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savarna citations of desire: queer impossibilities of inter-caste love

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abstract

Deliberations and discussions on inter-caste relationships in South Asia so far have been fixed within the confines of heterosexuality. Not only are heterosexual inter-caste relationships the default imagination of an inter-caste love, but also notions of heteronormativity dominate discussions of inter-caste love, relationship and, importantly, inter-caste marriages. In asking 'queer' questions about caste, this article analyses what an inter-caste dynamic means for social movements which rally around notions of love and desire or choose to reject them. This article recentres desire and intimacy into caste to imagine queer (im)possibilities of dalit love. In doing so, the article asks: where is the dalit lover? Building upon conversations and interviews with five dalit-queer scholars, intellectuals and activists, as well as provocations offered by them, this article complicates 'inter-caste love' itself as a site of power and politics, of social categorisation as well as of critical theorisation.

keywords

caste and sexuality; inter-caste; dalit-queer; savarna; love; desire

> All romantic relationships in India are experiences of caste
>
> (Jyotsna Sidhharth, Project Anti-caste Love)[1]

> You know, many of us don't think we deserve happiness. Caste broke our hearts and love cannot put them back together. Your forefathers taught us that our skins were blighted, our bodies foul and our colors dark. We have long memories – your forefathers crossing rivers on full-moon nights, armed with sticks, torching our huts, raping my foremothers. Our relationship with feeling less than human spans centuries. What is our love in front of this?
>
> (Jyoti, 2022, p. 10)

introduction

three accounts of desire

One: I was visiting a friend in New York in 2018 two months after I had moved to the US from Delhi for my PhD. I was experiencing the Fall season for the first time in my life and felt that it wasn't as romantic as Hollywood films made it out to be. Colourful landscapes did nothing to improve the isolation that living in white upstate New York brings. My (upper-caste) friend took me to a live performance by a queer singer where I realised that 'queer' spaces in gentrified New York are often attended primarily by gay white men. After the show, when everything around us was wrapping up, a white gay man comes up to my friend (who is a trans woman) and in a heartfelt moment congratulates them for their work and turns to his white friend standing next to him, and says, 'he is a trans Indian man who came out of the closet', and in the same breath, without missing a beat, 'you know I am dating an Indian guy right now'.

Two: In an interview, Ashok Row Kavi (upper caste) who 'is the first man to publicly come out as gay in India way back in 1984' (Singh and Rampal, 2018), talks about his upbringing as a right-wing Hindu fundamentalist and his role in the litigation surrounding Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (a colonial law which criminalised consensual, non-penile–vaginal intercourse). Generally talking about how he has no problem with Muslims identifying as LGBT+, he says that Muslim queer collectives would only dilute the gay movement in India. 'If they are so concerned about the queer Muslims, why don't they show interest in opening up space for people in Iran, Saudi, Pakistan and Bangladesh?' (*ibid.*). Kavi then clarifies that he doesn't care if 'your cock is Hindu or Muslim or RSS'[2] and one of the people he regularly has sex with is in fact a Muslim army man.

Three: Surya (2016), an upper-caste[3] woman, talks about the failure of feminist queer collectives to align with dalit bahujan women and activists. Attending a seemingly elite, upper-class gathering of cis-lesbian women, she says:

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[1] Project Anti-caste love is a dalit-driven collective which focuses on narratives, discourses and consultations on issues related to caste, gender, religion and relationships. Their work and writings can be accessed on their Instagram handle, @projectanticastelove.

[2] Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a right-wing Hindu nationalist paramilitary political organisation.

[3] It would be impossible to explain caste in a footnote as it risks oversimplifying centuries of subjugation and oppression and its liaisons with property, labour and sexuality. The term 'caste' is commonly used to refer to both 'varna' (order, class or kind) and

> [...] at some point, it was brought to everyone's attention that the group should contact the (older, more established, gender diverse) Dalit-bahujan collective, invite them to join meetings, come to parties [...] 'It's okay to be exclusive', someone finally said—a Brahmin, as it happens. She was known for being an ardent believer in bringing up caste whenever possible [...] what can I say about my own role? Yes, I was angry. Yes, I muttered something finally that I no longer remember. But I also didn't mention that my lover and partner—the person who I lived with and who I could not imagine life without—was Dalit. The sting I was feeling was more personal, newer, a more complicated shame that I didn't understand. (*ibid*.)

where is the dalit lover?

