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To be upper caste/to be a victim

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ABSTRACT

By treating the upper caste as an ethnographic category, this article shows what an endeavour of flipping the ethnographic gaze away from Dalits and onto the upper caste looks like. In studying upper caste victimhood, this article sees how being a victim acts as an important tool of mobilization and collectivization among upper castes. In interweaving cultural analysis and ethnography, I engage the complex relationship between regimes of affect, power, and caste as they implicate the production of a twisted, weaponized form of vulnerability. When contemporary Indian politics is saturated with narratives of upper caste pain, which thereby stand as a testimony to what it means to be a human, I understand upper caste affect via their wound to highlight the simultaneity of upper caste's humanity and their inhumanity. I argue that we should take seriously and examine upper caste 'woundedness' as it helps us better understand the embodied nature of caste and its relationship with violence. In doing so, I re-create modes of citation and knowledge production using a language which doesn't imagine the marginalized body to hold the burden of doing the work of pain, trauma, and violence.

KEYWORDS

Caste; affect; victimhood; woundedness; reservation; India

1. Introduction

In 1990, Rajeev Goswami, then a 20-year-old student at Delhi University (DU), set himself on fire to protest reservation¹ and became a sensational poster boy for depicting reservation's cruelty against upper castes. Goswami, a self-immolating student, has come to symbolize the hurt felt by upper castes, since his life and image have subsequently been used innumerable times to mark an important, visible moment in contemporary Indian politics to talk about upper caste victimhood. It is only recently that Rajeev's father drew attention to his son's generous nature. In an interview, his father painfully recalled how Rajeev hated inequality (Kaushika 2019). According to his father, he would often come back home from school with a missing shoe or piece of clothing, having given it away to someone who needed it more than him. Another student, Atul Aggarwal, who had also self-immolated in an anti-reservation protest, in an interview recalled surviving self-immolation and shared that he didn't even know what reservation was at the time! (Akbar 2015) In support of reservation for poor upper castes, he averred that someone born into an upper caste family must not be 'punished' through these reservation policies. At the time of these interviews, Rajeev's father lived in Michigan, U.S. and Atul Aggarwal lived in Noida (a city adjoining Delhi), having chosen to live in solitude, away from his parents, who owned a house in South Delhi (a neighborhood with expensive real estate). Both represent a story of class mobility tied with their caste privilege, and yet are perceived outside of their markers of class and caste, and have come to symbolize the hurt purportedly perpetuated by reservation. Such stories of upper castes' explicit recognition of

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pain are abundant; however, my interest in investigating this pain is to pivot this recognition away from their supposed capacity to change or grow.

What is obvious in narratives that seek to highlight Rajeev Goswami's (upper caste, brahmin) generosity and Atul Aggarwal's (upper caste, bania) melancholy, and yet is simultaneously jarringly missing in discourses around reservation, is how affect strongly shapes caste and thus, an upper caste identity. If we were to not ignore this constitutive nature of affect in shaping our politics, how could that understanding help us make sense of the changing political worlds around us?

The late 1980s-early 1990s and 2006 were two historic moments when India witnessed one of the most prominent student-led protests. From massive strikes to students self-immolating as a form of protest, the public outrage against reservation poured out onto the streets. There were multiple reasons for these protests. Upper caste groups strongly felt that 'their' places in educational institutions and government jobs were being threatened by – presumably 'non-meritorious' – dalit and adivasi students who were accessing these places through reservation policies. Feeling socially and politically victimized by these policies, one of the main demands of these protests was to eradicate caste-based reservation policies and only use economical background/class as a primary category for availing State entitlements. This was a demand made in a nation where class is entrenched within caste, religion, and ethnicity. Class and caste are not distinct sites of social standing in India. In fact, they are almost always encountered as intersectional and intertwined with one another. Creating a distinction between the two, however, provides fertile ground for these protesters to claim that the nation has failed the upper castes.

Stretching across decades, these moments in time signify important sites wherein upper castes represented themselves through visible languages of hurt and victimhood. How did this hurt become such a strong rallying point for thousands of caste groups, millions of people categorized as 'upper castes'? Rather than using *reservation as a site of politics*, in this article, I use the *politics of reservation* as an important affective moment in contemporary Indian politics to treat 'upper caste' as an analytical and ethnographic category. By doing so, I ask the following two questions: (a) how can we understand upper caste mobilization around the politics of victimhood? and (b) how is victimhood instrumental in understanding what forms the core of an upper caste identity? That is, what makes an upper caste, an upper caste? I deploy 'woundedness' to make affective sense of upper caste self-articulated victimhood and examine how we might understand their simultaneous humanity as well as in-humanity.

Joshilay², an anti-reservation activist organization/collective, dominated the anti-reservation public in the early 1990s. Blocking main city streets, demonstrating and giving speeches in schools and colleges all over the county, filing numerous petitions in multiple local courts, protesting by carrying brooms to indicate that they would be subjected to lowly jobs; this organization was instrumental in solidifying itself as a rallying point for agitated upper castes who stood strongly against reservation. Reservation, arguably, is one of the most contested sites of contemporary Indian history (Subramanian 2019; Wankhede 2023). When the rhetoric around reservation extensively revolves around upper caste pain, it is surprising that not much work has been done on how that pain has shaped and defined upper caste identity.

I use the theorization of upper caste affect as a provocation to reimagine India's political modernity and ethics from the perspective of dalit theorization and knowledge creation. For a dalit anthropologist like me, reservation is an interesting site to 'study up' (Nader 1972) the upper castes as well as study the many truths revealed by upper caste self-articulated victimhood. Discussing norms and practices of untouchability, Gopal Guru (2009) builds on Vitthal Ramji Shinde's work and points out the 'nausea-like attitude' deep-seated in the Brahminical minds of upper castes. Similarly, Joel Lee (2021) elaborates on feelings of disgust amongst upper castes by reading north Indian vernacular materials of a Hindu reformist organization. Both these scholars point out that emotions, particularly related to caste, have a basis in embodied experience. Thus, studying the affect located in the upper caste body does the work of re-imagining caste outside the historically violated, marked bodies of dalits. I am hoping to re-create modes of citation and knowledge production by using a language

which doesn't imagine the marginalized body to hold the burden of doing the work of pain, trauma, and violence. Given that dalits as well as many others across the world have repeatedly stressed the need to study upper castes and 'flip the magnifying glass', in looking at upper caste affect I am trying to show what that venture looks (and feels) like.

