and – to reiterate the above point – of acknowledging subaltern heterogeneity. Although it contains a promise of rejecting the validity of caste’s discrete communities, and thus of being ‘humanised’ in a less restricted way, it also gives rise to a certain forgetfulness and the related dilemma of having to identify and mobilise ‘alternative cultural values’.⁹⁸ This, then, mirrors Chakrabarty’s lament regarding the limits to the inclusion of the subaltern,⁹⁹ limits that are more intricate and actual than much of the literature on global governance acknowledges.¹⁰⁰ According to Chakrabarty, if we strive to facilitate recognition of those ‘life-worlds’ that are ‘subordinated by the “major” narratives of the dominant institutions’, it is important to depart from a tendency to reduce the ‘religious’ to ‘human relationships that are in themselves secular and worldly’.¹⁰¹

If we were to abide by the theorising proposed by Chakrabarty, there seems to be a need, in scholarly treatment of Dalit politics, to inscribe sensitivity towards those spaces or domains ‘where culture, spirituality, and social practices meet’.¹⁰² In addition, we need to bring to attention how the caste system more broadly, like the Hindu temple more specifically, is ‘implement[ed]...upon all who enter or approach it’,¹⁰³ or, more concretely, upon all who encounter or experience it via caste as ‘a birthmark’.¹⁰⁴ It is a birthmark that does not easily rest on or cohere with what Gupta refers to as ‘unfailing natural markers of difference’ – essential to phenotypical readings of groupness – and which, in its consequent ambiguousness, necessitates a recurrent obstruction of ‘co-mingling’.¹⁰⁵ Without such sensitivity towards a persistent immersion in and concurrent reproduction of caste, how might Dalit activists claim to ‘access’ and speak for the ‘long-delegitimized epistemes’ of the ‘silent victims of pervasive [...] human rights violations’?¹⁰⁶

This amounts to a challenge not only for the advocates of Dalit rights but also to the possibility of establishing inclusive and representative global governance arrangements. It transpires in Steur’s detection of a ‘local–global disconnect’, which has arisen because of ‘the hegemony of the human rights framework’ and a ‘professionalization and institutionalization of Dalit activism’.¹⁰⁷ It is a disconnection that does not easily cohere with the desire of ‘rendering Dalits visible’ – visible, that is, in the face of the enormous silence that arrives in the co-constitutive modalities of ‘the printed word’ and ‘visual imagery’.¹⁰⁸ Such inconsistencies prompt a call for engagement with the assumptions of caste that underpin its insertion into a human rights idiom, into the domain of ‘new rights advocacy’.¹⁰⁹ What suppositions, in other words, are needed to accept that ‘Dalit’ ‘as a rights term [...] must begin another journey beyond India and beyond the classificatory confines of bureaucratic legalism’?¹¹⁰ What

limitations await such journeys, journeys that are enabled and accompanied by the ‘discourse of human rights’?¹¹¹

A missed appointment

The late D. R. Nagaraj wrote that the ‘success’ of Dalit activism would equal ‘self-dissolution’.¹¹² What has transpired in the previous sections is that the internationalisation of the Dalit movement, as an insistence on the Dalit experience, fails to accommodate the continual ‘forging of Dalit identity’, and thus falls short of representing more than a restrictive and anaemic version of ‘the community of Dalits’.¹¹³ Consequently it does not fully capture ‘the progress of transformation’,¹¹⁴ the ‘constantly evolving’ category of caste,¹¹⁵ nor ‘the politicization of invented forms of caste’.¹¹⁶ It does not, in other words, make visible the diversity of ‘dalits as a people’,¹¹⁷ since it assumes – strategically or not – the basic quality of caste identity to be ‘exclusive and singular’, rather than ‘multiple and inclusive’.¹¹⁸ Why, it might be asked, is there such a need to mobilise endeavours of ‘self-minoritization’ and ‘self-closure’ and to buy into the seeming accomplishments of the ‘social particular’?¹¹⁹