The reason I bring these three narratives together—(a) of a white gay man trying to establish solidarity with an upper caste queer person by understanding his own racial relationship with an Indian man, (b) of a self-identifying right-wing upper-caste gay man dismissing Muslim queer formations yet fetishising a Muslim body and (c) of an upper caste queer woman understanding the distribution of caste within lesbian organising in an urban setting—is because they all refer to desires attached to particular kinds of bodies defined by race, religion and caste. I do not place them side by side simply to draw a parallel between whiteness and upper caste-ness, or to contrast white guilt with the lack of savarna guilt. Rather, I want to highlight a pattern; a pattern I would like to call 'savarna citations of desire'. What does it mean for a lower-caste body in an intimate relationship to be reduced to a reference to justify an upper-caste nuanced understanding of casteism? What does it mean for an upper-caste gay man to be fucking a Muslim body and actively dismissing and denying spaces for Muslim queer collectives? What

'jati' (birth group). The concept of varna involves a scheme of four divisions in a Hindu society (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras), and untouchables (dalits) who are below or outside these divisions. Jatis are thousands of titles or sub-caste groups that people mostly identify with for purposes like marriage. For histories of caste and its radical contestations, see Bayly (1999). On the point of terminologies, in this article I use 'dalit' and 'lower caste' interchangeably. I use 'dalit' and not 'Dalit' to acknowledge that the many caste groups that fall under this category are not homogenous and have distinct linguistic and regional histories. I also use 'savarna' and 'upper castes' interchangeably. In my PhD project, I am studying upper-caste victimhood and woundedness in North India, and one of my ethnographic enquiries is to see how different upper-caste groups (specifically brahmins and jats) relate to the term 'savarna'. Although there are varying claims to the term savarna itself, explaining the nuanced usage of savarna by upper castes is beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, I do want to emphasise that the term 'savarna' also circulates amongst the upper castes differently—some use it as a self-identifying marker despite their other family members not associating with it, while some have never even heard of the word. Constitutionally and in reservation/affirmative action policies, many dalits are recognised as 'Scheduled Castes' (SCs), some shudra castes are classified as 'OBCs' (other-backward castes), and indigenous tribes and adivasis are referred to as 'Scheduled Tribes' (STs). Many anti-caste scholars do not include OBC communities when they use the term savarna and prefer using the term 'bahujan' to collectively talk about OBC, SC and ST communities (Ilaiah, 1996; Rege, 1999). However, I do not exclude OBC communities from the term 'savarna' for three reasons. Firstly, many individuals who commit crimes against dalits in inter-caste relationships are from OBC communities, which makes it important for scholars and ethnographers who work on inter-caste desires to precisely name those social locations. Secondly, it is historically inaccurate to club OBCs and dalits together since caste segregation (both regionally and linguistically) has functioned and continues to function through the logics of untouchability. That is, it is through the practice of untouchability against dalits/SCs and an aspiration to attain brahmin status and caste capital that other upper castes (including OBCs) have historically occupied positions in the caste hierarchies (Ramanujam, 2020). Thirdly, much of the scholarship on inter-caste relationships produced by members of upper castes treats the topic of inter-caste relationships within upper-caste communities on a par with inter-caste relationships between upper castes and dalits, as if all inter-caste relationships were of the same kind. A brahmin–OBC, brahmin–kshatriya or intra-brahmin relationship (involving sub-castes within brahmins) are all technically inter-caste unions, but I am interested here only in inter-caste relationships where one party is dalit. The repercussions for dalit lovers are far graver than they are for upper castes involved in inter-caste unions.

does it mean for an upper-caste woman to experience shame arising out of her failure to discuss caste because she feels that she has failed her dalit partner?

Even though the marginalised body—specifically the love and desire for that marginalised body—is invoked in these cases, that invocation is only done to centre the experience of a lower-caste body around a savarna one. In a society which still religiously practices caste-endogamy,[4] violence and death often follows individuals who choose to marry outside the boundaries of their caste. Even in instances of death of a dalit partner, caste supremacy works at centring the upper-caste pain and vulnerability. Christina Thomas Dhanaraj argues that in incidents where dalit men are killed by their upper-caste partners' kinsmen, the upper-caste woman's pain is centred in the public discourse and a dalit man's death is glossed over.[5] Thus, dalit death (at the hands of upper castes) almost becomes a necessity to establish an upper-caste victimhood—as if the entire emotional commitment of dalit love was for the savarna to thrive and take centre stage. The entire life of the dalit man, dalit lover, becomes legible only through the upper-caste pain. When inter-caste love is cited by savarnas, it is to only centre their own lives and (supposedly) radical positions. My invocation of 'savarna citations of desire' is a dalit-queer attempt to understand 'queer elsewhere'. Heeding Kasmani *et al.*'s (2020) call to imagine 'elsewhere's' potential to engage with the marginalised's agentive capacity to radically create new worlds, I showcase what a dalit-queer reading of love is. Like the 'elsewhere', my invocation of 'savarna citations of desire' opens, bridges, moves and disrupts heteronormative and casteist imaginations of dalit love. My use of 'savarna citations' points out harmful appropriative capacities of savarnas to write about themselves through inter-caste love as well as use inter-caste love to centre narratives around themselves. Additionally, I am also using 'savarna citations of desire' to hold savarna narratives and scholarship on inter-caste love accountable for actively erasing the dalit lover. When dalit death oversaturates inter-caste love, how do we make sense of these erasures? In recognition of this citational practice by upper castes, I wonder how *does* the dalit lover feature in this love?