My theorization of affect draws from Ann Cvetkovich's work on depression. She understands affect as 'a category that encompasses emotion and feelings that includes impulses, desires and feelings that are historically constructed in range of ways' (Cvetkovich 2011, 4). My invocation of affect to study upper castes finds its pathways both through specific ethnographic encounters as well as its broad linkages with upper caste communities. I use victimhood as an entry point, wherein we can track the affective life in all its complexity and understand what kinds of representations might do justice to its social meanings.

2. On methodology and caste positionality

This article draws on ethnographic fieldwork I conducted for almost 2.5 years between 2018 and 2022 in parts of north India, specifically in New Delhi and the neighboring state of Haryana, where I studied two upper caste communities, namely brahmins and jats.³ Studying 'upper caste', a social and lived category that encompasses thousands of castes within the broader classification of *varna* as well as sub-classifications of and within *jati*(s), is a difficult task. In the limited space of a journal article, I engage with scholarship on brahmins, in so far as it helps me conceptualize upper caste affect and its connections with victimhood, but I do not engage with historical studies on brahmins and jats.

As many scholars of right-wing fascism and xenophobia would indicate, there is nothing new about upper castes feeling victimized (Bacchetta 2004; Jaffrelot 1999). Dibyesh Anand (2011) argues that the Hindu nationalist, with an inflated sense of self, perpetually laments the exceptional danger faced by India; that the Hindu is, was, and will always be in danger. This fear, as Anand notes, moves as much within the boundaries of the country as the one projected outside of it. Neeti Nair (2023) historically traces the 'hurt Hindu sentiments' in post-1947 partition South Asia and notes that invocation of hurt religious sentiments by both majority and minority communities has played a crucial role in the making of laws, reshaping State ideologies and fashioning new idioms of citizenship. However, while studies on Hindutva and Hindu right-wing nationalism historically place the 'Hindu-Indian' subject at its center, my interest in theorizing upper caste affect goes beyond just the right-wing or ideals of secularism. The majority of studies on the right-wing, or studies understanding upper caste victimhood in the context of fascism, operate within the broader binary of Hindu/Muslim and Christian but fail to account for the nuances of being and feeling like an upper caste. A continued focus on communal pogroms against religious minorities as well as an inquiry into everyday instances of violence is no doubt extremely important to understand right-wing mobilizing and strategizing. But it continues to exceptionalize an angry, fearful, generic caste-less Hindu. If at all this casteless angry Hindu is pushed to engage with questions of caste in right-wing studies, the focus on a dalit subject by upper caste scholars and historians overshadows the upper caste's unquestioned ability to dictate the terms and forms of violence (Narayan 2009). For all its focus on feelings, Hindu right-wing studies still hasn't advanced crucial connections between affect and caste.

I use brahmin instead of Brahmin, and jat instead of Jat, to de-mystify these categories. My use of 'upper caste' is to find a vocabulary that tries to accommodate complex *varna-jati*-subject positions and associations, and its ties with simultaneous universalisms and specificities of caste. Ramesh Bairy (2010), in his study on brahmins in Karnataka, notes that the categories of 'upper caste' and 'lower caste' are ambiguous and slippery. He rightly points out that the category of 'upper caste' may signify any caste which is above one's own. Regardless of how scholars conceptually use them, these categories invoke their intimate relationship with ritual orderings of purity and pollution as well as their investment in subtle and insidious inequality and power differentials. I use upper

castes without using 'upper' in single quotes in recognition of the fact that the castes I study are, in fact, upper than dalits, no matter how they might be placed in relation to each other. The placement of dalits outside the four *varna* system sustains the purity/pollution ritual and the caste order. Untouchability stands abolished under the Constitution of India but still thrives, leaving a majority of untouchable caste communities in bitter poverty and impoverishment. Any work on caste should not disguise the ongoing social, economic, and political prejudice and discrimination against dalits and untouchable caste communities by making apolitical theorizations.

My use of upper caste as an ethnographic category also seeks to extend Satish Deshpande's (2013) work on castelessness. He points out that the thousands of upper caste communities, by the virtue of being recognized as 'general category' in policy making and legal world(s), can pose as casteless citizens. This castelessness, he further argues, functions alongside upper castes disavowing their own caste, which reinforces the misnomer that caste only marks dalit bodies. In conceptually developing upper caste as an ethnographic category, I seek to signify caste onto communities that actively benefit from caste supremacy and strategically use caste only to wrongfully position themselves as victims. David Mosse (2020) also comments on castelessness and argues that caste is purported to be enclosed within Hindu religion and the nation both by the State and far-right Hindu groups. This works to dismiss caste as a category of description and social analysis, as well as to delimit legal and public action on caste. Both Mosse and Deshpande are pointing toward competing ideas of life enfolded by and within caste. In combining affect and caste together, the 'upper caste' category helps in analyzing how these communities overdetermine and underdetermine their own affiliations with caste itself.