In light of the elaborate entanglements and transpositions of caste, the strategy to make Dalits part of ‘a global history of dehumanization’¹²⁰ becomes both highly praiseworthy, for its concrete accomplishments, and yet questionable. The problematic aspect partly resides in how each ‘success’ – at least if assessed on the basis of the Indian context – merely shifts the subalternity onto other marginalised groups, eg ‘the artisanal communities’.¹²¹ That is, subalternity if, as here, understood as the condition of being ‘removed from lines of social mobility’¹²² — a social mobility that, in the specific case of the ‘closed stratification system’ of caste, is undertaken by groups or categories, rather than individuals.¹²³ At the heart of these concerns lies a question regarding what international or transnational challenges might effectuate in terms of social mobility.

A more positive take on the above would be that the transnational Dalit movement’s advocacy, in addition to being constructive as regards countering and raising awareness of discriminatory practices in local settings, expands the narrow limits of the UN’s work more broadly and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) specifically. As Thorat points out, the UDHR came about at a historical juncture, where ‘racism and discrimination were primarily understood in the context of the decline and dismantling of European colonialism’.¹²⁴ There was at the time no place for ‘the “internal” struggles’ of the colonies and the problem of caste-based discrimination was thereby made ‘invisible to’ and by ‘the UN bodies’.¹²⁵ A positive outcome, beside the augmented recognition of caste-based discrimination, would hence be the introduction of these ‘internal’ matters into the context of global governance.

It might nevertheless be argued that the transnational Dalit movement has come to strive for the materialisation of what Mutua refers to as the third part of ‘the savages–victims–saviors [...] construction’ or ‘prism’ that underpins the ‘grand narrative of human rights’, ie ‘the redeemer, the good angel who protects, vindicates, civilizes, restrains, and safeguards’.¹²⁶ As Mutua writes, ‘in the human rights story’ – in our case in the story of the Dalit movement since the build-up to Durban – ‘the savior is the human rights corpus’;¹²⁷ it is envisioned

as the redeemer by being upheld as a universally applicable instrument for identifying individuals' subjection to suffering and mistreatment. One significant setback here is that, as Chowdhury observes, 'human rights have become the state's responsibility' and they are rights in the sense of 'usufruct, to be preserved by the recipient as the giver deems *proper*'.¹²⁸ In the present case, working principally through a human rights framework consequently seems to come with limitations as these correspond to 'a juridical status given by the state'.¹²⁹ Another drawback is, of course, that 'the human rights discourse adopted by the UN' is oriented towards the 'implementation and materialisation of rights, and down-plays politics', thus hollowing-out 'emancipatory struggle[s]'.¹³⁰

Intrinsic to a rights-based approach to caste-based discrimination is, accordingly, a notion of rescue that becomes a call for 'identifying with distant suffering' and as such it echoes Nagaraj's description of Gandhi's understanding of untouchability and its anticipated decline.¹³¹ In the Gandhian version, overcoming untouchability equals 'a sacred ritual self-purification' that, above all, is a task for 'the caste Hindu self' and the 'hegemonic community'.¹³² For evident reasons it is a position that has been severely criticised. For example, it carries a tendency to place the 'public rite of self-purification'¹³³ in the hands of those who are recognised as inhabiting the privileged position of being able to identify and bear witness to suffering. Whereas Gandhi ascribed such unwarranted privilege to 'the heroic stature of the caste Hindu reformer',¹³⁴ the saviour in the present context arrives in the shape of the human rights defender. The figure of the hero, it might be argued, no longer comes in the 'caste Hindu' variety, no longer in the 'incarnations of Gandhiji'.¹³⁵

In sum, transnational Dalit activism does not, to speak with Baxi, 'constitute an unmanageable "mode" of participation' in global governance.¹³⁶ Rather, what we find is an active embrace of a worldly redemption to be brought forth with the aid of the human rights story and its many actors, and to be achieved through hopes of inclusion, recognition and legitimate representation: in other words, by 'expos[ing] the "ontological scandal"' of not admitting or attending to the lived realities of caste.¹³⁷ It is, however, a neglect that is surprisingly mirrored in the International Labour Organization's (ILO) recent assessment of the 'Decent Work Country Programme for India', in which caste as such is merely referred to twice.¹³⁸ Both caste and its continued denial are, thus, subject to expansion.

