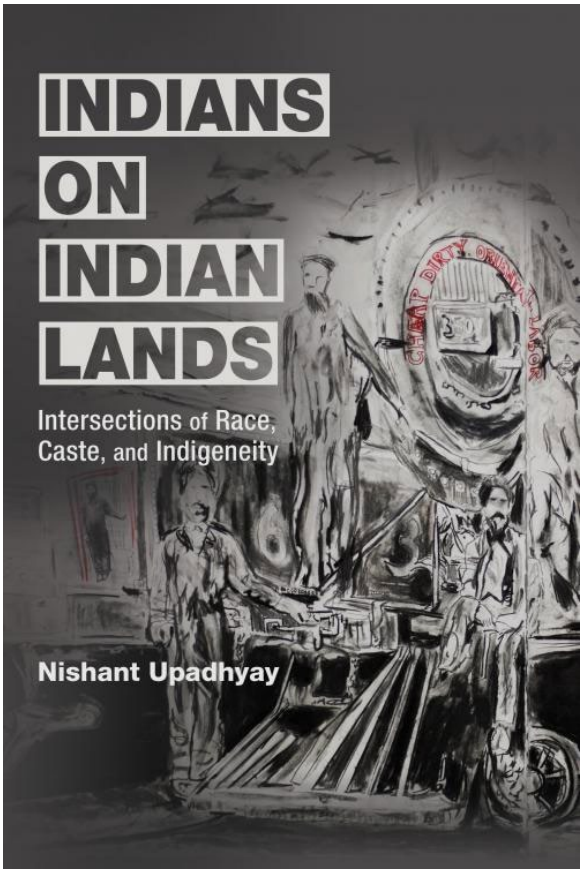
2025, Vol. 9, No. 2
ISSN: 2771-3520

Book Forum

Book: Indians on Indian Lands: Intersections of Race, Caste, and Indigeneity
Author: Nishant Upadhyay
Publisher: University of Illinois Press, 2024



Book Cover: by artist Jagdeep Raina

Abstract

This forum brings together three reflections on Nishant Upadhyay's recent book, *Indians on Indian Lands: Intersections of Race, Caste, and Indigeneity* (2024). Comments were initially presented as part of a panel at the Annual Conference on South Asia in Madison, Wisconsin, November 1, 2024. Following the three short essays is a response from the author.

1. **Caste Maneuvers Under Colonialism**- prabhdeep singh kehal
2. **Gendered Caste Complicities** - Sailaja Krishnamurti
3. **Transnational Caste Maneuvers** - Mona Bhan
4. **Author Response** - Nishant Upadhyay

Caste Maneuvers Under Colonialism

prabhdeep singh kehal

Nishant Upadhyay's *Indians on Indian Lands* is a powerful contribution and challenge to specific scholarly traditions and their scholars. Through structural, contextual, and relational analyses of race, caste, and Indigeneity, Upadhyay makes three significant contributions to scholarship on transnationalism, decoloniality, colonialism, and Sikhs. In particular, Upadhyay shifts our lens toward a more focused critique of casteism and how scholars are implicated and complicit in such casteism through knowledge production. For Sikh Studies and the study of Sikhs and Sikhi, Upadhyay provides a fresh approach for identifying and challenging casteism within Sikh communities in light of anti-Sikh racism.

First, as a structural contribution, Upadhyay names caste maneuvers as a practice of settler colonialism that displaces Indigeneity and Native peoples in one place to empower brahmanism and dominant casted settlers in others. While their study focuses on Indian migrants from dominant caste backgrounds who settled in Turtle Island (present-day Canada) at two different periods of time, caste maneuvers can occur in different places and be enacted by different groups. As they define it, caste maneuvers are "performances of casteless-ness" (Upadhyay, 2024, p. 38). Through these maneuvers, "brahmin and dominant caste subjectivities are made more palatable than [those subjectivities of] the caste/racial/colonial Others" (p. 38). These maneuvers leverage "discourses of tradition and culture [are used to] occlude brahminical, anti-Indigenous, and patriarchal violence inherent to hindu religion and society" (p. 112).

Upadhyay initiates this conversation by critiquing how knowledge production operates within postcolonial studies. They argue that in this field, brahmin and dominant caste scholars often remove caste as a factor of analysis, prioritizing critiques of Euro-American colonialism while neglecting right-wing hindu nationalist and caste-based imperialism. By beginning their critique at this point and offering a re-entry into established traditions of analysis, Upadhyay seeks to convince us of their structural argument – how knowledge created through caste maneuvers has sustained and continues to sustain settler colonialism both here (Turtle Island) and there (South Asia). They connect this critique to broader decolonial and anticolonial movements against Western imperialism, through Fanon's assertion that "The intellectual behaves in this phase like a common opportunist. In fact, he has not stopped maneuvering" (Fanon, 1963/2005, p. 49). Specifically critiquing citational practices to challenge all scholars across postcolonial studies, Upadhyay argues that caste maneuvers are "most visible through the citational practices of Indian postcolonial scholars who have heavily relied on white scholars. Citing Marx, Foucault, Derrida, and Gramsci, while erasing Phule, Ambedkar, and Periyar." This citational maneuver, they contend, "both de-castes these scholars and moves them closer to whiteness" (p. 38). By occluding "questions of caste, race, Indigeneity, and postcolonial occupation," caste maneuvers "[pivot to make] the brahmin and dominant caste Indian scholar as the colonized Other" (p. 38-39). In line with Akhil Kang's theorization of treating "upper caste" as an ethnographic category, Upadhyay underscores the importance of naming and critically examining upper caste "woundedness," which provides a stronger understanding of the embodied nature of caste and its relationship with violence (Kang, 2024).

By framing caste maneuvers as a transnational practice, Upadhyay's structural critique of knowledge production is both deliberate and purposeful. They aim to provide us with a grammar to identify how casteism is enshrined in knowledge production, social policies, and cultural and spiritual norms. Naming is central to this process, and Upadhyay rightly challenges scholars of South Asian heritage, like myself, to name our caste backgrounds–to reveal our casted statuses. In the liberal, Euro-American academy, self-identifications are often disconnected from critiques of power and tied to maintaining colonial systems (Coulthard, 2014; Gani & Khan, 2024). In contrast, revealing one's caste location is fundamentally about revealing the violence of brahmanism that is hidden in the division between public and private realms.

Upadhyay notes how this division has operated since colonial times:

> This division of the public and private realms has been a fundamental tactic deployed by the dominant castes to maintain their caste positionalities and power. This division allows for brahmin and dominant caste subjects to project their caste identities as private, domestic, and cultural; while, on the other hand, caste-oppressed subjects are forever marked as the caste Other in the public realm (p. 36).

This naming is not like the performative statements of identity that are common in Western nations and academic spaces (Adjepong, 2019; Gani & Khan, 2024; Kaur-Bring, 2020; Robinson, 2022; Vidal-Ortiz, 2004). In those contexts, identity categories are often simply stated, as if naming alone provides an account for how knowledge was produced (Collins, 2012; Davis III, 2019; Dodworth, 2018; Falcón, 2008; Hanson & Richards, 2019; Henson, 2020; Lynne, 2021; Matlon, 2022). Instead, such declarations often function to publicly process guilt among the dominators (Gani & Khan, 2024). Such as me saying, "I come from a jatt agricultural background in my family line." Beyond simply stating this, the act must be more than a speech act where the action is simply me speaking and assuaging my guilt (Ahmed, 2006).

Instead, naming our backgrounds must be a disempowering act because it should tell you that my interpretation of the social world is shaped by casteism and is unreliable when it comes to narrating the full extent of caste domination (Arondekar, 2009). Rather, our perspectives should reveal our relationships to violence and woundedness (Kang, 2024). This is because I occupy a position in a world that is designed to ensure that those like me are seen as the sole truth-tellers – a power structure we must name and challenge when revealing our backgrounds.