During my fieldwork, I disclosed to my interviewees that I would not anonymize their surnames. On being asked their caste locations, my interviewees mostly responded by telling me their surname, their surname's association with specific geographic and *jati* location, and its placement within the broader *varna* hierarchy. My own surname, Kang, is a *jat* surname in Punjab. I belong to the *chamar*, *ad dharmi* community (an untouchable caste). My grandfather decided to adopt this surname because he lived in a *chamar* ghetto in a village named after *jats*. In an attempt to shield the younger generation of the house from caste identification through surname, my family strategically gave me Kang. I 'pass off' as an upper caste because of my surname. People in my fieldwork not familiar with Punjab were not able to place my caste location. When explicitly asked about my surname, I would say 'I am a Punjabi', in order to claim a somewhat casteless universal identity. I manipulated caste universalisms and performed meritocracy to 'conceal' my caste. Joel Lee and Kusuma Satyanarayana (Lee and Satyanarayana 2023) build on autobiographical works of the dalit Marathi writer Baburao Bagul to argue that 'caste concealment' as deployed by dalits works as a contextual tool to highlight the strategic maneuvers they/we make. They note that caste concealment deals with a range of phenomena, including equivocation, experimentation with unmarking, disidentification, and play. On the point of significance of names for dalits, Bhawani Buswala (2023) looks at upper castes' use of undignified names in Rajasthan while addressing dalits and argues that usage of undignified names in the everyday social interactions shows how 'caste power shapes naming as a social practice making it an important object of symbolic struggles' (569). In similar vein, my negotiations with my surname also reveal struggles in and around naming. Buswala rightly points out that the social production of indignities through naming is also linked to the production of 'valuable names'. My concealing, passing, and experimentative unmarking all indicate complex everyday caste socializing.

In another context, Mark Juergensmeyer (1982) comments that while conducting the caste-based census in 1931, the colonial British government's census-takers were confused while documenting untouchable caste communities' religion. Noting their 'fickleness', the census-takers couldn't quite determine their religion since they used different names on different occasions. Juergensmeyer says how in the presence of Hindus, a person may identify himself as Ram Chand, among Sikhs as Ram Singh, and with Christians as John Samuel. This 'fickleness' indicated how untouchable castes would switch between different upper caste religious groups who desperately wanted to claim low castes within the folds of

their own religion. Since the early 1900s, these documented patterns teach us about the maneuvers of survival and agency-claiming tactics by dalits in a world overwhelmingly dictated by upper castes. My own negotiation with my surname in my fieldwork speaks to these fickle tactics of concealment.

I give these details to highlight that this placement and self-situatedness is the bare-minimum that scholars working in/on South Asia need to be committed to. No theorization or conceptualization on caste is divorced from transparency on questions of access and class, caste networking of upper caste, non-dalit researchers and scholars. Dalit scholars work to visibilize the meaning(s) and functioning(s) of caste structurally, while battling the hyper scrutiny of our bodies, names, and psyche in the everyday.

I decided to seek out Joshilay, the anti-reservation organization I study in this article, because I felt I would inevitably find brahmins there. I write this article in conversation with my fieldwork with Joshilay and Joshilay-affiliated brahmin heterosexual men who unexpectedly intervened in my field visits. In particular, I feature my interview with one brahmin man who works with Joshilay. This article is divided into three sections. In the first Section 3 begin to conceptualize upper caste affect. I argue that being hurt is innately tied to how upper castes identify themselves. The second Section 4 looks toward the upper caste 'wound' and the attachment to 'woundedness' to understand that to be an upper caste is to be wounded. Finally, in the last Section 5, through my ethnography I analyze the manifestations woundedness takes in my brahmin interviewees.

3. Moving beyond reservation: reading affect and caste together

My first meeting with Joshilay took place in the unforgiving Delhi summer heat of June 2019. After finding their contact on Facebook, I requested a meeting with them. Joshilay's office was in a posh locality in South Delhi; an intimidating building with barbed wire, surveillance cameras and name plates of its residents (all brahmin surnames) at the entrance gate. As luck would have it, the person I was put in touch with via my email exchange with Joshilay was a brahmin man, Mr. Pathak. Mr. Pathak (let's call him Raja Hindustani⁴) received me at the gate and took me inside. The office walls had rows and rows of legal journals and periodicals, bare acts, case laws and commentaries: clearly a lawyer's office. The advocate whose name (also brahmin) was on the office's front door often litigates for Joshilay, as per legal public records, and proudly talks about his active involvement with anti-reservation protests in the early 1990s in many public interviews. It appears that the brahmins and banias, who were leading the anti-reservation protests as students in the early 1990s, have now become lawyers and working professionals who continue to work with Joshilay and provide material and spatial support for younger students.

Raja Hindustani led me to a glass-walled cubicle, within easy eyeshot of the whole office. When I entered, to my surprise, seven others joined us. I tried to hide my surprise (and fear) and asked Raja Hindustani who these people were. He told me that everyone is a student volunteer with Joshilay. He made no attempt to introduce those seven students and neither did those students introduce themselves. Only later in 2021 when I met Raja Hindustani for the second time did I realize that bringing in multiple people to watch over me and surveil my every word was a well-thought-out strategy on his/Joshilay's part. I imagined I wasn't the first (or the last) to interview him. My interest, however, as I mentioned before, was less with Joshilay as an organization but more with the brahmins who inhabited Joshilay. I introduced myself as a researcher who was interested in studying affect (I said 'feelings' and not 'affect') of people (I said 'people' and not 'upper caste' or 'brahmin').

Joshilay works in almost 500 cities and towns across India. They run intense online anti-reservation campaigns in the name of 'saving meritocracy' and 'saving the nation'. They often share casteist anti-reservation memes on their social media accounts on Facebook and Twitter, and occasionally share (undoubtedly photoshopped) pictures of men and women holding posters saying, 'I am dalit and I stand against reservation'. The brahmin men who lead Joshilay might not be popular public figures, but their Twitter accounts are followed by both famous left and right-wing politicians. Much akin to 'meninists' lamenting 'false rape cases', Joshilay runs campaigns to

document 'false' cases of dalits accusing upper castes of caste-motivated violence and murder. Joshilay's universe goes beyond reservation-related mobilization.

'How do you mobilize for Joshilay? The ideas attached with your organization are so grand and abstract ... are people able to connect with them?', I asked (in Hindi).

There must be some deeper connection between upper castes at play? How do thousands of different upper caste communities affectively establish solidarity with each other? (I asked myself).

Raja Hindustani, frowning, said (in Hindi) 'we use "*samaanta*" (Hindi, for equality) when we talk to people in the streets, and use 'equality' when we talk to elites'.