These questions reveal a dalit-queer moment, i.e. a queer question about caste. Deliberations and discussions on inter-caste relationships so far have been fixed within the confines of heterosexuality. By this, I don't just mean that only heterosexual inter-caste relationships are the default imagination of an inter-caste love, but also that notions of heteronormativity dominate discussions of inter-caste love, relationships and, importantly, inter-caste marriages. In asking 'queer' questions about caste, I am interested in understanding what an inter-caste dynamic means for social movements which rally around notions of love and desire or choose to reject them. The category of 'queer' in my article works to name the alternative realisations and assimilations of what being a dalit means, and to uproot its conformity to heteronormative ideologies of anti-caste politics. I understand queerness not only as the social and political category that people use to define their sexuality but also as a mode of understanding the everyday-ness of sociality. As the surveillance around the dalit body and restricting dalit love and mobility has been so heavily guarded by caste supremacy, it becomes equally crucial to pivot discussions about inter-caste relationships to questions of desire and intimacies. A dalit-queer understanding of desire, thus, does not transcend the violent histories of caste or remain tangential to them but becomes

[4] The India Human Development Survey points out that over 95 per cent of marriages in India are caste endogamous. See Andrist *et al.*'s 'Negotiating marriage: examining the gap between marriage and cohabitation in India' (2013).

[5] Twitter post, Christina Thomas Dhanaraj, 'Intercaste marriages in India: Who's paying the price?', 18 September, https://twitter.com/i/events/1041839509468397568?s=12 [last accessed 25 March 2022].

central to remembering and articulating these histories. There is no dalit-queer desire without these histories, and simultaneously these histories cannot be told without revealing that there is something queer about dalit desires. Anupama Rao (2003) emphasises that Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar's (a towering dalit figure and social reformer) acknowledgement of desire between castes is important for understanding his call for breaking caste rules of kinship and untouchability. The dalit bodies and lovers, therefore, are inextricably tied up with questions of sexuality and power. Desire, Lauren Berlant (2014) writes, is often represented as political. In bringing people into a public or collective life, Berlant (*ibid*., p. 14) notes that desire 'makes scenes where social conventions of power and value play themselves out in plots about obstacles to and opportunities for erotic fulfillment'. A dalit-queer understanding of inter-caste love helps us suture 'caste' and 'desire' and recover narratives, intimacies and disruptions that are rendered impossible and unimaginable within an almost always heterosexual understanding of what being a dalit means or what an inter-caste love ought to be. Staying with Berlant's provocation, I write this article bearing witness to how the dalit lovers feature in the obstacles and opportunities to fulfilment and non-fulfilment of inter-caste love and desires.

I began this article by pointing out how damaging savarna accounts and scholarship on inter-caste love are. So much so that even the referential patterns within which dalit bodies and death feature by savarnas violently undervalue and undermine dalit lives. They treat dalit love, and life, as disposable. To undo that damage and recover the dalit lover from such practices, I write this article from conversations and interviews I conducted in 2020 and 2021 with five dalit-queer scholars, intellectuals and activists: Shripad Sinnakaar, Gowthaman Ranganathan, Kiran Nayak, Subhajit Sikder and Rachelle Bharathi Chandran. I have met and known these five individuals in my own work in dalit-queer collectivising and mobilising over the past decade. My association, friendship and intimacies with them span over a few years. I met a few of them in protest spaces in different cities in India, or giving speeches on public forums together, or via mobilisation around Section 377 litigation before the decriminalisation of homosexuality or simply after reading each other's thoughts on caste-sexuality online. All of them are public dalit-queer thinkers and activists, and I continue to follow and learn from their work. Through their narratives and my own, this article attempts to produce a dalit-queer knowledge production that aims to write against the savarna citational practices of desire. Building upon the provocations offered by these scholars and activists, this article complicates 'inter-caste love' as a site of power and politics, a site of social categorisation as well as critical theorisation. Through their interviews, I wish to convey that dalit-queers should not be compartmentalised to only talking about what being dalit-queer means, but to also seriously engage with what dalit-queerness does. I must clarify at this moment that I am not interested in presenting accounts of inter-caste love and relationships of dalit-queer individuals. Nor am I interested in the ways and languages they identify with in the queer and genders spectrum. As a dalit-queer person who identifies as non-binary, I am averse to investigative questions that dalit-queers are often asked about what our dalit-queerness 'offers' or point out specific moments to the world where caste and queerness 'meet'. Rather, I draw on dalit-queer experiences and insights to complicate public understandings of inter-caste love and desires. Overall, I simply hope to show how extra-ordinary the world is, when dalit-queers write about dalit-queerness and when dalit-queers ideate together.

