



Shailaja Paik

## *The Vulgarities of Caste: Dalits, Sexuality, and Humanity in Modern India*

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reviewed by [Kanchan Biswas](#)

*The Vulgarities of Caste: Dalits, Sexuality, and Humanity in Modern India* by Shailaja Paik published in 2022 by Stanford University Press is a well compiled and theoretically structured book on Tamasha's first social and intellectual history. [1] Shailaja Paik probes into uncharted archival materials, ethnographies, popular writings, and videos to explain how Dalit performers activists, and leaders navigated Tamasha's violence, cruelty, exploitation, and disdain. Paik employs ethnographies, films, and previously overlooked archive materials to show how Tamasha was created and shaped by conflicts over caste, gender, sexuality and culture. This book is organised into three parts excluding an elaborate introduction and conclusion. The first part discusses two chapters titled 'Policing Untouchables and Producing Tamasha in Maharashtra' and 'Constructing Caste, Desire, and Danger.' The second part includes two further chapters titled 'Ambedkar, Manuski, and Reconstructing Dalit Life-Worlds, 1920–1956' and 'Singing Resistance and Rehumanizing Poetics-Politics, Post-1930.' While the last part, consists of another set of chapters titled 'Claiming Authenticity and Becoming Marathi Post-1960' and 'Forging New Futures and Measures of Humanity.'

Tamasha is a secular character in a mobile community theatrical that has been practised mostly by Dalits for several generations. The art genre was established with blaze in the imperial Maharashtra cultural stimulation industry. Its amalgam of humour, eroticism and bombast created a formidable mix of mainstream and lowbrow. The Dalit Tamasha women, who symbolised both the yearning and revulsion of a patriarchal culture, were important to these performances. Paik positions such women in the spotlight as they regain *manuski* (human dignity) and transform from *ashlil* (vulgar) to *assli* (genuine) and *manus* (human).

Paik gives a social and intellectual history of Dalit women's stigmatised sexuality in the twentieth century, as well as patriarchal efforts to sanitise it. She draws on a huge repository of Marathi materials ranging from periodicals to music to governmental papers. *The Vulgarities of Caste* is the first text in South Asian history to investigate the vernacular conceptions of vulgarity and disgust, as well as the roles they played in shaping the sociopolitical environment of western India in the 1900s. Paik examines the processes and politics of vulgarity that are recognised and shared by men in the colonial British government, the dominant castes, and Dalit circles alike by exploring the Dalit theatre performance, Tamasha.

The author contends that, while the parameters of vulgarity are inconsistent it works to widen and re-generate caste hierarchy, class inequality and Dalit subalternity through sexual and social distinctions (including cuisine, language, music and dance). Her scholarship addresses Dalit performers which she refers to as 'vulgar public women,' who orchestrated patriarchal pressure both inside and beyond the Dalit community and manipulated it to their own interests. Paik examines how an array of significant social figures enabled the development and consolidation of caste patriarchies across the twentieth century by striving to firmly define the modern public domain and local Marathi heritage.

This book demonstrates how, despite the efforts of progressive Dalits like Dr. Ambedkar and Ambedkarite Jalsakars (9) to remake Dalit women and sanitise Tamasha of its *sringarik* (erotic) elements (50), there continues to be a substantial number of Dalit women entertainers who strain to overcome the pervasive embarrassment of being considered *ashlii*. Paik investigates the ordinary and everydayness in Dalit lives, building on and departing from the Ambedkar-centred historical perspective and movement-focused approach of Dalit studies. Subsequently, she suggests how cultural choices made by communities speak to far-reaching concerns regarding caste inclusiveness, disparity, and abusive frameworks within Indian society, and she expands through novel perspectives on the potentially transformative impact of Dalit politics and the worldwide development of gender, sexuality and humanity. Dait also inquires into the manner in which India's cultural and sexual structures of *asleel*, as well as their contentions disagreements in Marathi and subaltern Dalits, reveal alternatives and endeavours to challenge the confines associated with gender and sexuality. She further maintains that *aslii* (vulgarity) and sexuality established through Tamasha remain indispensable to contemporary times and the ingrained caste proliferation that were paramount to forming both regional and ethnic identities.

In the final chapter, where an extensive biography of famous Tamasha artist Mangalatai Bansode is covered, the empirical analysis of the book is addressed. Mangala Bansode, 66 years of age has been involved in this sector since she was seven years old. She is the eldest daughter of Tamasha legend Vithabai Narayangaonkar, who lived in Narayangaon in Pune district, which is considered the tamasha's solemn site. Mangalatai, who currently resides in Karavadi village in Satara district, began running her own *phad* (troupe) of roughly 170 people in 1983. The 'Mangala Bansode and Nitin Kumar Tamasha Mandal' (Nitin Kumar is her younger son, a singer-actor-dancer and the troupe's ace) plays in Maharashtra villages from autumn to summer each year.