He gestured toward me when he said 'elites'. He had assumed that I am 'elite', to him an upper caste person. I felt tensed up. My command over the English language, status as an ivy league American graduate student and queer sense of style had translated into me being an upper caste, an 'elite' person, in Raja Hindustani's eyes. I didn't correct him or ask for clarification. Raja Hindustani then proceeded to lecture me on the founding principles of Joshilay ('to help the needy' and 'work for the nation'). It was a narrative quite similar to Rajeev Goswami's father. Over the course of this meeting, each of my questions that sought specificity about Joshilay, or the seven individuals in the room, or Raja Hindustani in particular, would be met with a strict refusal to answer, sometimes even a rude interruption ('how is this even relevant?') or the automated phrase almost on loop – 'only class, no caste!' Joshilay's goal, I was told, is to 'bring equality' and 'eliminate discrimination'. 'Ambitious goals', I responded (almost condescendingly). Raja Hindustani, again with furrowed brows, said 'out of the four people sitting at a table, if only two get *chai* (tea) and others don't ... we want to fight against this kind of discrimination ...' Ignoring the fact that no one in the office had offered *me* any *chai* or water (as is quite customary), I realized that he had quite cleverly, without naming dalits or adivasis or even using the word 'caste', concluded how affirmative action works toward benefiting only a few and further, and delineated that to be discriminatory. That is, he had misidentified the structural violence dalits and adivasis have been subjected to for centuries and placed himself and his own community to be the prime casualty of caste oppression – all by simply saying that certain people have been left out of State entitlements ('not given *chai*' as he put it). 'But please don't put the word "caste" in your research when you mention Joshilay. We don't talk about caste. We only talk about discrimination', he quickly added. By flipping the narrative, he shrewdly sought to project me as the outlier who was 'bringing up caste' and thereby dividing up a seemingly united nation, an imagination that erased entrenched histories of caste violence. Simultaneously, he and the organization were able to project themselves as attending to the higher call of uniting people against so-called 'discrimination'. 'Only class, no caste!' – the mantra on loop.

Working within these abstractions and rallying upper caste hurt around these abstractions works toward entrenching caste supremacy. Writing on notions of abstraction with affective circulation of love and hate, Sara Ahmed (2004) notes how hate groups often resort to the notion of 'love'. So, if you are against their specificity of hate, you are obviously against love. Thus, to be against Raja Hindustani or Joshilay is not just to be in support of caste-based reservation but against equality itself. There is more to unearth with Raja Hindustani's hatred for reservation and simultaneous love for his community and the nation. To talk about upper caste victimhood in rehearsed articulations of love/hate distracts us from *seeing* upper castes. Realizing that my meeting with Raja Hindustani and Joshilay personified every stereotyped casteist rhetoric against dalits in the garb of abstraction, I decided to end the meeting and requested if I could meet Raja Hindustani again. He agreed (to my surprise).

Raja Hindustani is not just indicating that his victimhood is caused by reservation; he is also weaving the terms of that victimhood to manipulate State policies and assert that victimhood in opposition to dalits. In all of this, his own caste or even the word 'caste' never materializes overtly, but is perpetually hovering around in the air, inside us. Whereas dalit lives and the dalit political subject addresses complicated and violent experiential dimensions of practices of untouchability and are positioned as a unique cultural and political subject of historic suffering (Rao 2009), upper caste suffering, and victimhood alters the nature of social relations and political ethics.

Arguing how cultural analyses could also be accounts of affect, Michelle Z. Rosaldo (1984) notes that affect, often wrongly relegated only to the realm of the private, is an always culturally informed interpretation(s) in which a person's body, self and identity is immediately involved. Thus, Rosaldo urges political readings of affect beyond the public-private binary. My ethnographic account of Joshilay, therefore, is not meant to publicly expose their private affairs and neither is my fieldwork an endeavor to draw out Raja Hindustani's private life. Through my fieldwork, I am seeking to explore how an examination of upper caste affect can help us understand the upper caste identity formation. By choosing to ignore a deeper investigation of upper caste affect we fail to realize that as a political culture we are witnessing what forms the core of upper caste-ness itself. In order to examine how affect enables upper castes to fervently situate themselves as victimized, we need to see how the very core of what constitutes an upper caste person's identity is hurt itself. What does it mean to be upper caste when they perpetually choose to be witnessed by the world through hurt?

4. Understanding upper caste woundedness

In their work on trauma and victimhood, Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman understand trauma to facilitate the relationship between an individual and the collective. They argue that to understand trauma beyond the world of neurosis we need to locate it not in the mind, brain, or the psyche but in the moral economy of contemporary societies (Fassin and Rechtan 2009). The connection between what goes on at an individual level and the collective level, they further argue, establishes a connection between culture and psyche. This connection, they note, lies at the heart of the politics of trauma. Raja Hindustani's incessant invocation of his own community's abjection reveals what Fassin and Rechtman identify as an articulation of trauma that acts as a facilitator from the 'intimate wound to the wounded memory' (Fassin and Rechtan 2009:20). My enquiry into understanding upper caste affect via their wound is to highlight the simultaneity of upper caste's humanity as well as their inhumanity. Joshilay, which represents a majority of upper castes who use reservation as a diversion from talking about their own castes, tells us a story of not just what it means to be wounded but also about holding the power to wound others. I am writing about upper caste affect to fight against the assumption that an individual upper caste person's suffering bears witness to the collective trauma of the nation. Because Raja Hindustani would have the world believe that brahmins like him have an unbearable experience – only class, no caste! – that upper caste abjection is a testimony to what it means to be human. I am using woundedness to make sense of upper caste suffering – not for it to matter, but to embrace it enough to make it sensible for marginalized thinkers like me to even begin extending the humanity that was denied to us. This act of extending humanity to us in the context of insurmountable violence and humiliation against dalits is a necessary research tool of survival. To take Fassin and Rechtman's call seriously, Raja Hindustani's wound is compelling precisely because it reveals a moral, affective economy of caste violence. For Raja Hindustani to articulate hurt is an indication of humanity, no doubt. But to highlight that upper castes are humans who can be cruel, casteist and treat dalits inhumanely is a humane research. As Ambedkar in his speech addressing the All India Depressed Classes Conference in 1942 envisioned dalit emancipation as a reclamation of a 'human personality', my interest in studying upper caste victimhood is to find my own route to understanding dalit personhood. In a similar vein, I use upper caste wound to address the feelings, and lifeforms that caste takes: be it exceptional, extreme or ordinary.