Even as I write this article in 2021, underneath the Delhi monsoon sky and often romanticised North Indian monsoon rains, I am haunted by criminal killings of inter-caste lovers, particularly of dalit lovers. Just

within the last year, there have been several reported horrific instances of dalit men and women being killed. In March 2020, a 17-year-old boy, Bhimraj, was beheaded by a girl's father and brother (from the OBC community) who suspected that Bhimraj's brother had eloped with the girl (Express News Service, 2020). In May 2020, an 18-year-old dalit boy was assaulted and forced to drink urine by a girl's family members (from the OBC community) for being in a romantic relationship with her (Ganeshan, 2020). Just a few days before I finished writing this article in August 2021, in New Delhi a 9-year-old dalit girl was gang raped, murdered and forcibly cremated by upper-caste men in order to bury evidence (Taskin, 2021). These are just a few instances of violence meted out against dalits and adivasis for society-sanctioned transgressions. As dalit researchers and writers, we carry all these mutilations within our bodies and psyches and hold our families' ancestral memories of caste subjugation. My article is indebted to the 'wayward' lives of devadasis[6] and dalit sex workers who have as 'bad subjects' (Ramberg, 2018) lived against the moralist, nationalist ideals of conjugality that centred on heterosexual, monogamous marriages (Sreenivas, 2011). My article also positions itself in conversation with feminist studies on inter-caste love that do build on desire, even if they don't critically engage with heterosexuality (Kannabiran and Kannabiran, 2002; Hebbar, 2018). Saidiya Hartman (1997) in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997) writes how the spectacular character of black suffering and the voyeuristic fascination with terror and suffering leads to an uncertain position between witnessing that pain and becoming a spectator. In her work, she seeks to illuminate the terror and subjugation of the mundane and quotidian 'rather than exploit[ing] the shocking spectacle' (*ibid.*, p. 4). Perhaps in some ways I imagine that me writing about dalit love in the face of such abominable and gory crimes and human rights violations against dalits in the everyday is doing just that: bearing witness to the untameable capacities of dalit love rather than hyper-focusing on dalit death and mutilation.

what is so queer about inter-caste love?

on the dalit-queer standpoint

Over the past decades, a lot of work has been done on inter-caste relationships, particularly on inter-caste marriages (Kannan, 1961; Berreman, 1963; Anant, 1972; Saberwal, 1973; Corwin, 1977; Mines and Priyanka, 1998; Parry, 2001; Dhar, 2013). Many scholars have also offered useful analysis of gender and caste, and the role of the state in inter-caste marriages (Chowdhry, 2007). Feminist works on inter-caste marriages also point out the relationship between women's murders and the feudal and patriarchal hold over land and property (Ahlawat, 2012; Abraham, 2014). Many works have also noticed trends in inter-caste marriages and examined data related to those trends over the decades (Béteille, 1996; Allendorf and Pandian, 2016; Narzary and Ladusingh, 2019). The colossal amount of work on inter-caste marriages informs my own understanding of these relationships, although I reject the heteronormative stance taken by most authors. There is almost no critical engagement with how inter-caste coupledom is also another reiteration of an ideal form of heterosexuality. In re-centring 'queer' into inter-caste and writing from a dalit-queer standpoint, I am also writing against upper-caste scholars who misunderstand and appropriate what embodying dalit-ness means. Upper-caste scholars like Meena Dhanda (2012) even go as far as calling

[6] Devadasis are women and non-women (primarily dalit) who marry temple goddesses in religious rites, mostly practised in parts of South India. A contentious figure in the Indian history, devadasis are often defined through their illicit sexuality and sexual liaison outside heterosexual matrimony.

themselves 'one of the dalits' when writing on inter-caste couples because dalit, as she writes, is a political term of self-reference that anyone who is oppressed can claim. While there is truth to 'dalit' emerging as a political category coined by lower castes for themselves, her use of it for herself is not only deeply casteist and ahistorical, but also points towards the need to hold savarna scholarship on 'inter-caste love' accountable. I point to these moments to indicate that a dalit-queer standpoint on inter-caste love is also a political act of pointing to the systematic hierarchies that govern love, desire and marriage.

Because 'queer' is so far removed from 'caste' or only imagined within visibly queer-dalit bodies (Ponniah and Tamalapakula, 2020), anti-caste movements tend to miss how dalit-queer politics offer alternative readings of 'dalit' beyond the false heterosexual gender binary. My understanding of inter-caste love is located at the intersection of queer, feminist and anti-caste scholarship and challenges the notion that these fields are necessarily distinct and separate. Gayatri Gopinath (2005, p. 15), in her pioneering work on South Asian cinema and culture(s), uses the framework of 'impossible desires' to 'signal the unthinkability of a queer female subject position within various mappings of nation and diaspora'. She points out that a queer female is such an impossibility within the imagination of the nation that it is important to scrutinise why nationalist ideologies produce this subject position as unimaginable. In the same vein as Gopinath's work, I analyse the queer impossibilities of inter-caste love. On the point of reading archives of caste and sexuality, Anjali Arondekar (2018) asks their readers to abandon the historical language of search and rescue and rather focus on caste and sexuality as sites of radical abundance. They ask, 'what would it mean to let go of our attachments to loss, to unmoor ourselves, as it were, from the stakes of reliable ghosts?' (*ibid*., p. 110). I use dalit-queerness along with this invocation of a 'radical abundance' to talk about dalit and queerness together. But I wonder where 'radical abundance' leaves narratives of dalit queers which proudly root themselves in loss, abandonment and grief while simultaneously holding onto queer joy and fabulosity. Or my own narrative, since impossibilities of dalit-queerness primarily drive this article.