For instance, in what ways were my Punjabiness, Sikhness, presumed manhood and heterosexuality, and educational credentials perceived as "fitting" for someone in my position as I navigated US academia? Upadhyay makes similar observations throughout their text, noting how they were afforded the benefit of the doubt by many of their hindu informants the moment they learned of their last name, which is a brahmin surname. Even among non-hindus, such as the Sikhs in their study, there was a cultural understanding that this surname signified someone who produces reliable knowledge. This perception not only resulted in more open-ended and longer interviews with some initially reluctant informants but also enabled Upadhyay to gather and analyze insights that became the foundation for this book, now part

of their tenure file. In a caste supremacist world, caste functions to ensure that even critiques of caste are often shaped and delivered by those occupying dominator positions – myself included.

As a Sikh and as a person on this planet, it is my responsibility to disrupt and end systems that create hierarchies of humanity. Yet, even when I actively challenge these structures, I am rewarded by them. In other words, not only are dominant-caste individuals like myself and Upadhyay unable to fully articulate the impact of casteism on others, but we are also entrapped by designs and legacies created by ourselves and our ancestors to withhold humanity from others. These entrapments must be interrogated and dismantled.

Upadhyay continues their structural argument about casteism and knowledge production by shifting to specific contexts in order to understand the place-based dynamics of casteism when brahmin and dominant caste Indians settle in new regions. Their second contribution lies in this contextualization: *Indians on Indian Lands* connects casteism and settler colonialism within transnational projects. Upadhyay shows how the incorporation and inclusion of dominant casted settlers into settler states strengthened settler colonialism in Turtle Island and bolster brahmanism in southern Asia. While their first contribution provides an intellectual foundation for critiquing knowledge production, this second contribution brings attention to the specific places and subjects of Upadhyay's research.

For example, Upadhyay examines caste in two distinct settings and time periods through two sets of interview subjects. The first group comprises Sikh retired workers—men who had worked in the lumber sawmills and women who had worked in fish canneries in British Columbia between 1960s and the 1990s. These workers had migrated during the 1960s and 1970sfrom different parts of Punjab to Turtle Island, entering through Canada. These retired Sikh workers now reside in Vancouver and Surrey. The second group of interviewees, in contrast, consists of "'high-skilled' dominant caste Indian hindus" currently working in the tar sands of Alberta (p. 6). The Alberta-based interviewees are described as "highly educated and skilled, upwardly mobile, dominant caste Indian hindus, and in heterosexual (presumedly endogamic) marriages" (p. 6). Despite differences in dominating caste positions, religious backgrounds, and genders, Upadhyay brings these two groups together to understand the shared ways that caste operates under conditions of racial colonial capitalism.

Upadhyay argues that this contextualization is important because it shows the settler colonial nature of casteism and its endurance. The transnational link is established through projections of Otherness, or what Sara Ahmed (2000) terms 'stranger fetishism'. In this concept, someone perceives a "stranger" in one place and conflates that being with a "stranger" in another place, creating a similarity and connection between these two strangers through the voyeur's perceived strangeness. Upadhyay uses this framework to make their argument on the transnational and colonial nature of caste, which they summarize as, "for diasporic Indians on Turtle Island, the Indian Other (Native Other) is constructed through processes of stranger fetishism which allows for the dominant caste Indian self to recognize Indigenous Others as the stranger" (p. 100).

By conflating these 'strangers', dominant caste Indians are able to use their norms from one location – southern Asian – in two ways: they position themselves above Indigenous and Native peoples in *both* places and establish themselves as the model settlers. Or, as Upadhyay emphasizes for dominant caste Indians,

> anti-Indigenous racism [on Turtle Island] operates from existing anti-Adivasi, anti-Tribal, and anti-Dalit ideologies that get mapped onto Indigenous people of Turtle Island. Brahmin and dominant caste Indians in white settler states position themselves within these modalities of race, Indigeneity, and caste, here and there (p. 100).

This transnational nature of casteism, Upadhyay argues, reveals three key dynamics in how caste operates on Turtle Island: the interchangeability of Othering processes ("what is bad there, is bad here"), the homogenizing of Others ("who is bad there, is bad here"), and the disposability of these collective Others ("whomever is bad, is unneeded"). Importantly, these processes are not straightforward; in fact, the complexity of domination often relies on a simplicity of pathologization that obscures its inherent complexity.

While the logic is based on simple binaries, on Turtle Island, it enables dominant caste Indians to join the ranks of settlers, positioning themselves above the Indigenous Other by projecting "discursive binaries on Indigenous people in Canada, [affirming] their inclusion in the state, [marking] their ascendency toward white-settlerness and [making] the Indian immigrants the 'better' Canadian" (p. 101). Dominant caste Indians do not need to actively strive to achieve this position because this mapping is mediated by the settler state: the state takes the casted settlers' investments and inclusion within the Canadian settler state to teach the casted settler "who the Native is through state-sanctioned anti-Native discourses" (p. 101).

Though I could pull examples from Upadhyay's book, I want to focus on their methodology for deconstructing the dominant caste speaker through experiences of gender and sexuality to reveal the caste Other. Autoethnographically, I extend their analysis on the transposability of Othering (Kaur-Bring, 2020). Growing up, my femininity was policed as inappropriate, often framed against not just girls, women, and gender-nonconforming individuals but also jatt cisheterosexual men. While I internalized this as trauma, also it also reflected casteist practices attempting to mold me into the jatt Sikh Punjabi man who upholds a caste power structure.

In later conversations with my father about my own queerness and transness, he eventually opened up about knowing someone like me from childhood. However, that person had been from a marginalized caste background and their gender and sexual nonconformity was interpreted as an inherent to the casted Other, not traits associated with the dominators' caste or faith. This explains why my father believed he had never seen anyone like me. By categorizing gender nonconformity as a way to mark a distinction, people can use caste maneuvers to maintain ideas of gender and sexual purity, such as in my case. Such purity is necessary for caste to function on Turtle Island because claims of gender and sexual purity enable claims of racial purity. Upadhyay argues and shows how assertions of "'racial purity" and distancing from

the caste and racial Others are central to the caste maneuvers used by brahmin and dominant caste Indians to claim superiority and achieve the "model minority" status" (p. 90).

As a final contribution, Upadhyay also contributes a relational understanding of intimacy under colonialism. They call these "colonial intimacies" without a normative distinction that these are good/bad intimacies. They simply are forms of intimacies existing under colonialism. Upadhyay uses the concept of colonial intimacies to analyze gender and sexuality through careful relational analyses of differentially positioned dominant caste individuals. I will share three instances of this relational analysis: queer/homosexual intimacies between settlers and Natives; heterosexual intimacies between settlers and Natives; and queer/homosexual intimacies within settlers.

When discussing queer/homosexual intimacies between settlers and Natives, Upadhyay analyzes Tomson Highway's (Cree) story "The Lover Snake" from 1985. The story portrays "'a tale of two lovers who were 'more than friends, more than brothers, more than lovers, even'—a Sikh man, Dahljeet, and a Cree man" (p. 128). The narrator describes their intimacy:

> It was almost as if, in the midst of certain totally unexpected moments in time we spent together, there would arrive from somewhere a certain buzzing half- sound, a certain inner ringing as perfect in pitch and purity as the tone from a tuning fork. It was beautiful. (Upadhyay, 2024, pp. 129–130).

While Dahljeet and the Cree narrator ultimately cannot maintain their relationship for untold reasons, Upadhyay uses this example to highlight both the possibilities and the inherent limitations of colonial intimacies. Though it might be interpreted as a typical relationship falling out between lovers, Upadhyay highlights the importance of considering the different colonial positions these two men occupied. Drawing on their narrators' accounts of heterosexual experiences between settlers and Natives in their interviews, Upadhyay notes that colonialism must be considered as an element of their breakup.