As a departure and renewed opening, it seems relevant, in conclusion, to enquire about the impetuses and drivers of the Dalit movement in its transnational appearance. To what extent does it succeed in acting on and enacting what Nagaraj claims makes up the genesis of the Dalit movement, ie the confluence of 'the transcendental aspect of fighting caste ego, and the mundane reality of fighting for real opportunities in education and jobs'?¹³⁹ While the former in the past has been mobilised through acts of conversion, the latter's significance tends to be intensified precisely through such attempts to leave the Hindu fold, as attested to by how conversion – as noted above – results in a loss of 'access to [...] scheduled-caste status and the few government privileges assigned to it'.¹⁴⁰ In the case scrutinised here, ie in the coinciding of national and transnational mobilisations of Dalit activism, a pattern of working towards the

betterment of mundane realities is evident. What is missing is the necessary transcendence and annihilation of Dalitness as such.

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Notes on Contributor

Ted Svensson is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Political Science, Lund University, Sweden. His main research interests are transnational actors and global governance, identity politics, issues broadly related to constitutive moments, poststructuralist thought and contemporary South Asia. His most recent publications include *Production of Postcolonial India and Pakistan: Meanings of Partition* (2013), articles in *Global Society* and *Alternatives*, and a chapter on South Asia in *Comparative Regional Security Governance* (2012). He is also co-editor of *Governing Borders and Security: The Politics of Connectivity and Dispersal* (2014) and associate editor of the journal *Cooperation and Conflict*.

Notes

1. Cokhamela poem, cited in Zelliott, "The Early Voices," 78.
2. HRW, *Broken People*, 4.
3. See Adler and Pouliot, *International Practices*.
4. Visvanathan, "The Race for Caste," 2513.
5. United Nations, *World Conference against Racism*.
6. European Parliament, "European Parliament Resolution."
7. Grugel and Uhlin, "Renewing Global Governance," 1710.
8. Zelliott, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, 267. See also Paik, "Mahar–Dalit–Buddhist," 228ff.
9. Quigley, *The Interpretation of Caste*, 46.
10. For a critique of this, see Singh, "Caste, Class and Peasant."
11. See Adler and Pouliot, *International Practices*, 8f.
12. See Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 20.
13. Bob, "'Dalit Rights'"; Lerche, "Transnational Advocacy Networks"; and Smith, "Going Global."
14. Guha, *A Subaltern Studies Reader*; and Chaturvedi, *Mapping Subaltern Studies*.
15. Lerche, "Transnational Advocacy Networks," 246.
16. Bob, "'Dalit Rights'," 168.
17. *Ibid.*, 169.
18. See Jodhka, "Dalits in Business," 42; Jodhka, "The Problem"; and Omvedt, "Caste in the Census," 409.
19. Thorat, "Caste, Race and United Nations' Perspective," 143.
20. *Ibid.*, 149.
21. *Ibid.*, 152.
22. Thakur, "Dalit Politics," 2, 6.
23. Some of the most significant organisations are the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) with its eight national branches, the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights and the National Confederation of Dalit Organisations in India, and the Dalit NGO Federation in Nepal.
24. A parallel presence has been exercised at and through the World Social Forum. Smith, "Going Global," 23ff.
25. Thorat, "Caste, Race and United Nations' Perspective," 152.
26. Visvanathan, "The Race for Caste," 2512.
27. Guru, "What it Means," 173.
28. Gupta, "Caste and Politics," 414ff. On 'internal mechanisms', see Jodhka, *Engaging with Caste*, 23ff.
29. Tallberg et al., *The Opening up of International Organizations*. In the case of Dalit activism, the increased access to international organisations consists of the submission of reports or other input to the Human Rights Council, UN Treaty Bodies, the Universal Periodic Reviews and the UN Special