By pointing out savarna citational practices of desire, I demonstrate that dalit-queerness must be taken up as a critical hermeneutic. It helps us make sense of messy desires. That is to say that the recognition of this citational pattern is only possible by seriously engaging with caste and queerness. Dalit-queerness is not just a subjective position but also a medium through which I am able to tell impossible stories. It helps me analyse inter-caste love and desires differently because of the innovative ways in which dalit-queer thinkers and artists have created possibilities for dalit being and belonging, and especially by centring the intimate and the sexual while theorising and imagining dalit being and belonging. Through dalit-queerness, I imagine queerness to hold intimacies and desires in an inter-caste relationship while giving space for the category of dalit at the same time. While arguing that black diaspora poses a historical and conceptual challenge to dominant histories and theories of sexuality in queer studies, Keguro Macharia (2019) uses 'frottage' as a creative way to see how the sexual can be used to imagine and create worlds. As a black-queer theoretical tool, Macharia uses frottage to indicate a relation of proximity to the figure of the black diaspora who unsettles the heteronormative tropes through which the black diaspora has been imagined and realised. Much like Gopinath and Arondekar, Macharia also attempts to re-imagine and tell difficult, impossible stories. Black and queer, Macharia argues, often inhabit the same spaces and bodies in uncomfortable ways. Macharia uses frottage, an art or practice of rubbing on an uneven surface, as well as a sexual act in which bodies rub against each

other, to foreground the frictions that black and queer make with each other, which at times leads to pleasure and at other times to irritation or even pain. Macharia's work helps me argue that in a similar fashion dalit and queer also occupy sometimes uncomfortable positions, and sometimes joyful ones. By centring sexuality, frottage can also imagine those very uncomfortable positions to be joyful too. I dedicated these two sections of the article to laying out the scope and breadth of what a dalit-queer project looks like. In the previous sections, I set the stage for recognising how the savarna places itself in inter-caste love by calling that placement 'savarna citations of desire'. I offer no solution to undo this practice but only the ferocity with which dalit-queers re-imagine our world(s) and beings. I now turn to dalit-queer conceptualisations of inter-caste love and explore how such conceptualisations alter dominant heteronormative understandings of inter-caste love and desires.

impossibilities of inter-caste love

Shripad's hopelessness and Rachelle's mistrust

'I am tired of feeling hopeless. I feel despair. I don't want to feel this despair all the time. I want to feel hopeful about love, but I am not', Shripad told me over the phone. Sitting in front of my laptop screen, furiously typing notes, even hundreds of miles away I could viscerally feel their exhaustion. I couldn't offer anything else, but only 'I know [...] I feel you'. Shripad and I were talking about what hope the future holds for us. Shripad Sinnakkar is a student of philosophy, a native Telugu speaker who lives in Mumbai. They emphasised their relationship with Dharavi (where they live), one of the largest slums in Asia, discussing how intimately their dalit-queerness is tied to Dharavi. Its ghettoisation, its dalit neighbourhoods and communities defined the way Shripad saw boundaries of love to be limiting. 'I see a limit to love, to its boundaries and the hope it gives to our [dalit] families', they said. Over the past few decades, considering the rise of right-wing Hindu gay and trans organising in India (Narrain, 2004; Upadhyay, 2020), as well as casteist and classist queer collectives touting themselves to be intersectional safe havens (Fernandes, 2020), I had been feeling uneasy with the expectation (from mostly upper-caste individuals) that dalit-queers offer a pathway towards a different kind of future. Placed in an upper-caste liberal fantasy of dalits labouring to create a better world for everyone, my discomfort came from the fact that such fantasies often neglect how everyday strategies of survival and safety do not let dalit-queers claim such futures for themselves. Seeing how Shripad felt similarly about the future, I shared my own ambivalence about dalit-queer futures. They mentioned how they were critical of a queer futurity where dalit-queers are expected to perform a certain kind of political living and being. They were critiquing the pressure to embody those futurities. Without denying that many dalit-queers do aspire to lay stakes on those radical future possibilities, Shripad was alluding to the fact that those futures feel impossible for people who cannot afford to dream because of the precarious material conditions that centuries of oppression and humiliation have put them into. Shripad's hopelessness for the future stemmed from their strenuous relationship with their family, which had far too many stories of abandonment. Abandonment from support, well-being and perhaps, in many ways, from love. In light of the possibilities that queer temporality opens for imagining radical futures, a queerness that is 'not yet here' (Muñoz, 2009), how do we account for dalit-queer futures? Or lack of them? 'There is no durable intimacy for those who are abandoned', Shripad said, recounting how they came to embody their dalit-queerness through widows in their family who were not given support, and through family members who were/are wrongly incarcerated for resisting violent instances of casteism. I offer this moment of my