The relationship between this unbearable experience (of Raja Hindustani, and other brahmins and upper castes), the wound, and the claims that Raja Hindustani (and other upper castes) makes in the name of vulnerability, works toward creating a visual, affective narrative to accrue benefits for some at the cost of debilitating others. Lilie Chouliaraki and Sarah Banet-Weiser historically analyze the uses of victimhood as a claim to injury (Chouliaraki and Banet-Weiser 2021). They argue that in the context of events including the two World Wars, the Holocaust, civil liberties

struggle, and suffrage movements (along with many other social movements), the twentieth century placed victimhood at the center of collective attention and emotion. The twenty-first century, they further note, radically expanded this position of victimhood and intensified this shift. It is within these radically shifting positions that people who have historically been in positions of power work toward becoming the righteous voice of the vulnerable. Both these authors point toward victimhood acting as a 'master signifier'. Within the American context, Alyson M. Cole (2007) writes about the 'Cult of True Victimhood' wherein State actors and politicians who had long demonized victimhood came to engage in victim politics themselves. She argues that post 9/11 and then President Bush's conception of victimhood to characterize terrorism, this engagement continues a long tradition of suppressing marginalized groups that challenge the status quo. The upper caste's tendency to dominate narratives of victimhood tries to disallow others from what it means to be hurt. After all, the maintenance of boundaries is inherently tied to preserving caste rituals of purity and pollution. Against fears of boundaries (of caste and therein hurt) collapsing, upper castes rush to protect the boundaries of victimhood too, much like caste purity.

Understanding upper caste victimhood through affect also points toward how upper caste's articulation of trauma works toward disassociating victimhood as an affective mode of communication from their social positions. Joshilay, therefore, taps into the important historical moments that allow the shifting of erstwhile claims of victimhood against the colonial, State, corporate regimes to re-defining what it means to be vulnerable and injured. This is precisely why I think my invocation and reliance on the 'wound' works to make a better sense of upper caste victimhood. For me, investigating what it means to be upper caste by studying upper caste affect is to step away from the competing claims to victimhood. I am writing this article at a point where the legitimacy of upper caste pain is not up for debate. The State, corporate and religious structures and institutions have always worked and continue to work toward retrenching caste capital in favor of brahmins, banias, and other upper caste communities. That is, upper castes have already won claims for the recognition of their hurt via legal, social, and political channels. The urgent call (and the most obvious one) is to see how these claims to woundedness reveal the ideals, inhumanity, ethics of scores of upper castes, who are demonstrating how their claim to vulnerability can move mountains, borders, galaxies. Conceptually, I shift between 'victimhood' and 'woundedness' to understand the political efficacy of upper caste groups' claim to being hurt.

To think about victimhood and woundedness together is to move beyond understanding wounding just as an adjective or a verb; a marker of being injured. I am looking toward upper caste articulations of victimhood to understand their attachments to a perpetual state of woundedness. At this juncture, I note (again) that even though reservation is the context within which I explore upper caste woundedness, I am not interested in the law itself. Lochlann Jain (2006), commenting on injury lawsuits in American tort law, notes that law is only one of the many sites that understand the state of human wounding. An important take away from Jain's work on understanding the human state of wounding is the push to recognize how certain claims made to the State act as an open wound for an entire community. Claims surrounding reservation offer only a marginal and rudimentary mode of understanding the supposed tragedy meted onto upper castes. A study of upper caste perspectives on reservation cannot be the structuring principle and the only site to understand upper caste communities' hurt.

Laurence Ralph (2012) writes about disabled ex-gang members in Chicago and notes how their wounds 'enable' a certain kind of socializing and community making. An ethnographic enquiry of these wounds, he argues, tells us how they become the precondition that enable social transformation. The sociality of upper caste wound reveals to me an important question: what does this recognition of wound mean for thousands of upper caste communities, their relationship with others and with themselves? If to be upper caste is to be wounded, what role does the wound play in staking claims to power in the society? The 'wound culture', as Mark Seltzer (1997) argues while commenting on American society's public fascination with torn and opened bodies and with scenes of murder and crime, is a collective gathering around trauma and the wound. While Seltzer relegates

this fascination within the realm of the private, what intrigues me is how the upper caste wound publicly creates vocabularies of weaponized hurt. This is to say that it is not enough to just identify upper caste hurt but also to investigate how that identification of hurt harms those who do not fit into those vocabularies of woundedness. What accords those wounds the power to generate social meanings?

Ravi Sundaram (2010) reads Seltzer's 'wound culture' in scenes of road accidents in 1990s Delhi, and shows how the public spectacle of death and disorder sharpens the public's sensory experience of a growing metropolis. Harris Solomon (2022), while writing about the anthropology of wounds, contrasts Seltzer's rendition of the wound in the private with Sundaram's insistence on talking about the necessity of the wound being seen in public, to create an affective relationship with the city, space and surrounding. Heeding Sundaram's call to understand wound in the everyday and not just in extreme spectacles of horror and emergency, an ethnographic enquiry into the wound culture that underlies the public opens newer attachments to wounding. My interest in talking about the upper caste wound is to also name the public and private caste evasion tactics practiced by upper castes in the name of hurt and victimhood. Not once did Raja Hindustani or other brahmins or upper castes involved with Joshilay admit that they were in fact 'wounded'. They were quite adamant in insisting that the world doesn't read them as casted bodies but as victims of 'inequality'. There was a sharp (and false might I add) distinction being made between class and caste. This is why anthropology from the margins and writing from below alters the very ethics of the study of caste and inequality. To study the wounding from the location of the marginalized is to not just see what those wounds enable but also how those wounds diminish oppressed lives. The everyday wounding of upper castes sheds a new light on the caste wound culture. Thus, to look intently at upper caste wound culture is to make visible how woundedness generates a form of caste violence. To locate this woundedness in light of active denial and disavowal of their own complicity in structures of caste is to recognize the drama of upper caste victimhood. That is, the distribution of injury of caste across millions of bodies and its real, material translations into claim making and community formation. Arjun Appadurai (1990) comments on 'praise' forming a 'community of sentiment' among Hindus in India and warns against deconstructing emotions as a distinctive phenomenon. He says that emotions have a basis in embodied experience and are thus rooted in elementary biophysical range that is both limited and universal. Thus, my invocation of woundedness is not just in the realm of abstraction, or interiority, but in the everyday violence of caste, its manifestations within and on the body of upper castes.