Paik perceives Mangalatai's existence as a spectacle of harsh rhythm and viciousness, mocking her male audience. She adapted her theatrical artistry and the typical expressiveness of Dalit women's sexual openness into a place of resistance and aversion for Dalit women, grounded in an arbitrary caste politics. Tamasha was familial (*khandani*) for Mangalatai, an ancestral-heritage, with cultural and caste capital, a venture-backed effort, a livelihood which was important and would generate income for her household for five generations. She effectively monetised Tamasha by converting fallow grounds that were utilised for excrement (*hagandari*) into an inherited right (*vatandari*), ridiculing the system of succession in caste-based feudal slavery and leveraging on Tamasha (41).

Mangalatai's mother Vithabai designated her Lavani (25), that is her genre of music popular in Maharashtra accompanied with dance and theatrical performance, as a text of protest by using it as a political parody that illustrated the contradiction between the performativity of seduction and the lyrical denial of her sexual readiness. Like Magalatai, Vithabai also emphasised Tamasha women's exploitation, used her body to elicit excitement, and performed concealed conducts of resistance in order to record her Dalitness as abject, perilous, influenced, irrational, entangled in violence and humiliation. At the same time Vithabai's performances were dissident and resistant

against caste discrimination and patriarchy.

Pavalabai's (122) history and memory sheds light on the caste and gender battle between Dalit and touchable actors and authors. While Pavalabai's family and certain Dalit scholars recognised her agency, creative skills and successes, elite touchable men attended to Pavalabai's desperation, irresponsibility, and hopelessness by choosing her partners or moving casually between them. Dalits portray Pavalabai's subjectivity and agency as a powerful and valiant head of household, while upper-caste clients Jintikar and Dange objectify and demean her as an enticing commodity. Pavalabai received no credit from Jintikar or Dange. They had already condemned her for misbehaviour. These are the constrained perceptions of Dalit women made by touchables.

Most importantly, Mangalatai's son Nitinchandra summed up the force of Tamasha women's performance violence: 'Sagalyana sambhalun karava lagata' (We must continue, [to be] hospitable, flexing, challenging, accepting, and negotiating with all). Tamasha folks had to stay put in order to prevent societal upheaval. These were the awful boundaries they had to live within (310). Although Nitinchandra asserts, Tamasha served as a medium for Dalits to proclaim their identity, question the social order, and protest centuries of injustice. Paik demonstrated how these inconsistent and contested narratives and points of view interplay to recreate Pavalabai's, Magalatai's and Dalit Tamasha performers lifeworld.

Paik concludes the book by arguing that the ostensibly objective, theoretical, and academic approaches towards the study of Tamasha artistic endeavours serve fresh blows in the conflict between the advocates and detractors of *shil-ashlil-manus-assli*; they keep affecting hereditary Dalit artists whose circumstances are conveniently designated as 'backwards, disgusting, dirty, vulgar, and corrupt' (355). She brilliantly pointed out that Tamasha women's successful politics lay not in 'producing a pure, political opposition but in forging possibilities for their futures from presumably impure resources and precarious positions and expanding categories of manus and assli' (355). Dalit artists entwined the struggle towards re-identification of self, through Tamasha performances; they severely shatter the organised, schooled and sophisticated Dalit modernity of their caste counterparts. Yet Tamasha women exercise their few modes of agency while surviving the structural violence of *ashlil* caste and untouchability. Paik suggests that the academic audience, their ideologies, various viewpoints, and negotiations deserve to be heard as recent uprisings spread to an even more diversified global stage.

Her research is supported by the American Council of Learned Societies, the Stanford Humanities Centre, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Institute of Indian Studies, Yale University, Emory University, the Ford Foundation, and the Charles Phelps Taft Research Centre, among others. Paik has written essays in major international publications on a number of topics, including the politics of naming, Dalit and African American women, Dalit women's education, and new Dalit femininity in colonial India. Her scholarly and research interests include, among others, human rights, gendering caste and subaltern history.

Existing literature has scantily focused on the folk-art form of Tamasha. Even the very minuscule studies to date, have largely focused on its historical genesis, economic struggles and expression of ethos of a community. Prominent literature includes Julia Hollander's (2007) *Indian Folk Theatres*.<sup>[2]</sup> However, it is true to state that Tamasha's performance space has likewise decreased to largely rural places. In its heyday, Tamasha played in major cities like Mumbai. Presently Tamasha has been curtailed by government regulations to a great extent. The troupes are now prohibited from playing after 10 p.m., even on the periphery of cities. Further changes in technology, audience preferences and diminishing venue availability have all had an impact on Tamasha. Thus, scholarly intervention is the need of the hour. In such times of necessary

documentation and discourse, Paik presents this extraordinary book depicting not only biographical anecdotes of Tamashan women, but also theoretically anchoring the study within the variables of a caste-gender nexus depicting the politics of vulgarity. This book is an excellent read which requires much patience and careful understanding.

## Notes

[1] Tamasha is a 'traditional form of Marathi theatre, often with singing and dancing, widely performed by local or travelling theatre groups within the state of Maharashtra, India.' See '[Tamasha](#),' *Wikipedia*, accessed 21 Nov. 2023.

[2] Julia Hollander, *Indian Folk Theatres*, London: Routledge, 2007.

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