Upadhyay emphasizes this point further by juxtaposing this queer intimacy against heterosexual intimacy between settlers and Natives. They use the story of a romance between Indigenous and Asian Canadian characters who formed a sort of "hybridized Native-Asian" family to emphasize dynamics they saw among their informants. Upadhyay, along with other scholars, notes that this "hybridization" under colonialism enabled Asian Canadians to belong to the settler state. In contrast, until 1985, Indigenous women and their children would lose their Indian status by marrying "outside" Indigenous communities. On top of that, this hybridization often led to the cultural exclusion of Natives from Asian communities. When accounting for colonialism, Upadhyay argues, this

> belonging is akin to claims of early white settlers belonging to Canada, and these relationships appear strikingly similar to fur trade relationships between white settlers and Native women, where white men relied heavily on Native women for their expertise and knowledge. (p. 133).

As a key point of their relational analyses, Upadhyay identifies these similarities but cautions against homogenization. They assert, "I am not comparing white men to South Asian men, but I posit that we can understand racialized masculinity vis-à-vis Native women's agency more critically through this juxtaposition" (p. 133). The point of analyzing colonial intimacies, they argue, need not be about assigning normative judgements but to reconnect these relationships to structures of power. Turning the dominating logic of caste as transnational in on itself to consider how caste operates across faith backgrounds (Kang, 2024), Upadhyay also extends this insight on Indigenous women's agency to southern Asia. Specifically, as they uplift, "the logic of brahmanical patriarchy also have been entrenched within Sikh communities, as Amritpal Kaur (2020) notes: 'The life of a Dalit woman in Punjab is a true picture of the intersectional reality of caste, class and gender.' Many of the caste-based practices have continued in the Sikh diaspora" (Upadhyay, 2024, p. 34).

Finally, in an instance of queer/homosexual intimacy within settlers, Upadhyay turns this analysis on themselves to critique their own "casted-settler pessimism" that seeps through their analysis. They write, "In each chapter, I argue that dominant caste Indians cannot be in decolonial alliances with Indigenous struggles because of our positionalities and complicities in varying interconnected structures of imperial power across South Asia and Turtle Island" (p. 142-43). At the same time, they also deconstruct this pessimism as a "function of my caste positionality as well as my academic training" making it more akin to white pessimism because the pessimism is "produced through the logic of privilege and power" (p. 143). Their tendency to only perceive only bleak futures is a luxury and privilege—the presumption that there is nothing that can be done productively— while hope has been placed on those who are Othered to assert that other worlds are possible. In their final deconstruction, they tie this pessimism to how they produced knowledge through this book: "this book has been invested in illustrating the possibilities and impossibilities of solidarities, more than often ruminating on the materialities of brahmin and dominant caste hindu complicities and foreclosing any possibilities of decolonial relationalities by these communities" (p. 143). While they occupy a position of truth-teller within a caste hierarchy, they seek to dismantle this position. Doing this effectively is a tenuous task, but one that perhaps breaks the pessimistic worldview that nothing is possible.

Through these three contributions, Upadhyay advances scholarship on transnationalism, decoloniality, colonialism, and Sikhs towards a more focused critique of casteism and scholars' implicatedness and complicity in it. This work provides a much-needed corrective to much of Sikh Studies and the broader study of Sikhs and Sikhi. However, at times, Upadhyay moves quickly through their theoretical points to assert interpretations of theoretical points rather than fully reveal the machinations of caste that underpin those theoretical points. For instance, which state-sanctioned anti-Native artifacts or narratives were pivotal in connecting the Native and Indigenous Others here and there? Does it matter what tools dominant caste southern Asians use to weave themselves into the settler state, or is it sufficient to know that they can and do so? Similarly, when discussing Sikhs as targets of racism due to their status as a minoritized faith, Upadhyay notes the importance of distinguishing racism emerging from Islamophobia that Sikhs experience, and the racism Sikhs experience tied specifically to anti-Sikhness. An example of the former is racism that targets Sikhs for their turbans within white settler states, while an example of the latter is Sikhi being subsumed as a derivative of hinduism within dominant caste hindu spaces. While

accurate, this theoretical point is rarely re-engaged, if at all, in the text. However, Upadhyay's careful relational analyses of subject positions indicate further possibilities. A more in-depth analysis of the interviews would reveal even further insights into the mundanity of casteism, and how it is reworked and remade under differing conditions of colonialism and incorporation. For instance, comparing the experiences of retired Sikh workers with those of dominant caste hindu Indians who work in Alberta today could reveal further insights into how faith and caste interlink to perpetuate casteism. While they rightfully analyzed the similarities in their book, the next question would be to analyze the differences across their interviews to reveal the uses of faith to enshrine casteism.

A key lesson of *Indians on Indian Lands* is that when dominators speak, our actions should redirect attention to that which materially and culturally empowers us. Furthermore, these actions should dismantle the structures and pathways that privilege us in order to create space for others to imagine liberatory futures. We must act differently from postcolonial scholars who have "de-casted" themselves, such as Partha Chatterjee, Gayatri C. Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Vijay Prashad, and Vandana Shiva – individuals whom Upadhyay identifies as engaging in caste maneuvers within postcolonial studies (p. 38). Upadhyay argues that these scholars bill themselves as "the embodiment of the authentic global south critique," while they "often systematically sideline and invisibilize Kashmiri, Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi, Tribal, Indigenous, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, working-class, and other South Asian critiques of the Indian state and its imperialism" (p. 38). In doing so, these scholars also co-opt "the works of Black, Indigenous, other racialized, and global south scholars to often position [postcolonial studies] as one of the most legible bodies of scholarship on colonialism and imperialism" (p. 38).

Upadhyay draws connections between postcolonial scholars' caste privilege, their silences on casteism, and their neglect of Kashmir to make a connection between brahmanism and Zionism in their text. Though they spend ample time specifying the nature of this interconnection, they also put forth an implication for challenging structural power: much like beneficiaries of Zionism must reject it and its consequent violences, those in empowered positions by brahmanism must target its structures and pursue its abolition. I prefer the term "position" rather than "identity" here because, when one follows caste across time, space, and place, dominant caste individuals frequently adopt new identities – racialized, minoritized– in lieu of their casted identities. All while holding onto the networks of power and exclusion bestowed upon us by caste-based societies simply because we are not the Other that brahmanism places outside of humanity and existence.

Ultimately, critiques like mine, that desire more from Upadhyay's analysis, are indicative of a well-argued manuscript that has laid fertile ground for future investigations. While ruminating on casteism and its limitations is increasingly becoming an academic pastime, Upadhyay reminds us that such reflection often serves casteism and dominant caste individuals. Ruminating is not the task; dismantling and abolition of casteism is the task.

Author Note

prabhdeep singh kehal *investigates how racism, cisheterosexism, and colonialism are experienced within cultural organizations, asking what constitutes anti-racist and anti-colonial strategies for equitable cultural inclusion. Their book project explores how cultural change and demographic inclusion manifest in professors' debates over the hirability of elite junior, tenure-track candidates. They are the founder and current lead of the Sikh LGBTQIA+ Oral History Project, which explores how queerness, transness, casteism, and Sikhi manifest in mundane life experiences. kehal received their PhD in Sociology from Brown University and is currently a Postdoctoral Associate at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.*

References

Adjepong, A. (2019). Invading ethnography: A queer of color reflexive practice. *Ethnography*, *20*(1), 27–46. https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138117741502

Ahmed, S. (2000). *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*. Routledge.

Ahmed, S. (2006). The Nonperformativity of Antiracism. *Meridians*, *7*(1), 104–126.

Arondekar, A. (2009). *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India*. Duke University Press Books.