- Procedures. In addition, it includes accreditation for IDSN to the Durban Review Conference held in 2008 and a number of 'UN parallel events [...] in association with its ECOSOC-accredited associates and national members'. See <http://idsn.org/international-advocacy/>.
30. Babu, "The Bhopal Conference," 183. See also Oommen, "Sources of Deprivation," 57.
 31. Paik, "Mahar–Dalit–Buddhist," 218.
 32. Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, 128ff.
 33. Tartakov, "Introduction," 1.
 34. Oommen, "Sources of Deprivation," 46.
 35. National Commission for Scheduled Castes, *First Annual Report 2004–2005*, 21.
 36. Visvanathan, "The Race for Caste," 2512.
 37. Thorat and Sadana Sabharwal, *Caste and Social Exclusion*, 7.
 38. Quigley, *The Interpretation of Caste*, 9, 12.
 39. *Varna* corresponds to the division of labour that finds its legitimation in Hindu scriptures (such as the *Law of Manu*), *jati* relates to the (discrete) social groups that are based on endogamy.
 40. Cf. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*.
 41. Lindt, "Towards a Comprehensive Model," 90.
 42. *Ibid.*, 96ff.
 43. *Ibid.*, 90.
 44. *Ibid.*, 92, 96.
 45. Visvanathan, "The Race for Caste," 2512; and Guru, "What it Means," 168ff. Cf. Gupta, *Interrogating Caste*, 86ff.
 46. Visvanathan, "The Race for Caste," 2513.
 47. Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism*.
 48. Visvanathan, "The Race for Caste," 2513.
 49. Jodhka, "Caste, Culture and Clinic."
 50. Visvanathan, "The Race for Caste," 2514.
 51. Bob, "'Dalit Rights'," 191; Hardtmann, *The Dalit Movement*, 195ff. See also IDSN, *Caste Discrimination*, 6f.
 52. For a critique of how existing work on caste fails to account for the centrality of 'property and production relations', see Singh, "The Real World."
 53. Visvanathan, "The Race for Caste," 2512.
 54. Bob, "'Dalit Rights'," 175.
 55. Jain, cited in Kumar, "Understanding Dalit Diaspora," 114.
 56. See ILO, *Equality at Work*, 35, 37.
 57. See Geiger, *Subverting Exclusion*.
 58. Thorat, "Caste, Race and United Nations' Perspective," 142, 158ff.
 59. Bob, "'Dalit Rights'," 191.
 60. Dirks, "Castes of Mind," 56, emphasis added. See also Jodhka, "Engaging with Caste," 74.
 61. "Caste Discrimination to be Outlawed," BBC, April 23, 2013. <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-22267147>.
 62. See Dirks, "Castes of Mind," 56.
 63. Kumar, "Understanding Dalit Diaspora," 115.
 64. Visvanathan, "The Race for Caste," 2514.
 65. Hardtmann, *The Dalit Movement*, 191.
 66. Keck and Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders*. Cf. Lerche, "Transnational Advocacy Networks," 256.
 67. Thorat, "Caste, Race and United Nations' Perspective," 154.
 68. IDSN, *2012 Annual Report*, 4, 8f.
 69. Jodhka and Shah, *Comparative Contexts*, 4, 7f.
 70. Rao, *The Caste Question*, 267, emphasis in the original.
 71. Teltumbde, "Mukhiya's Assassination"; and Teltumbde, "Bathani Tola," 11.
 72. See Chowdry, "Caste Panchayats"; and Gorringer, "The Caste of the Nation," 135.
 73. Corbridge et al., *Seeing the State*, 102.
 74. Deshpande, "Caste and Castelessness," 36.
 75. IDSN, *Caste Discrimination*, 15.
 76. Deshpande, "Caste and Castelessness," 36.
 77. "Dalit–Adivasi Delhi Declaration 2012." http://idsn.org/fileadmin/user_folder/pdf/New_files/India/2012/Delhi_Declaration_-_Nov_23_-_FINAL.pdf. See also Gupta, "Caste and Politics," 412, 421.
 78. See S. Nagappa's address on January 20, 1947. *Constituent Assembly of India Debates (Proceedings)*.
 79. Deshpande, "Caste and Castelessness," 36.
 80. Kothari, "Rise of the Dalits," 1589.
 81. Jodhka, "The Problem."
 82. Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, 113.
 83. *Ibid.*, 152, 159, 161f.
 84. Ambedkar, a historically prominent Dalit politician, is today the 'deeply internalised [...] icon', who 'overwhelms even [...] revolutionary politics' among Dalits. Teltumbde, "Bathani Tola," 11.