Even if Raja Hindustani is disguising his victimhood in heroic abstractions and tirelessly working toward a simultaneous affiliation with and disavowal of caste (and his own caste position; never once did he utter 'I am upper caste' or 'I am brahmin'), it's only through the wound we can understand how the 'upper caste' identity functions. I understand upper caste affect as a form of dangerous world making which imposes itself onto us again and again, repeatedly. A language and performance of suffering which continues to disenfranchise the historically marked bodies of caste oppression and simultaneously cut off and limit access to resources and capital.

On the question of claim-making, Wendy Brown in *Wounded Attachments* (1995) reads Nietzsche's account of *ressentiment* (of how a sufferer seeks revenge for his/her/their suffering) and says that this resentment is a triple achievement:

It produces an affect (rage, righteousness) that overwhelms the hurt, it produces a culprit responsible for the hurt, and it produces a site of revenge to displace the hurt (a place to inflict hurt as the sufferer has been hurt) (Brown 1995, 68)

Interestingly, Brown talks about historically marginalized identities' attachments to their suffering. She argues that this constructed suffering and pain among them, and the demand made to the State based on that pain, is in contradiction to an investment in emancipation by marginalized identities. While Brown's analysis claims to offer a critique of a contemporary libertarian model of rights, I want to flip the gaze and look at communities never accused of 'identity politics'; that is, the ones

who have been in power and have a vested interest in maintaining their hold on power. Upper castes are not just overtly investing in suffering and victimhood in order to establish what being an upper caste means, but also simultaneously defining the terms of that suffering precisely because of the privileged position they occupy. What we see in contemporary upper caste-ness are newer forms of embodying pain and suffering. Understanding upper caste woundedness leads us to realize how being an upper caste signifies a process of becoming and a community in the making. The 'wound of the mind', unlike the wound of the body, as Cathy Caruth (1996) tells us, is a breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world. Drawing from Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Caruth understands the wound to tell many stories. She says,

... it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language. (Caruth 1996, 4)

Extending Caruth's provocation of the wound to fully know upper caste affect is to enmesh ourselves (painfully so, might I add) within the constantly shifting wound of the body, into the wound of the mind, into the wound of the psyche, and into the wound of the nation. Asma Abbas (2010), in response to Wendy Brown's conceptualization of wounded attachments, says that we ought not to reduce complicated journeys of seeking justice to mere reliance on notions of blame. She calls for a more humane reading of woundedness. An inquiry into questions of suffering, Abbas argues, should not diminish us as human beings by giving us readymade frameworks of action, but in fact, should ask more of us. It asks us for our intimacy and humility, and to see how suffering and our labor are co-constitutive of the world we inhabit. I take Caruth's and Abbas' provocation quite seriously. It is precisely because of inhumane everyday treatment of dalits and the histories of subjugation that I come from that I am able to extend a humane reading of woundedness to the communities that continue to oppress.

5. Woundedness manifestations

I met Raja Hindustani again in 2021. Between our first meeting in the summer of 2019 and our second meeting on a rainy evening in September 2021, he would rarely ever respond to my requests to meet. He would sometimes rudely shut me down ('what more do you want to know?') or insist on sending him a fixed set of questions ('please send me a questionnaire'), to which I always responded with 'but this is an open-ended interview ... I don't have fixed questions to ask ...'. Other times he would send me texts out of the blue late in the evening, saying, 'come meet me at [this spot]'. These spots would keep changing. One evening I finally mustered the courage to meet him. He had called me to a doctor's clinic in a locality in South Delhi. A luxurious white colored Mercedes-Benz stood outside the clinic's sleek glass door. From the surname on the clinic's front door, I knew it belonged to a brahmin. I stepped inside the clinic and Raja Hindustani stood at the end of the hallway. He conspicuously looked at me head to toe mockingly, whispered something in the clinic's male receptionist's ear (who audibly snickered) and pointed toward a room at the end of the hallway. Before I entered the room, I noticed a garlanded portrait of a man hugging Narendra Modi right above the reception. I entered the room – a typical doctor's office: a desk, chairs, and an elevated bed with curtains for patients to lie down on. The man hugging Modi in the portrait sat behind the desk, poker-faced, along with another bespectacled man on a chair opposite him. Raja Hindustani walked in and sat on the elevated bed and pointed to the only other empty seat for me to sit on. Once again, he made no attempt to introduce the two other men in the room and neither had he informed me earlier that we would be joined by other people. The other two men did not speak but continued to coldly look at me, looked me up and down while simultaneously pretending to not look at me at all.

Trying to ease up this tensed room I casually asked Raja Hindustani, 'so do you work here ... or come here to hang out-'.

(in Hindi) '*yeh sab shodiye, seedha boliye kya jaan-ne aaye hain*' (stop wasting time/beating around the bush, get to the point!), Raja Hindustani cut me before I could finish my sentence.