conversation with Shripad to indicate the central role that intimate relations play in dalit philosophies of personhood. While I was making a note on Shripad's hopelessness, I was reminded of bell hooks' (2000) essays on love where she mentions that her motivation for writing about love was precisely that there is so much cynicism surrounding it. She writes that justice and self-care are deeply tied with love's possibilities. Taking a cue from Shripad's call for a radical hopelessness and hooks' call for promise(s) of love, I wonder how inter-caste love transforms communities that are so deeply entrenched within violent systems of caste oppression. I asked Shripad if they thought inter-caste love offered any transformative capacities to dalit communities, and they kept returning to abandonment and hopelessness. 'What good does inter-caste love do to us when it's difficult for me to imagine a future for my mother? For queers and women in my family? All I have seen is how love abandons …', they said. Even after repeated invocation of hopelessness, I was struck by Shripad's willingness to keep loving and, more importantly, to seek love. Because of their difficult relationship with the family and the family's equally difficult relationship with caste supremacy, Shripad was able to embody a complex position of refusal to hope for a future where supposedly love frees them, and a position of continuing to want love despite anticipating abandonment. In an interview discussing her Japanese and African-American roots, Okazawa-Rey, one of the founding members of the Combahee River Collective, speaks for her part of love's potential to transform communities and institutions (Swift, 2020). She asks for a 'radical vulnerability', a commitment to being wrong and a willingness to be hurt and disappointed. Shripad's radical vulnerability reveals an important dynamic for understanding inter-caste love: a productive tussle between hope and hopelessness, between futurity and abandonment.

In her ethnographic work on love letters in Nepal, Laura Ahearn (2001) writes that love, like all other emotions, accumulates meanings only in specific socio-cultural interactions, in particular places and at given moments in history. She says that there can never be an ahistorical experience of romantic love. In another context, Abhinaya Ramesh (2020) understands 'vulnerability' to be rooted in the hierarchical caste society which impacts the lives of dalit women through everyday acts of violence. She argues that our understanding of dalit women's vulnerability needs to be rooted within their experiences of subordination resulting from caste-based patriarchy as well as their quest for universal transformative emancipatory practices. More importantly, Ramesh helps connect how vulnerability can only be used politically when the everyday material and socio-political conditions of dalit women are centred within feminist movements. She is particularly critical of upper-caste and upper-class feminist civil society organisations, politicians and activists who often impose articulations of vulnerability onto communities as a viable form of empowerment. These impositions, she argues, foreclose any possibility of change in exploitative and oppressive caste-based social and material relations for dalit women (*ibid.*, p. 3). Ahearn's observation and Ramesh's enquiry open avenues for me to ask: who can afford to love and be vulnerable across boundaries of caste?

Rachelle Bharathi Chandran, a writer who hails from Bangalore and currently lives in Mumbai, shared with me how isolating being dalit is. In high school and undergraduate college, zir points out that even inter-caste friendships seemed like such an impossibility that inter-caste love manifesting from those friendships and intimacies felt (and still feels) unreal. From zir's own past friendships, relationships as well as mediating zir's dalit friends' inter-caste relationships, Rachelle points out how dalit partners keep doubting themselves. 'An important element of these relationships is that dalit lovers are constantly gaslit by their savarna partners […] it is so difficult to build trust with them [savarnas],

trust washes away since at any given moment of conflict, they [savarnas] almost always side with their own caste-kin members'. Rachelle maintains that in a world where dalit love is anyway taken for granted and stereotyped to be easily available and disposable, the fact that dalit lovers' upper-caste partners don't fully realise what siding with their own family members means is another form of betrayal. 'And the fact that dalit men tend to excessively romanticise falling in love with upper-caste women only further adds to the emotional labour that dalit partners must vigorously undertake to sustain inter-caste love', ze added. After talking to Rachelle, I was reminded again of how dalit love is an impossibility not just because caste supremacy is bent on destroying it, but also because of extraordinary and spectacular demands placed on it. Rachelle gave me another articulation of the savarna citational practice: of mistrust. In her ethnography on 'love marriages' in law courtrooms of Delhi, Perveez Mody (2008) talks about inter-faith and inter-caste couples as belonging to a 'non-community' of people. She says that they don't constitute a community in the conventional sense of the word. They are simultaneously rejected by, and have a unique relationship with, the social groups that they are forced to leave. Rachelle is imploring us to complicate this position of 'non-community' further by arguing that attachments between inter-caste lovers are embodied through constant negotiations with trust and the burden to explain their hurt and mistrust ('why are you offended and not why I offended you', as a friend once put it to me). I am intrigued by Rachelle's use of 'trust washing away'. Inter-caste marriages are advocated as a solution for breaking caste hierarchies to such an extent that it is almost as if inter-caste couples can commit no mistakes. These marriages supposedly wash away the stigma of caste or shame, humiliation. The Supreme Court of India in *Lata Singh v. State of Uttar Pradesh*[7] addressed a case brought forth by an inter-caste couple who were facing severe violence from the upper-caste partner's family. In its judgment, the court noted, 'the caste system is a curse on the nation and the sooner it is destroyed the better [...] inter-caste marriages are in fact in the national interest as they will result in destroying the caste system'.[8] Inter-caste marriages, therefore, are seen by the highest court of law in the country as a nation-building force. There is also an implied—as well as obvious—reference to a 'good' inter-caste marriage, i.e. a monogamous, heteronormative union that promotes the idea of an ideal caste-free nation. Sara Ahmed (2004), while offering a critique of how 'love' is culturally used in creating communities, comments on how people use love to enforce the nation as a shared object of together-ness. She points out how the promise of cohesion within multiculturalism in the name of love is presented to be an essential requirement to hold the nation together. 'It is "love", rather than history, culture or ethnicity that binds the multicultural nation together' (*ibid.*, p. 135). Could the desire of upper caste-ness also be seen as an aspiration for an ideal nation rooted in heteronormativity? Rachelle's provocation offers us another important dynamic to understand inter-caste love: allowing the space for mistrust, for hurt and to reject idealist, pristine and nationalist norms of how inter-caste union is lived.