Collins, P. H. (2012). *On Intellectual Activism* (2nd edition). Temple University Press.

Coulthard, G. S. (2014). *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. University of Minnesota Press.

Davis III, J. (2019). Law, Prison, and Double-Double Consciousness: A Phenomenological View of the Black Prisoner's Experience. *The Yale Law Journal Forum*, *128*, 1126–1144.

Dodworth, K. (2018). 'A real African woman!' Multipositionality and its effects in the field. *Ethnography*, *22*(2), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138118802951

Falcón, S. M. (2008). Mestiza Double Consciousness: The Voices of Afro-Peruvian Women on Gendered Racism. *Gender and Society*, *22*(5), 660–680.

Fanon, F. (with Sartre, J.-P., & Bhabha, H. K.). (2005). *The Wretched of the Earth* (R. Philcox, Trans.). Grove Press. (Original work published 1963)

Gani, J. K., & Khan, R. M. (2024). Positionality Statements as a Function of Coloniality: Interrogating Reflexive Methodologies. *International Studies Quarterly*, *68*(2), sqae038. https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqae038

Hanson, R., & Richards, P. (2019). *Harassed: Gender, Bodies, and Ethnographic Research*.

Henson, B. (2020). "Look! A Black Ethnographer!": Fanon, Performance, and Critical Ethnography. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, *20*(4), 322–335. https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708619838582

Kang, A. (2024). To be upper caste/to be a victim. *Contemporary South Asia*, *42*(3), 301–315. https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2024.2375722

Kaur, A. (2020, November 21). *Dalits of Punjab – Dalit Women and Their Struggles*. Velivada. https://velivada.com/2020/11/21/dalits-of-punjab-dalit-women-and-their-struggles/

Kaur-Bring, N. (2020). Autoethnography: A Potential Method for Sikh Theory to Praxis Research. *Religions*, *11*(12), Article 12. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11120681

Lynne, A. (2021). Paired Double Consciousness: A Du Boisian Approach to Gender and Transnational Double Consciousness in Thai Kathoey Self-Formation. *Social Problems*, *68*(2), 250–266.

Matlon, J. (2022). *A Man among Other Men: The Crisis of Black Masculinity in Racial Capitalism*. Cornell University Press.

Robinson, B. A. (2022). Non-Binary Embodiment, Queer Knowledge Production, and Disrupting the Cisnormative Field: Notes From a Trans Ethnographer. *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 10608265221108204. https://doi.org/10.1177/10608265221108204

Upadhyay, N. (2024). *Indians on Indian Lands: Intersections of Race, Caste, and Indigeneity*. University of Illinois Press.

Vidal-Ortiz, S. (2004). On Being a White Person of Color: Using Autoethnography to Understand Puerto Ricans' Racialization. *Qualitative Sociology*, *27*(2), 179–203. https://doi.org/10.1023/B:QUAS.0000020692.05355.6e

Gendered Caste Complicities

Sailaja Krishnamurti

Nishant Upadhyay's *Indians on Indian Lands: Intersections of Race, Caste, and Indigeneity* (2024) is a crucial intervention in the study of racialization, power, and diasporic settler communities, theorizing caste as both locally specific and transnationally mobile. Through interviews and literary analyses, Upadhyay shows how caste migrates with South Asians, shaping how they understand themselves and the lands they come to occupy as settler workers.

To build this argument, Upadhyay draws on interviews conducted at two sites in Canada, where the labor of Indian migrants directly enables the extraction of resources from traditional Indigenous lands. The first site is the Lower Mainland area of coastal British Columbia (BC), where Indians arriving in the 1960s and 1970s found working-class employment in pulp mills and fish canneries. The second site is the northern Alberta oil patch, where professionalized Indian emigrants have settled in growing numbers since the 1980s oil boom. Throughout the book, Upadhyay draws attention to the specificities of migration histories, colonial settler practices, and postcolonial ties that shape these regions. By juxtaposing these two sites, Upadhyay powerfully illuminates how these distinct migrant cohorts understand themselves in relation to national belonging, land, and Indigenous people.

In addition to interviews with workers in BC and Alberta, Upadhyay draws on literary sources that depict encounters between South Asian and Indigenous peoples to build an argument about colonial intimacies. A third site explored in the book, discussed only in the conclusion, is the urban space of Tkaron:to (Toronto), where Upadhyay interviews South Asian activists challenging settler colonialism. Through these multiple sites and methods, the book artfully exemplifies what Upadhyay, following Visweswaran (2010) calls "affiliative interdisciplinarity".

While much to commend about this significant contribution to the study of South Asian diaspora and settler colonialism, I will focus my reflections on three core concepts in the book: the 'caste maneuver', complicity, and casted-settler pessimism. As a scholar of brahmin hindu ancestry who studies South Asia, I often grapple, frequently unsuccessfully, with naming the ways that my caste privilege has directly contributed to my access to knowledge, spaces, and communities. Upadhyay's work on these concepts resonates deeply, standing out as both generative and critical.

Until recently, many scholars of South Asian American Studies and South Asian religions, many of whom come from dominant caste heritage, perpetuated the widely held assumption that caste was somehow left behind in South Asia and/or confined to the historical past. Upadhyay refers to this obscuring of the "logics of Brahminism and settler colonialism" as a 'caste maneuver' – an act performed by someone with caste privilege to obscure their advantage and appear 'casteless', or innocent of caste (Upadhyay, 2024, p.38). More recently, and following the lead of Dalit scholars and activists, there is an emerging body of scholarship that exposes how caste continues to function in various ways in diaspora communities (Ayyathurai, 2021; FCHS Collective, 2022; Krishnamurti, 2021; Patel, 2016; Upadhyay, 2019). As Dalit

scholars, writers, and creators have gained visibility, and become more accessible to English-speaking scholars, it has become increasingly clear how such 'caste maneuvers' have shaped South Asian Studies by continually obscuring the ongoing realities of caste in both South Asia and its diasporas. Upadhyay especially indicts the legacy of postcolonial scholars from India, largely upper caste elites, whose work hinges on identification as abject colonial subject. Upadhyay sees this denial of caste complicity as a move towards 'caste innocence', echoing Dr. BR Ambedkar's scathing critique of 'touchable Hindus,' who have the "supreme merit of satisfying themselves that they are not responsible for the problem of the Untouchables". Upadhyay's project is to make caste complicities visible, and "to offer methodologies to unsettle the brahmin and dominant caste hindu on Indigenous lands." (2024, p. 41).

To this end, the core of Upadhyay's methodology is an insistence on naming ongoing complicities with caste and colonialism. Not only does caste continue to exist in diaspora, but it also becomes assimilated into the machinery of settler colonial ideology. Some caste-privileged Indian settlers in the book explicitly describe Indigenous people in Canada with the same prejudices they hold against caste-oppressed people in India: they are lazy, prone to vice, and benefitting from unearned state support. Yet, Upadhyay also uncovers how caste-privileged hindus co-opt the language of Indigenous rights and decolonization to make claims about hinduism as indigenous to India (2024, *p.* 113). This exemplifies casteist settler logic at its extreme, but as Upadhyay shows, even progressive scholars and activists fall into this trap.

In Upadhyay's reading, therefore, caste-privileged Indians can never truly be in solidarity with Indigenous people on Turtle Island any more than they can align with Dalit, Adivasi, and caste-oppressed people in South Asia—because, in both cases, their very existence and presence are contingent on the continual oppression of those others. Throughout the book, Upadhyay reiterates that "dominant caste Indians cannot be in decolonial alliances with Indigenous struggles because of our positionalities and complicities in varying interconnected structures of imperial power across South Asia and Turtle Island" (2024, *p.* 142). The work of dominant caste Indians, Upadhyay argues, begins with acknowledging their complicity with oppression.