85. Oommen, "Sources of Deprivation," 50.
86. Fitzgerald, "From Structure to Substance," 280f; and Zelliott, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, 133.
87. Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-modernity*, 157.
88. Hayden, "Excommunication as Everyday Event."
89. Thorat and Sadana Sabharwal, *Caste and Social Exclusion*, 9.
90. Spivak, "Woman in Difference," 108.
91. Jodhka, "Nation and Village," 57f (cf. Jaffrelot, *Dr Ambedkar and Untouchability*, 162); and Thorat and Kumar, *B. R. Ambedkar*, 352.
92. Rao, "Stigma and Labour."
93. Jaffrelot, *Dr Ambedkar and Untouchability*, 119ff; and Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-modernity*, 155.
94. Gupta, *Interrogating Caste*, 29ff, 93, 115. Cf. Pandey, *A History of Prejudice*, 92f.
95. Dirks, "Castes of Mind," 66.
96. Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, 222.
97. *Ibid.*
98. *Ibid.*, 33.
99. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.
100. See Marchetti, "Mapping Alternative Models," 134.
101. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 101, 103.
102. Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, 150.
103. Tartakov, "The Hindu Temple," 51, 61.
104. Rao, *The Caste Question*, 268.
105. Gupta, *Interrogating Caste*, 19.
106. Spivak, "Righting Wrongs," 529.
107. Steur, "Dalit Civil Society Activism."
108. Tartakov, "Introduction," 2f.
109. See Nelson and Dorsey, "New Rights Advocacy."
110. Visvanathan, "The Race for Caste," 2513.
111. Hardtmann, *The Dalit Movement in India*, 204.
112. Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, 109.
113. *Ibid.*, 114.
114. Tartakov, "Art and Identity," 27.
115. Teltumbde, "Identity Politics."
116. Dirks, "Castes of Mind," 76.
117. Thakur, "Dalit Politics," 12, emphasis in the original.
118. Heredia, "Subaltern Alternatives," 49.
119. See Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, 115f.
120. Rao, "Stigma and Labour", emphasis added.
121. Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, 117ff.
122. Spivak, "Righting Wrongs," 531.
123. Gupta, *Interrogating Caste*, 29. In India, according to Ashwini Deshpande, there have been no recognisable patterns of 'upward caste mobility' since 1947. Deshpande, *The Grammar of Caste*, 99.
124. Thorat, "Caste, Race and United Nations' Perspective," 144.
125. *Ibid.*, 144f.
126. Mutua, "Savages, Victims, and Saviors," 201ff.
127. *Ibid.*, 204.
128. Chowdhury, "'The Giver or the Recipient?'," 40, 45, emphasis in the original.
129. *Ibid.*, 36.
130. Grugel and Uhlin, "Renewing Global Governance," 1713.
131. Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, 66.
132. *Ibid.*, 45, 69.
133. See *ibid.*, 67.
134. *Ibid.*, 45.
135. *Ibid.*, 46.
136. Baxi, "'Global Neighborhood'," 542.
137. Guru, in Jodhka et al., "Conversations on Caste Today."
138. ILO, *Independent Evaluation*.
139. Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, 30.
140. HRW, *Broken People*, 26.

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