Gowthaman's and Kiran's parallels between inter-caste and queer

Gowthaman Ranganathan, an anthropology student who hails from Chennai, told me about their second 'coming out' as an inter-caste child of a brahmin-dalit couple. 'The story *after* the marriage doesn't get spoken about much [...] specially the everyday negotiations', they said. Gowthaman told me that they

[7] *Lata Singh v. State of Uttar Pradesh* (2006) AIR 2006 SC 2522 (Supreme Court of India, 7 July 2006).
[8] *Ibid.*, para 16.

made sense of their personhood, as an inter-caste child, only through their queerness. Throughout their life, they witnessed a lack of institutional, societal and moral support for their parents. And it was through this lack of support that they came to embody their own queerness:

> When queer relationships collapse, there is no one to help you through them. You must figure it out all on your own. But I see whenever heterosexual relationships or marriages undergo even the slightest of turmoil, the entire families move heaven and earth to resolve that tension. In some ways, I understood inter-caste relationships to also be like queer relationships because the former (as I understood them from my parents) was also not able to access support networks like caste-endogamous marriages.

Gowthaman's dalit-queer parallels with inter-caste relationships made me wonder if inter-caste heterosexual couples feel the pressure to sustain their marriages because everyone expects them to fail. If being queer helps us recognise values of ownership within ideals of monogamy and thereby explore polyamory in respectful ways, how do we understand an inter-caste relationship with monogamy in a heterosexual marriage? I asked Gowthaman if they ever felt that their parents felt the pressure to put up a front of a 'successful' marriage, and they replied, 'definitely [...] because my mother's own family members ostracised her, I think she was always trying to prove something'. Talking about facing pressures and battling stereotypes for being in an inter-caste marriage, Kiran spoke to me about his constant negotiations with the state, and community at large. Kiran Nayak, a politician based out of Chikkaballapur (Karnataka), has been married through a religious ceremony to his OBC partner for about thirteen years but has petitioned the state to formally recognise his marriage. 'Everyone around us was unable to understand why two "women" would be together. Not only did they not recognise our relationship, but they also dismissed me being a trans-man', he said. Kiran mentioned how there is already a stereotype that inter-caste relationships are a temporary abode for lovers till they 'settle' with a 'serious' partner. 'This stereotype is exaggerated by another assumption that dalits and dalit-queers are inherently promiscuous', Kiran pointed out. Kiran is making a crucial connection with the perception that dalit women's bodies were sexually available to upper-caste men through exploitative practices (Gupta, 2016). Both Gowthaman and Kiran are offering us insights into what an embodied queer understanding of inter-caste-ness feels like.

Subhajit's safety in rejection

In love, Berlant (2011) points out, it is impossible to tell the difference between destructive and world-building impulses. I am compelled by Berlant's hope to imagine different affective dimensions and attachments to re-build world(s). What is at stake for dalit lovers when inter-caste love might destroy them as well as their families? Subhajit Sikder, currently a research scholar at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in Delhi, moved to JNU from Kolkata. Born to a Bangladeshi immigrant father and a mother who hails from Uttar Pradesh (both dalits) and brought up in a dalit ghetto, they told me that they understood markers of difference only through love. That is, they understood social hierarchies in the worlds around them after falling in love. Subhajit did not want to share the name of their first love, but I insisted on knowing their love's surname. 'Pathak [a brahmin upper-caste surname] [...] he knew already that I was dalit when we met. Eventually, he also knew that I was in love with him [...] and things happened [...]', Subhajit reminisced about their first love, pinpointing instances where their love blossomed in secret:

> Trust me, I recognised all the red flags; he never introduced me to his upper-caste friends, he would always find upper castes attractive, would often say casteist things to me [...] he jokingly told me one day that he would marry me had I been a girl and then added, 'maybe not because even then you would be dalit'.