As part of this practice of naming complicities, Upadhyay carefully documents how perceptions of caste facilitate access during the interviews. One interlocutor, recognizing their surname as brahmin, addressed them as "*Panditji*". In another instance, a Fort McMurray engineer learns their surname and welcomes them as a *gharwale* –someone from the same 'house' or clan. This perception of brahminness gives Upadhyay access to stories that might not have been shared with individuals of a different caste or race. This might be understood as an intentional caste maneuver: Upadhyay's caste capital enabled them to perform brahminness, and Indianness, in ways that make them intelligible to their interlocutors and allows them access to their casteist and racist ideologies. It is unlikely, perhaps even impossible, for someone who was not able to perform (or pass with) some elements of brahmin masculinity and Hindi-speaking 'authenticity' to have achieved the same access. In Chapter 3, Upadhyay highlights how upper-caste hindu emigrants in Fort McMurray transpose their complaints about caste-based reservations in India to benefits received by Indigenous people in Canada: "Without provocation, the willingness to share their biased and casteist outlooks illustrates how rampant casteism is within these Indian diasporic communities, and how integral it is to their claims to citizenship and belonging in Canada." (2024, p. 103).

This intentional use of caste maneuvering exposes a reality that is normally only shared among people who assume kinship through caste.

While Upadhyay reflects on how assumptions of caste, kinship, and gender shape their encounters with respondents throughout the book, there is more to explore about how gender shapes understandings of caste. Caste maneuvers are always gendered, and both gender and caste can either provide or limit access in the field. Upadhyay acknowledges that they have more data on men in these spaces than women and notes that their perceived gender presentation as a cis man likely facilitated greater access to men. Although this is a practical limitation of the research, it is unfortunate that readers gain less insight into the women's experiences and contributions to these extractive industries. In both communities, the women interviewed are primarily marriage migrants who provide domestic care, earn income, navigate social conflict, and raise children. These roles make them an integral part of the economic life of their households, the communities, and the settler colonial projects. However, as women, they also bear the burden of performing both gender and caste roles in specific ways, especially with outsiders.

Upadhyay conducted interviews in the Lower Mainland with eight men who were mill workers and eight women who worked in fish canneries, all of whom emigrated from rural Punjab in the 1960s and 1970s. In an offhand comment at the beginning of chapter 2, Upadhyay refers to these interviewees as "aunties and uncles," a phrase that reflects both a slippage and an acknowledgement. Upadhyay is accepted into the social space of these community elders as someone who is intelligible as a Punjabi-speaking Indian, and as a person who understands the implicit casted and gendered norms that govern these interactions. The women interviewed seem careful not to share experiences that might seem too negative, and often downplay experiences of racism, sexism, or conflicts with neighbours or coworkers. These women insisted that conditions were "good" or "fine", and avoided describing experiences of explicit racism, possibly "because they were not comfortable with me as an outsider, not from within the Punjabi community from British Columbia, and as an assumed cis man researcher" (Upadhyay, 2024, p. 80). Upadhyay interprets this insistence on "things are good" as a way for the women to affirm belonging in Canada, but I wonder about the degree to which this may also be mediated by South Asian gender norms which require women to bear suffering without complaint and without revealing it to men.

In the "hyper-masculinized" environment of Fort McMurray, Upadhyay interviewed ten men and six women, all first-generation migrants. The men were all engineers, while the women who worked held less skilled jobs. Similar to the BC group, most of the women had emigrated as spouses. Upadhyay observes how the interviewees' presumptions of their gender facilitated access to the intensely masculinist world of the oil patch but also limited interactions with women. They carefully describe how women were present in the domestic space during interviews, moving in and out of rooms, serving tea, and caring for children while 'the men' spoke. Upadhyay interprets this kind of labor as part of the larger mechanics of extraction, observing that "[h]eteronormativity, race, and endogamic logics of caste are deeply intertwined in the neoliberal economy" (2024, p. 70). It would be valuable to explore more about these women's experiences and their perceptions of cultivating 'belonging' as settlers. It is, however, clear that the intersecting hierarchical relations of gender and caste significantly determine what Upadhyay is able to access in their research.

Upadhyay meticulously identifies how caste maneuvers are at play throughout the book. They also reflect on how their own access to academia, as well as to opportunities for research and publication, are enabled by the interconnected workings of caste and the racial hierarchies of settler colonialism. As a scholar of brahmin hindu ancestry who studies South Asia, this resonates deeply with me. I try, though often fail, to name the ways in which caste privilege has directly contributed to my access to knowledge, spaces, and communities. The inescapable reality of caste as an ideological formation embedded within settler colonialism leads Upadhyay to coin the phrase "casted-settler pessimism," which they describe as "both the function of my caste positionality as well as my academic training" (2024, p. 21). Such pessimism, they argue, is ultimately an expression of privilege.

As a counter to this pessimism, Upadhyay devotes the final chapter of the book to the people they call "dreamers"— South Asian activists based in Tkaron:to whose work challenges settler colonialism in creative ways. The dreamers are queer women whose migration narratives connect them to locations and histories that decenter India and offer a more expansive view of South Asia's colonial histories, from Tamil Eelam to Nepal, East Africa, and the West Indies. The contributions in this chapter are both inspiring and profound. These dreamers are engaged in community work rooted in mutual aid and trauma-informed care. One contributor, Kavita Bissoondial, describes a model of community building that challenges heteropatriarchal colonialism on multiple levels. She envisions communities as polyamorous partnerships, "where we are non-hierarchical and are able to value everyone at the table, and everyone has a strong understanding of their obligations to each other, to the land, and to the treaties" (Upadhyay, 2024, p. 151). This anti-heteronormative way of reimagining social relationships opens many future possibilities. It provides a stark contrast to the familial structures of gender and caste which are at work throughout the book. Upadhayay thus sets up a dichotomy between brahmin settler, whose privilege is pessimism, and the anti-caste, decolonial queer femme imaginary.

While this chapter is posited as a potential antidote to the casted-settler pessimism, I question whether this juxtaposition inadvertently reproduces a form of caste maneuver. In the introduction to the book, Upadhyay writes that "exposing complicities illuminates other relationalities, solidarities, and possibilities. This interrogation makes visible the multitudinous ways racialized diasporas align, and possibly un-align, themselves with the settler project. . .While complicity cannot be opted out of, at the same time, complicity and solidarity are not binaries" (2024, p. 12). Yet, in the conclusion, this binary appears to be reaffirmed. Upadhyay asserts in the conclusion that while they "provide the academic analyses in the book, the dreamers offer tools for the actual work that needs to be done" (2024, p. 143). This framing in my view diminishes the crucial interventions of progressive intellectuals (including Upadhyay) whose work both supports and inspires the strategies of change workers. It also implies that optimism can only come through the labour of the other, particularly the double-diasporic, multiply colonized, queer, femme, ethnically marginalized other, who must, once again, show us how to do the work. If pessimism is a privilege, the burden of optimism, it seems, once again falls disproportionately to the margins.

This raises the question of whether the concept of 'casted-settler pessimism' might inadvertently return us full circle to 'caste innocence'. I am struck by the tendency of many critical scholars to get caught up in

declarations of complicity. What happens, and what is possible, *after* the naming of our complicities? This appears to be a central question that Upadhyay is struggling with throughout the book. And if, as Upadhyay contends, complicity and solidarity are not binary, then some forms of solidarity must be possible. In the conclusion to *Indians on Indian Lands,* activist Mita Hans describes how she has used the concept of *seva*, or service, to guide her practice as an activist. I am interested in how the concept of service towards decolonization and caste abolition might provide a way forward, so that we might see naming complicity not as a limit, but as the starting point for meaningful liberatory action.

