

Book Review

Jhuma Nath Acharya

Suraj Yengde, *Caste Matters*. New Delhi: Penguin Random House India Publication, 2019, 304 pp., 599 (Hardback). ISBN: 978-0670091225.

Caste Matters is a compelling and thought-provoking book by Dr. Suraj Yengde that delves into the profound influence of caste on Indian society. Drawing from his personal experiences as a Dalit, he presents a nuanced and insightful analysis of how caste intersects with other societal factors such as class, gender, and religion. It covers a wide spectrum of topics, ranging from the political and economic implications of caste to its portrayal in literature and popular culture. Throughout the book, Yengde emphasizes the necessity for a more comprehensive and nuanced comprehension of caste and offers a potent call to action for readers to confront and challenge caste-based discrimination in all its manifestations.

Yengde initiates his book by sharing his personal journey growing up as a Dalit in India. He reflects on the widespread discrimination and violence encountered by Dalits in Indian society and delves into the intricate ways by which caste interlaces with other societal aspects such as class and religion. He also examines the ways in which Dalits have organized themselves to combat caste discrimination, including movements such as the Ambedkarite and Dalit Panthers movement. Ultimately, he provides a compelling testimony to the enduring struggle for justice and equality in India.

Yengde presents an insightful perspective on the emergence of a new generation of Dalit activists and intellectuals who are reshaping traditional forms of Dalit politics and identity. He argues that this fresh wave of Dalit activism is characterized by a more sophisticated and intersectional approach that aims to connect the fight against caste discrimination with other social justice movements.

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The author describes how social media has facilitated a novel type of Dalit activism, transcending geographical and social constraints, and how globalization has provided Dalits with a platform to assert their rights on the global stage. However, a deeper examination of structural and institutional barriers is crucial within the context of Dalit activism.

Suraj Yengde delves into diverse experiences of Dalit communities across India, underscoring the heterogeneous nature of the Dalit identity. This identity encompasses a wide array of castes, languages, and cultures, shaped by regional, historical, and social influences. The author highlights the intersectional character of Dalit identity, emphasizing that it is influenced not only by caste but also by elements such as class, gender, and religion. He scrutinizes the role of social movements and political parties in molding Dalit identity, and the challenges faced by Dalit activists in forging a shared sense of purpose and identity. He offers an intricate exploration of the complexities of Dalit identity inclusive of acknowledging and celebrating the diversity within the Dalit community.

Yengde argues that Dalits, despite ongoing marginalization in many aspects, are challenging established stereotypes of Dalit identity and establishing new roles within Indian society. A key point he makes is that the rise of the Dalit middle class represents a substantial transformation in the dynamics of caste in India. This group is progressively wielding economic and political influence. He also observes that the ascent of the Dalit middle class challenges conventional perceptions of Dalit experiences, as this cohort frequently lacks the same level of poverty and oppression that defines the lives of numerous other Dalits.

Yengde contends that the ascent of capitalism in India has opened new avenues for Dalits to assert themselves in economic and political arenas. However, it has also perpetuated caste-based inequalities. The author's analysis illustrates that even though Dalit entrepreneurs have defied traditional caste notions and achieved economic success, caste-based discrimination continues to constrain their opportunities and uphold existing power structures. He argues that the surge of Dalit capitalism in India introduces fresh prospects for economic and political empowerment for Dalits. However, it also underscores the persistent influence of caste-based inequalities that curtail their success.

In the conclusion, the author sheds light on the role of Brahmins in sustaining caste-based inequalities in India. He contends that while many Brahmins have historically been among the most privileged and powerful groups in Indian society, an increasing number are challenging the ideology of Brahminism and advocating for social justice and equality. Dr. Yengde examines the historical and cultural underpinnings of Brahminism, underscoring its function in legitimizing caste-based hierarchies and justifying the subjugation of lower castes. He also explores how Brahmins are presently contesting this ideology, both through individual activism and the establishment of progressive Brahmin organizations. The author's primary assertion is that the burgeoning movement of Brahmins against Brahminism constitutes a significant shift in the caste dynamics of India. It challenges conventional notions of Brahmin identity and the role

of Brahmins in perpetuating caste-based inequalities. Dr. Yengde also acknowledges the movement's challenges and limitations, given the persistent influence of Brahmin elites.

In *Caste Matters* Suraj Yengde presents a powerful analysis of the intricate caste system in contemporary India. Drawing upon his personal background as a Dalit and his academic expertise, Yengde offers a compelling portrayal of the impact of caste system on Indian society. Notwithstanding the author's optimism, the significance of the book cannot be underestimated.¹

¹Caste defines the continuity of Vedic culture. The Hindutva movement has weaponized caste to change the color and contours of new Indian democracy. Suraj Yengde's optimism about Dalit Capitalism, ironically, underscores the imminence of Hindutva as a fulcrum of all reactionary forces that thwart the egalitarian values, principles, and practices that Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar established. Class matters too.