Even more tensed than before, I started asking about Raja Hindustani's association with Joshilay. Through questions about Joshilay, I was trying to understand Raja Hindustani's life. Raja Hindustani is a brahmin man in his mid-30s from Amethi (a small town in the North Indian state of Uttar Pradesh) who migrated to Delhi in 2008 and began his PhD in Computer Science in 2015. He read about Joshilay in a local newspaper in 2006 as an undergraduate student in Agra. Whenever I tried to ask personal questions, he would divert the discussion to reservation. My questions like 'do you like living in Delhi?' or 'do you like what you are studying' would be met with a monosyllable response or no response at all. I was often interrupted by his cellphone, and he would pick up his phone, rudely cutting me off. Because Raja Hindustani showed no interest in talking about his personal life, defeated, I asked more questions about Joshilay. An extremely frustrating back and forth ensued between Raja Hindustani and me because he kept maintaining that he doesn't want to talk about 'caste' and at one point even shouted at me saying, 'don't malign us by talking about caste!'. He explained to me that reservation in India is either meant for 'special people' or 'for the needy'. A class-based reservation is the only just reservation and is meant for the needy. He even went as far as calling the current reservation system a 'V.I.P. – very important person – policy'. Cleverly and cruelly, he had mis-named dalits and adivasis as VIPs!

'What do you mean?', I asked. Much like the *chai* metaphor before, this time Raja Hindustani explained inequality to me with a '*roti*' (chapatti) reference. In crude, informal Hindi he said, 'regardless of whether a 'special' person is hungry or not ... they are force fed *rotis*. *Rotis* should only be given to people who are hungry, regardless of class or caste'. I was repeatedly stunned by the vitriol against dalits garbed in the language of grand, abstract statements. By this statement he meant that reservation is unjustly given to people (dalits, adivasis) even when they are not 'hungry' – that is, in his opinion, they don't need it. The actual hungry people are the poor ones. The 'poor', without specifically calling it as such, meant upper castes. Berlant (1999) writes that creating political cultures that value abstract or universal personhood tends to produce privileged bodies and identities that travel unmarked and free of structural humiliation. Raja Hindustani, while sitting in a posh doctor's clinic in a highly valued real estate plot of land with his brahmin friends (who hug Modi and drive a Mercedes Benz), could easily dictate which caste fits the indicators of poverty. Glad that the mask I wore during this interview was hiding my disgust and anger, I further enquired about Joshilay's stance on whether class mattered more than caste. Visibly angry, Raja Hindustani, responded (in Hindi),

firstly, not only do they eat their share but also stand in line for more (*ek to khayiye, aur line main bhi lagiye*), and secondly, they keep standing in that line, don't step away ... they even start vomiting in that line and yet they keep eating (*us line main khade bhi hain, ulti bhi kar rahe hain, phir se kha rahe hain*), then they even shit in that line. But people who are hungry ... keep standing in that line behind them (*wahi par tatti bhi kar de ... aur jinko bhookh lagi hai, woh line main hi khade reh gaye*).

Numbed by his explicit casteism and referencing of shit, I did not seek any clarification. My ears had become red, and my tongue had started throbbing because I was biting on it really hard. My gums had started hurting because I was clenching my jaw so tightly. I am trying to recover and name the wound that is so explicitly materializing behind his hurt/hatred. As much as this statement tells us that reservation for upper castes has always been about their denial to confront their caste privilege, their bitterness toward the dalit 'other', it also tells us about the vocabularies through which their wounds endure. Upper castes and brahmins like Raja Hindustani do not have a history of being ostracized, subjugated, killed, and violated because of their caste. So, they try to create new doorways to pain by reimagining their relationship to their own caste. This reimagination is an attachment to a wound. This wound is inherently tied to what being an upper caste means. We witness that upper castes repeatedly verbalize and embody that pain to tell the world what being upper caste is. Therefore, through their wounded identities, their wounding enables them

to create paths toward realizing citizenship and political legibility over and above their already legible, stable caste privilege.

Woundedness helps us better understand the embodied nature of caste and its relationship with violence. When the object of enquiry is flipped from the dalit body, mind, and psyche onto an upper caste one we realize how upper castes are able to tell multiple stories of hurt/hurting, violation/violating. Their wound gives meaning to their identity. Ambedkar in *Annihilation of Caste* talks about how Hindus (particularly brahmins) desperately hold onto practices of endogamy and purity. He says, 'his [Hindus] whole life is one anxious effort to preserve his caste ... caste is his precious possession which he must save at any cost' (Ambedkar 1936). Similarly, Sundar Sarukkai (2009) also studies brahmins' preservation of caste boundaries while centering the ethics of touch. He argues that in examining the hereditary and permanent characteristics of untouchability, the person who refuses to touch the untouchable is the one that embodies the real site of untouchability. Building on Ambedkar and Sarukkai, I would argue that these anxieties around preservation and touch are one of the many manifestations of woundedness. To me, these wounds become a site of publicity and community formation. Where the upper castes are exposing their wound to the world to talk about abjection, I treat this wound as a story of upper caste-ness – which is misread as abjection. Mahitosh Mandal (2022), in an attempt to pathologize casteist behavior, notes that defining casteism as a clinical or psychological problem implies that there is nothing normal, logical, or natural about casteist behavior. Building on many theorists' works, including Ambedkar, who insisted on understanding the mind of the brahmin and other upper castes to make sense of violent indignities toward dalits, Mandal argues that caste-based atrocities are a direct consequence of the threatened Brahmanical ego. By shifting the gaze away from dalits, Mandal calls for caste not just to be psychologized but emphatically to be pathologized. There is indeed nothing logical about Raja Hindustani's hate. Sitting in a clinic talking to Raja Hindustani and his brahmin friends while uncovering the brahmin and upper caste wound, I was shocked by how obvious manifestations of upper caste wound primarily drive this world. In between identifying and elucidating the existence of Raja Hindustani's pain and narrating its legitimation, I am trying to create a newer understanding of caste wound cultures.

Throughout my meeting with Raja Hindustani the other two men in the room kept quiet, but the man sitting behind the desk (the one hugging Modi in the picture hung outside) finally chimed in when I asked for clarification on Joshilay's stand on the EWS quota. 'We are not against reservation per se but against the current policy of reservation', he said. 'EWS is the only fair system and based on economics', he added. 'Do you think economics has nothing to do with caste, religion etc.?', I followed up. The Modi-hugging man then started giving me an example.