Author Note

Sailaja Krishnamurti *is an Associate Professor and Head of the Department of Gender Studies at Queen's University in Katarokwi/Kingston, Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee territory. She is a feminist scholar of racialization and religion in the South Asian diaspora. Co-editor of Relation and Resistance: Racialized Women, Religion and Diaspora (MQUP, 2021), she has written on topics ranging from South Asian migration histories to uncles and aunties, superheroes, comics, and cosplay. Krishnamurti is a founding member of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) seminar in Intersectional Hindu Studies and co-creator of the Critical Feminist Hindu Studies Collective (@Auntylectuals).*

References

Ayyathurai, G. (2021). Emigration Against Caste, Transformation of the Self, and Realization of the Casteless Society in Indian Diaspora. *Essays in Philosophy*. https://doi.org/10.5840/eip20212194

FCHS Collective. (2022, November 2). *Hindu fragility and the politics of mimicry in North America*. The Immanent Frame. https://tif.ssrc.org/2022/11/02/hindu-fragility-and-the-politics-of-mimicry-in-north-america/

Krishnamurti, S. V. (2021). Grounded Religiosities: Women Navigating Hindu Identity and Social Justice. In B. Lee & S. V. Krishnamurti (Eds.), *Relation and Resistance: Racialized Women, Religion, and Diaspora* (pp. 19–44). McGill-Queens University Press.

Patel, S. (2016). Complicating the Tale of" Two Indians": Mapping 'South Asian' Complicity in White Settler Colonialism Along the Axis of Caste and Anti-Blackness. *Theory & Event*, *19*(4).

Upadhyay, N. (2019). Making of "Model" South Asians on the Tar Sands: Intersections of Race, Caste, and Indigeneity. *Critical Ethnic Studies*, *5*(1–2), 152. https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.5.1-2.0152

Upadhyay, N. (2024). *Indians on Indian Lands: Intersections of Race, Caste, and Indigeneity*. University of Illinois Press.

Transnational Caste Maneuvers

Mona Bhan

Nishant Upadhyay's book, *Indians on Indian lands*: *Intersections of Race, Caste and Indigeneity*, is a provocative exploration of the ways in which brahminical supremacy plays a key role in sustaining and strengthening anti-Blackness, white supremacy, and settler violence against Indigenous communities in Canada. What strikes me most about the book is the weight and complexity of Upadhyay's arguments, coupled with the lucidity of their prose, which makes the text highly accessible across a range of disciplines and audiences.

Upadhyay's key intervention lies in demonstrating how brahminical supremacy knows no territorial limits. In doing so, they pry open the convenient silos that have historically separated scholarship on caste apartheid, both in South Asia and in the South Asian diaspora, from scholarship on settler colonialism. The book reveals the intersecting and layered ways in which oppressive structures cohere and co-produce both settler colonialism alongside the enduring systems of racial/caste apartheid, not just among white populations but also among racialized Indian hindus and Sikhs in North America. Upadhyay underscores how white supremacist states exploit racialized immigrant labor to erase, render invisible, and diminish native existence. The book powerfully illuminates the limitations of a Marxist framework and foregrounds the centrality of settler colonialism as a key optic for understanding the complex intersections between racialization of immigrant labor and the simultaneous erasure of Indigenous bodies. However, Upadhayay's analysis is not limited to conventional critiques of Western states that rely on the gendering and racialization of immigrant labor or on settler amnesia to sustain their capitalist imperial hegemony. Instead, they offer a trenchant critique of the ways in which dominant scholarship on South Asia is implicated in reproducing erasures of native life-worlds, with profound implications for how we (mis)understand caste, nation, indigeneity, and settler colonialism? In their clear and unequivocal style, Upadhyay peels away the layers of obfuscation and skullduggery within postcolonial and transnational scholarship that has conveniently ignored the elephant in the room: the continued colonization of Indigenous territories both here and in India. They expose the pretense that British colonial violence, rather than caste violence, is foundational to the Indian state; and that brahminical supremacy is somehow less pernicious than white supremacy; and that a critique of European colonialism, but not that of Indian colonialism, is sufficient to understand the violent legacies of the past and present, particularly against Dalits, Adivasis, and other occupied peoples.

Upadhyay raises another set of key questions, notably addressing the ongoing Indian colonialism in Kashmir and the conspicuous silence of transnational and postcolonial feminist critiques on this issue. Upadhyay frames the decolonial and Indigenous turn as one that is fraught with anxieties for postcolonial (read: brahmin) scholars, which explains why they remain reluctant to analyze brahminism as a "transnational socio-political-economic assertion of supremacy" in which they themselves are implicated (Upadhyay, 2024, p. 25). Indian feminist anxieties about turning to indigenous and decolonial frameworks, and their tendency to foreclosing debates on indigeneity, leave settler colonialism and occupation as foundational modalities of violence of/in India. An implication of this in the U.S. academy is that white

frameworks of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) often end up reifying brahminical frameworks of knowledge production, effectively normalizing brahminism as "diversity." The political implication of this, I argue, is that India is continually upheld as a "model of democracy." Although democracy is not an analytic Upadhyay uses in their book, it raises questions about how we might understand the deeply vexed relationships between transnational brahminism and the portrayal of India as a "democracy," particularly in the political and cultural discourses in the U.S. and Canada.

The dominant ideological strand of "Hindu exceptionalism," for instance, presents hinduism as the basis of what Chetan Bhatt calls" an evolved intellect (Bhatt, 2001, p.6; also see Bhan and Bose, 2023, 98)." It asserts that "values of democracy, inclusivity, justice, and scientific inquiry" are key elements of "the Hindu way of life" (Bhatt, 2001, p.6; also see Bhan and Bose, 2023, 98). Alongside these presentations of brahminism as a force for progressive social change, India is also simultaneously framed as a champion for global democracy. In this context, the relationship between transnational brahminism as a sociopolitical project cannot be seen in isolation from India itself as a democratic polity. Frequently framed as a rehabilitative or restorative force in contemporary politics, brahminical hegemony, both in India and abroad, is largely perceived as a force for collective upliftment, be it through the popularization of the International Day of Yoga or through India's ongoing investments in forms of "racial and caste capitalism" through NGO work (Shankar 2023). These efforts perpetuate the figure of the "brown savior" (Shankar 2023), a global hindu elite from dominant castes who's liberal saviorism entrenches capitalist and imperialist politics of the Global South.

A second, albeit related, concern that I think Upadhyay's work generatively raises, for me, is the ways in which brahminism is misrecognized as a force of "secularism." Upadhyay carefully how caste is continually reframed and depoliticized as culture, making a critical argument that reveals how caste comes to be normalized, and even celebrated, in India and the diaspora. However, brahminism also positions itself as a secular orientation, not just a spiritual or a cultural one. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, serves as a quintessential example of a brahmin secularist. If one considers how India's secular experiments, from its inception, were tied to caste and religious apartheid, then Nehru's "caste maneuvers" to present brahmanism as a secular orientation make perfect sense. Caste maneuvers do not simply produce postcolonial and secular scholars as casteless; they also position them as liberal subjects who actively renounce both a religious sensibility and orientation. In other words, postcolonial scholars do not just shed caste but also religion, which then allows caste to be interpreted as a cultural attribute rather than a racial or religious one. Such an analysis of the secularization of brahminism in political and public discourse opens important avenues of exploration centered on discussions of Islamophobia in India and North America. Could a discussion of Islamophobia and secularism in the book have further complicated conceptions of caste, race, and indigeneity in the diaspora, especially within a white settler context heavily shaped by anti-Muslim bigotry and the military-industrial-academic complex in the post 9/11 era?