They continued, 'love took over, nothing else mattered [...] I felt validated [...] I finally felt "seen" by a brahmin man'. What struck me the most in our conversation was when Subhajit revealed that they were willing to lose everything for this brahmin man because they thought they never had any self-worth to begin with. Time and again, trying to pay attention to Subhajit's joy, grief, giggles and loss, I instead kept thinking that a casteist brahmin man has robbed this person; a person who has a lot of love to give. After I shared my thoughts, Subhajit considered them for a few minutes and replied, 'I felt safety and affirmation in unrequited love, specially from a brahmin man'. The brahmin man has become the caste ideal; only he can validate Subhajit's desires. Subhajit feels desired only through these troubled dynamics of pleasure, caste and rejection.

Darieck Scott (2010) locates blackness' abjection as a site of pleasure and argues that although sexualised domination is tied up with what being black means, he is also interested in seeing how that very abjection and domination could create a political potential, an access to freedom. In a similar fashion, Jennifer Nash (2014) reads the 'ecstatic possibilities of racialisation' and uses 'racial iconography' as a method to read ecstasy in racialised black performances. She uses ecstasy to 'consider how race aids pornographic protagonists in staging, enacting and naming pleasures, even as it always already constrains protagonists' lexicons of desire' (*ibid.*, p. 3). I invoke Scott's and Nash's sexualised reading of power within racialisation along with Subhajit's narrative. Subhajit's relationship feels risky, troubling as well as exciting and stimulating. I am not avouching that dalit-ness is produced only through rejection, domination and loss but I am interested in using dalit-queerness to provide opportunities for us to consider how histories of being dalit are also histories of individuals seeking pleasure in that possible or even immanent rejection. Subhajit's desire, I would argue, is seeking pleasure in rejection.

The trigger for me now is to ask: does this desire in rejection, or does this pleasure in dalit rejection, act against a desire for upper caste-ness? Subhajit does not want to be an upper caste in this derivation of pleasure but is using that pleasure to articulate a different kind of dalit-ness. The reason I bring up this question is because even feminist understandings of inter-caste love fail to recognise the queer possibility that rejection gives, or fail to understand the dalit aspirations for upper caste-ness precisely because they dissociate questions of sexuality (but not gender) from questions of power. For instance, Manisha Gupte (2013) complicates the notion of family 'honour' attached to women's bodies and sexualities and interviews men from upper-caste families whose daughters have eloped with dalit men. The outrage from the girl's kinsmen, Gupte (*ibid.*, p. 75) says, often manifests in questions like 'were *we* lacking a penis?' or 'is *their* penis made of gold?'. No doubt the outrage felt by upper-caste kinsmen here is attached to a patriarchal sense of ownership over women's bodies as well as the role those bodies play in the larger political economy of the land. But this moment is crucial to me because anxieties about transgressing caste boundaries (through the penis in this case) are being spoken through a rejection. In another instance of men with a misplaced sense of entitlement over women's bodies, Paro Mishra (2013) attempts to understand upper-caste jat men breaking norms of caste endogamy because of the skewed sex ratio in states like Punjab and Haryana. She notes that in the absence of women of their own caste groups, these men often marry dalit women from across states and justify it by saying that women have

no caste of their own—only the one into which they marry. I would argue that a dalit-queer understanding of inter-caste desires helps us recognise attachments like rejection and the possibility of rejection in modes of being dalit. Therefore, many of these upper-caste articulations of their own stakes in inter-caste relationships are embedded in 'queer' questions of caste.

With the help of dalit-queer elaborations on love, rejection and loss, I have tried to show what a queer reading of caste is. Through these narratives, we witness how dalit-queers' messy equations with desires and intimacies counter how dalit love is lost within savarna citational practices of desire and empty heteronormative understandings of inter-caste love.

conclusion

Over the past decade, I grew tired and exhausted by the voyeuristic attention on dalit-queer bodies by both savarna and even well-meaning dalit heterosexual cis-gendered men and women. I write this article to point out to the world that they need to *hear* us and not just *look at* us. I find the queer 'elsewhere(s)' in this article by making visible the dalit-queer narratives and theorisations that are ever-evolving and -expanding. For what is 'elsewhere' which seeks to inhabit queer worlds without a dalit-queer reading of love, without dalit-queers who embody infinite worlds within us: worlds which scare us, bring us joy, bring us shame, bring us life.

This article consists of two sections. The first section recognises how savarnas place themselves in narratives of inter-caste love, a pattern which I name 'savarna citations of desire'. The second section comprises dalit-queer articulations of inter-caste-ness and explorations of what a queer understanding of inter-caste relationships looks like. As I stated before, the second section is not to offer a solution to the pattern pointed out in the first section, but is my own way to uncover the dalit lover who has been erased. By offering dalit-queer accounts of ambivalence, promise and lack thereof with inter-caste marriage and relationships, and using dalit-queerness as a method to understand dynamics of inter-caste-ness, in this article I have shown how dynamics of/within inter-caste need to be necessarily looked at through questions of sexuality and power. I have recentred desire and intimacy into caste to imagine queer (im)possibilities of dalit love. Through conversations with dalit-queer scholars and activists, I have tried to show how dalit-queers imagine worlds differently and embody caste creatively and open up (im)possible articulations of inter-caste love.

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