There is a SC man in Delhi. His son studies in Delhi Public School (DPS is considered to be an elite high school in Delhi) and gets admitted into a good college because of reservation. Because his son gets reservation, the poor, rural people will suffer ...

This evasion tactic once again reveals a wound that bears witness not just to a specific anti-dalit hate but also upper castes' incapacities to understand humanity. The Modi-hugging man was no stranger to giving grand examples. As I later found out, the man is a popular figure. One of his most illuminating television appearances was during the Covid outbreak in March 2020. A mass gathering (of about 2000 people) in a Muslim dominated neighborhood in Delhi (Nizamuddin) of a group called Tablighi Jamaat was seen by many right-wing Hindus as a 'super spreader event' (BBC 2020). Despite Prime Minister Modi holding a huge public event to host the then US President Donald Trump just a week before, mainstream news channels floated terms like 'Corona Jihad' and 'Tablighi Virus' (Kidwai and Sahar 2020). The Modi-hugging man often appeared on COVID related panels in Hindi and English news channels justifying the accusation of 'Corona Jihad', in his capacity as a professional doctor. In the context of deadly communal riots in Delhi targeting working class Muslims a few weeks before, and public outrage against the politically charged anti-Muslim immigrant legislation, the Citizenship Amendment Act, the accusation

of 'Corona Jihad' unsurprisingly had grave consequences. Businesses run by working class, low caste Muslims were shunned throughout the country, fake videos of Muslim-appearing individuals openly sneezing in public were mass circulated and communally motivated violence against vulnerable sections of Muslims in India increased (Apoorvanand 2022). The upper caste wound has grave consequences.

As I pointed out before, I maintain that my ethnography does not relegate the wound only to the right-wing Hindus/ upper castes. It would be inaccurate to assume that Joshilay is mostly made up of right-wing aligning brahmins and upper castes. In fact, famous current centrist and leftist politicians were publicly a part of Joshilay in their college days.

Only when my attention diverted to the Modi-hugging man did I realize that Raja Hindustani was secretly recording me on his cell phone. Thankful again for the mask I was wearing, I decided to end the interview. Before leaving I thanked Raja Hindustani for his time. 'Please don't mention "caste" when you write about us. We don't want to be misrepresented. And please don't mention my name', he quickly added. I reminded him that all people in my fieldwork remain anonymous but insisted that I write their surnames to locate the person's social, caste status.

Raja Hindustani responded with a smile and with what I think was the only humane moment in our encounter and said, 'Oh! That's okay ... there are many "Pathaks" in India [laughs]'.

I exited. I could not have walked out of that clinic faster.

6. Conclusion

In this article, I explore and conceptualize how affect shapes caste. In between all the accusations, conflicting claims and abstractions made by Raja Hindustani and his friends/colleagues, what is evident is the power that upper caste victimhood wields. Throughout this article I have tried to show the everyday-ness of non-admission of casteism and yet, being simultaneously fully enmeshed within violence that caste supremacy generates. Studying upper castes is a difficult (and an ambitious) endeavor. By studying caste and affect, I am trying to ethnographically examine what makes an upper caste an upper caste. I use 'woundedness' as a feeling, action, and a tool through which upper castes make themselves known, relate to each other, and reassert their position in claiming political, economic, and social power. Juxtaposing my ethnographic encounters with the caste wound culture in contemporary South Asia, I understand wounding and woundedness as a means to understand upper caste community formation. By manipulating vocabularies of vulnerability and pain, upper castes use victimhood as a tool of power to reinscribe their hegemonic status in furtherance of caste supremacy. To be wounded, and to simultaneously wield the power to wound others, both entrenches and regenerates upper castes' long continuing power to oppress.

Notes

1. The reservation policy (or affirmative action in other contexts), as provided by the Constitution of India, was set to benefit dalits/low castes [legally and administratively categorized as Scheduled Castes (SC)] and adivasis/indigenous tribes [categorized as Scheduled Tribes (ST)]. In 1990, in addition to SC and ST individuals, reservation was given by the State to castes recognized as Other Backward Classes (OBC), i.e., castes that have historically been below the upper castes but above dalits and adivasis within the caste hierarchies practiced in India. In 2006, the government in power at the time introduced reservation in private education institutions (it was earlier applicable only to public funded universities) and in 2019, reservation was extended to economically weaker groups (categorized as EWS – Economically Weaker Section) among 'general' category (all upper castes who are not SC, ST or OBC). For a more detailed history and analysis of reservation in India, See Anand Teltumbde, *Republic of Caste: Thinking Equality In The Time Of Neoliberal Hindutva* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2018).
2. Josh (Hindi) translates to enthusiasm and energy. Joshilay could refer to a person or a collective who embodies immense enthusiasm. I have chosen the word Joshilay also for its play with a popular brahmin surname 'Joshi', which is a brahmin community mostly settled in north India.
3. This research has been reviewed and approved by Cornell University's Institutional Review Board for Human Participants (IRB).

4. Politics of caste citational practice and accountability demands from us to name and point the exact caste location. Pathak is a brahmin surname and my interviewee's real, legal surname. The only way I could make sense of hate in my field was by protecting myself through Bollywood. I take the name 'Raja Hindustani' from a popular 1996 Hindi-Bollywood movie called 'Raja Hindustani'. Raja (Hindi) translates to 'king' and Hindustani (Hindi) translates to 'Indian' symbolizing king of the country, someone's whose love is tied with the very essence of a lovable country. One of the most iconic Bollywood songs from the 1990s is from this movie called 'Aaye Ho Meri Zindagi Main Tum Bahar Ban Ke' which translates to a lover singing to another lover – you have brought spring/happiness into my life/you have entered my life. During distressing situations with Mr. Pathak, I would ironically imagine this song to have the opposite effect on me. That is, Mr. Pathak did not bring bahaar (spring) into my life. An appropriate name for Mr. Pathak who would never stop repeating his love for the country.

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