This is also a context where, as Upadhyay argues, "Indians enact and reproduce, wittingly or unwittingly, the logics of a settler state" (2024, p.12). While I appreciated Upadhyay's careful attention to the ways settler logics are often unwittingly reproduced, I wondered if a deeper analysis of the political economy

of “transnational” settler colonialism might help locate and envision culpabilities differently. For instance, what are the discursive and material ways in which settler states and their overseas proxies (such as the Hindu American Foundation) fortify settler economies? How they do so through the rewriting of histories and through the sale, manufacturing, and circulation of weapons between states like India and Israel? How is the Indian state materially vested in sustaining settler states like Israel? And how do such state investments contribute to the global tactics, modalities, and instruments of settler colonialism? In other words, how can we extend the book’s analysis beyond transnational brahminism to also encompass transnational settler colonialism and the part that diasporic communities in the U.S. and Canada play in realizing this vision. In a sense, I was wondering if such an analytic move might disrupt the reductive assumption that brahminism produces settler colonialism *only* on Turtle Island, and not in India, Israel, or elsewhere.

A related discussion I thoroughly appreciated in the book was about nations and nationalism, which, as Upadhyay rightly claims, are key concepts for assertions of sovereignty for Indigenous people and for envisioning alternative imaginings of nationhood beyond its territorial form. Postcolonial scholars’ cautioning against the dangers and violence of nation-state formations is a denial of the fundamental need for minoritized and Indigenous groups to claim sovereignty. This cautionary stance is yet another instance where bloody histories of nation-states are used to dismiss questions of sovereignty and selfhood for those who find themselves to be perpetual targets of state violence. Upadhyay rightly calls for embracing Indigenous conceptions of nationhood, where placemaking practices are deeply intertwined with the intimate relationships Indigenous communities forge with their landscapes. Yet, I was left wondering about other imaginaries of nationhood that lurk in the background but are not entirely brought to bear on the key arguments of the book.

For instance, how might foregrounding the question of Khalistan open up a different set of inquiries? On page 33, Upadhyay starts developing the contours of this argument. The anti-Sikh genocide of 1984, for instance, significantly shape the migration of Sikhs into Canada, which may explain why “Sikh and Punjabi migration patterns to Canada work differently from other migration patterns, as they have a longer history of coming to North America” (pp 33). However, what remains unstated is how Sikh conceptions of India shape both their experiences of migration as well as their experiences of racialized minoritization in Canada. Upadhyay explains that their different relationship with India, compared to their hindu counterparts, largely influences their relationships with indigenous colonization in the diaspora. Yet, I wonder if this could perhaps be elaborated further. What are some of the imaginaries/critiques of Khalistan that are prevalent among Sikhs and hindus, shaping not just their relationship with indigenous and Black communities here but also with each other? Here, I am thinking of recent events where Canada accused the highly evolved surveillance apparatus of the Indian state for the murder of vilified minorities from the Sikh community in Canada, leading to a highly publicized political debacle between India and Canada. While the political vendetta between India and Canada continues, a sizable segment of Indians who believe it to be the handiwork of Lawrence Bishnoi, leader of the transnational Bishnoi gang, celebrate him for teaching Khalistanis a lesson (India Today, 2024).

I was also curious to hear more about the ways Upadhyay invokes Ghassan Hage's work to reflect on "how racialized immigrant communities frame their immigration experience as positive," an orientation that plays a key part in legitimizing the migrant experience (pp, 80). In doing so, they are performing what Sara Ahmed calls the "happiness duty" (see pg, 81). This contrasts, in Upadhyay's view, with the melancholic migrant who is unable to assimilate and can never become the ideal political subject. Upadhyay explicitly applies this framework to Sikh women working in fish canneries in British Columbia to show how Sikh women perform ideal immigrant subjecthood. I wonder, while this performance of happiness is clearly gendered and racialized, what happens to this "happy immigrant" within the context of delusional politics of victimhood that Indian high-caste hindus now articulate through claims of hinduphobia and politically manufactured narratives portraying them as vulnerable and under constant threat, summed up in their claim *hindu khatre main hai* [hindus are in danger]?

My final question concerns Upadhyay's methodological turn to literature in their final chapter, *Colonial Intimacies*, where they carefully explore the potential of cross-racial relationships to both reproduce violent structures of oppression as well as forge pathways for decolonial love. For this chapter, Upadhayay forgoes interviews and instead delves into literature. While I found the book's range of methods dazzling and their reliance on literature a fascinating choice to speak to, access, and engage with questions of intimacy, I wondered if Upadhyay could reflect more on the process that shaped their decision to employ different methods for different sets of questions. As Upadhyay powerfully elucidates, our methods, particularly those that rely on face-to-face encounters, are too wrapped up in class and brahmin privilege. How might a turn to literature mitigate the awkwardness of these uneven, power-laden encounters? At the same time, however, might such a turn diminish the potential of these awkward encounters to expose the limits and contradictions of brahminical modes of knowledge production?

Author Note

Mona Bhan *is a professor of Anthropology and the Ford-Maxwell Professor of South Asian Studies at Syracuse University. She is a political and environmental anthropologist whose work in Indian-occupied Kashmir explores the role of economic and infrastructural development in counterinsurgency operations and resistance movements against protracted wars and settler occupation. Her areas of expertise include wars, militarism, and counterinsurgency; indigeneity and settler colonialism; race, gender and religion; ecocide and climate change; and military occupation and infrastructural policies. Her current book, Hydropowered Nation: Clean Energy and India's Dirty Wars in Kashmir, examines the political and material logics that co-produce hydropower as India's "forever asset" and Kashmir as an eternal part of Hindu India.*

References

Bhan, M., and Bose, P. (2023). Humanitarian Hindu, Exceptional Citizen. Journal of Muslim Philanthropy and Civil Society. VII (II): 96-117.

Bhatt, C. (2001). Hindu nationalism: Origins, ideologies, and modern myths. Berg.

India Today (2024). The Rise of India's Religious Gangster [Video recording]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b19_yXHmEtA

Shankar, A. (2023). Race, Caste, Labor, and the Global Politics of Help in India. Duke University Press: Durham.

Author's Response

Nishant Upadhyay

What a privilege it is to sit with and reflect on such generous, thoughtful, and incisive commentaries on my book by esteemed friends and colleagues. The three responses offer critical and pertinent questions that push the boundaries of my work. In this reply, I will ruminate on some of these questions and offer tentative responses, leaving others open for future meditations, reflections, and research directions. I hope these conversations will inspire other scholars to explore the intersections of brahminism, hindu nationalism, and settler colonialism in the making of Indian and South Asian diasporas on Turtle Island and beyond.

Over the past year, the Khalistan movement,[3] a campaign advocating for sovereign Sikh state, has gained a lot of attention in both the Indian and Canadian press. In September 2023, the Canadian government publicly accused the Indian state's involvement in the assassination of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a prominent Khalistani activist.[4] Prime Minister Trudeau told the Canadian parliament that his administration has evidence linking the Indian state to the killing. India has denied the allegations. This has triggered a diplomatic impasse between the two countries, with both sides accusing each other—Canada blaming India for killing, silencing, and surveilling of Sikh Canadian citizens, and India claiming that Canada harbors anti-India extremists and terrorists.

The tensions deepened in October 2024 when the Canadian government identified six senior Indian diplomats stationed in Canada are persons of interest for targeting Sikhs in Canada, including the assassination of Nijjar.[5] In November, the situation escalated further as pro-India/hindutva groups attacked a peaceful protest by Sikh organizations outside a temple in Brampton, ON. The protest was aimed at Indian diplomats visiting the temple. On the same day, pro-India demonstrators, many armed with weapons, attempted to storm the premises of a gurdwara in Malton, ON. Indian media sensationalized the events by miscategorizing the protests as anti-hindu events and all protestors as Khalistani. In response, a statement issued by several Sikh organizations noted: "India's disinformation campaigns have propagated false narratives of sectarian conflict, attempting to mischaracterize anti-India protests as anti-Hindu" (Baaz News 2024). Hindutva state and non-state actors, both in India and Canada, have weaponized fake news to frame most, if not all, critiques of the Indian state as anti-hindu or

[3] The idea of a sovereign Sikh homeland in the Punjab region dates back to the early 20th century under British rule. The contemporary Khalistan movement emerged in the late 20th century as a response to the religious and economic alienation and systemic oppression within the Indian state. As demands for a new Sikh state grew in the 1970s, the Indian state retaliated with military violence. In 1984, India launched Operation Blue Star to curb the movement. Indian forces attacked the Golden Temple, Sikhism's holiest site in Amritsar, resulting in deaths of hundreds in the scared premises. The subsequent assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards triggered widespread anti-Sikh pogroms, led by Congress-affiliated groups, killing thousands and intensifying Sikh marginalization. Many Sikhs fled India in the wake of these events, and many immigrated to Canada. As Sikhs sought refuge abroad, the Sikh nationalist cause found support among the growing diasporic Sikh community. Sikh nationalism encompasses a range of ideologies, from democratic, egalitarian, and anti-casteist visions to more traditional, conservative, and militant ideologies. For some, the vison of a sovereign nation is territorialized, while for others, a de-territorialized homeland.

[4] In November 2023, U.S. prosecutors claimed an Indian official was behind a plot to assassinate a Sikh activist, Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, in New York.

[5] This includes the High Commissioner of India to Canada.

Khalistani.[6] Moreover, they have circulated false information about Canada being unsafe for hindus, alleging that Khalistanis have taken over the Canadian state. This has further escalated the hindutva propaganda of "*hindu khatrein mein hai*" (hindus are in danger) and the alleged "hinduphobia" in Canada.[7]

These recent events have made visible, yet again, the significance of the Khalistan question in Canada and the antagonistic presence of hindu fascism that continues to target minorities both in India and within the diaspora. However, as Mona Bhan aptly observes, Khalistan is a subject I largely avoided engaging with in the book. While I tried to articulate the asymmetrical sovereignties between Sikh, hindu, and Indian nationalisms, I did not delve into the varying Sikh and Khalistan nation-making projects. Two primary reasons informed this decision.

First, along with hindutva and Indian nationalist actors, the progressive Indian left (both in India and the diaspora) has often failed to express solidarity with any form of sovereign Sikh nationhood. This reluctance comes from a broader refusal to engage with spirituality and religiosity, shaped by the Indian left's entrenched secular and atheist critiques of religion. As a result, Indian diasporic left reduces all forms of Sikh assertion to Khalistani nationalism and denies any forms of sovereignty. Many of the elder Punjabi and Indian leftist "uncles" who introduced me to my interlocuters in Vancouver and Surrey similarly rejected the Khalistan movement. Through our shared atheist and secular commitments, I too reproduced the silences surrounding sovereignty movements rooted in faith.

Second, the intersections of caste and Sikh and Khalistani nationalisms remain largely underexplored, which further deterred my engagement with the topic. However, the long history of organizing around Sikh sovereignty, whether tied to Khalistan or not, and the recent events call for a deeper engagement with these questions. This line of inquiry could open up new imaginaries of (Sikh) nationalism vis-à-vis hindu, Indian, and Canadian nation-making projects as well as in relation to Indigenous nationalisms. A horizontal and relational exploration of nationalisms (Indigenous and Sikh) contesting dominant nationalisms (Canadian and Indian) can illuminate the critical role of sovereignty in dismantling transnational settler colonial structures.

Connected to this discussion, the book also does not engage with questions of religion, faith, and spirituality beyond hindu nationalism. While it explores brahminism and hindu nationalism in depth, it leaves out other forms of religious and spiritual praxis, such as those of Indigenous, Sikh, Muslim, and other communities. A more sustained engagement with these questions could offer valuable insights into the modalities of settler colonialism and brahminism that frame Christian and hindu practices as secular and progressive, while casting others as backward and violent. Moreover, as kehal highlights, a relational exploration of Sikhi could illustrate the differences in how caste operates in everyday life between hindu

[6] Recently, it was reported that California-based hindu nationalist organization, Hindu American Foundation, organized training with local police officers to surveil local Sikh activists.

[7] I agree with Bhan's argument that diasporic hindutva claims of "hindu *khatrein mein hai*" and hinduphobia disrupt the tropes of the "happy immigrant" that I engage with in the book. The conceptualization of the "unhappy immigrant," and the question of who is allowed to mobilize these narratives, reflects a function of caste woundedness and fragility.

and Sikh communities. As I note in the book, quotidian casteism functions differently between diasporic Sikh and hindu communities. Yet, many within the dominant caste Sikh community continue to render caste as a solely hindu practice. Recent work by Sasha Sabherwal (2024) illuminates the workings of caste within the Sikh community in BC. Needless to say, more such explorations are urgent and necessary.

The commentaries engage deeply with the theorization of caste-maneuvers and raise incisive questions about my own caste-maneuvers as a brahmin scholar in the writing of this book. I appreciate these sharp and insightful provocations, which prompt me to further reflect on my positionality. In the book, I make visible how my brahmin identity played a pivotal role in facilitating conversations with respondents in Vancouver and Fort McMurray. As Sailaja Krishnamurti rightly observes: "Upadhyay has the caste capital to perform brahminness, and Indianness, in ways that make them intelligible to their interlocutors and allows them access to their casteism and racism." This access allowed me to highlight racial, settler, and caste complicities. Without my caste mobility, this would not have been possible. However, critiques of caste-maneuvers are invariably reproduced in my own research, whereby naming caste positionality becomes a function of privilege. Further, as prabhdeep singh kehal observes, this privilege is entrenched through the production of the monograph, which will ultimately contribute to my academic tenure. kehal aptly writes: "within a caste supremacist world, caste operates to ensure that even critiques of caste come from those from dominator positions." Moreover, my (assumed/perceived) gender adds another layer to these caste-maneuvers. My limited interactions with women, and the subsequent gendered silences, reveal the modalities of caste-patriarchy. Krishnamurti and kehal illuminate my maneuvering and raise urgent questions for brahmin and dominant caste scholars about the limits of naming our positionalities. This act of naming is a praxis, one that is contiguous with, rather than contradictory to, the claims to castelessness critiqued in the book. Erasing caste and naming casted complicities are both ways of claiming caste-innocence—even when such acts are unsettled through self-critiques, they remain forms of caste-maneuvering.

What comes next after the declarations of complicities? The book struggles with this question throughout. While I aim to challenge the binaries of complicity and solidarity, the book argues that dominant caste solidarities are inherently fraught and ultimately impossible. Yet, the book itself is an attempt toward solidarities through my own complicities and positionality. Within these contradictions, perhaps readers can find seeds of disruption, seeds that may work to destabilize casted settler complicities…

Author Note

Nishant Upadhyay *is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of Colorado, Boulder. They hold a PhD in Social and Political Thought from the York University, Toronto. Upadhyay is the author of Indians on Indian Lands: Intersections of Race, Caste, and Indigeneity (University of Illinois Press, 2024). Their research and teaching focuses on settler colonialism and empire, intersections of race, caste, and indigeneity, queer and trans of color studies, and South Asian diaspora. Upadhyay's work has been in published in journals such as the American Quarterly, Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies, Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies, Critical Ethnic Studies Journal, Cultural Studies, and Feminist Studies.*

References

Baaz News. (2024). Canadian Sikh Organizations Condemn Attack on Malton Gurdwara. *Baaz News*. https://www.baaznews.org/p/sikh-organizations-condemn-malton-gurdwara-attack

Sabherwal, S. (2024). The Elasticity of Caste in the Sikh Diaspora: Jat Cool and Caste Masculinities in the Pacific Northwest. *Journal of Asian American Studies,* 27(1), 91-114. 10.1353/jaas.2024.a926985