


Article

“The Witch’s Mirror”: A Review of Scholarship on Witchcraft and a Reassessment Based on the Intersectional Lived Experiences of Dalits and Adivasis

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Abstract: This article explores intersectionality of identities within Dalit and Adivasi traditions through a review of contemporary research on practices of witchcraft. Witchcraft practices occur all over the Indian subcontinent and form focal points of intersectionality beyond fixed structures and stereotypes. By approaching witchcraft through the perspective of the lived experience of the ones involved, we gain better understanding of the individuals involved, of the larger socio-economic context and of the practice itself without falling into the trap of recasting stereotypes. By approaching witchcraft from the perspective of lived experience, it becomes clear that the occurrence of witchcraft is the outcome of complex intersectional power structures, such as gender, caste, class and religion/spirituality. However, the approach accomplishes even more by addressing diversity, ambiguity and dynamics within intersectional (power) structures. The knowledge drawn from the approach of lived experience of Dalits and Adivasis leads to new academic discourses such as ‘Dalit and Adivasi Studies’, ‘Critical Caste Theory’, ‘Dalit Feminism’ and the ‘Dalit Queer Movement’. These discourses provide new counter-hegemonic knowledge, adding to and challenging academia.

Keywords: caste; intersectionality; South Asia; Hinduism; lived experience; Dalit; Adivasi; witchcraft



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1. Definitions

In the context of this article, it is necessary to define witchcraft in South Asia. Cultural practices that can be associated with witchcraft in South Asia have to be judged as phenomena in their own right, not to be confused with the European concept of Wicca traditions. The English term ‘witchcraft’ should in the South Asian context be seen as a general, container concept to indicate different local practices with different names, related to region, language and communities involved.

Myths of Indian versions of witches, known as “Dayan”, “Chudail”, “Tonhi” or other local terms, have existed for long and are popular in Indian films and literature. Apart from myths, actual practices of witchcraft also still exist. Some researchers argue that these practices are, in fact, “witch hunts” or “witch accusations” by defining them to be nothing more than a form of violence, especially towards Dalit and Adivasi women. For instance, Yadav in *Witch Hunting: A Form of Violence against Dalit Women in India* (Yadav 2020).

However, I agree with Chaudhuri that witchcraft practices should not be regarded a priori as a means of oppression. Rather, they can also serve as a “weapon of the weak” (Chaudhuri 2013).

A popular theoretical explanation for witchcraft practices provided in sociological and anthropological literature is that given by Marvin Harris in *Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches: The Riddles of Culture* (Harris 1974). Harris argues that no matter how bizarre a people’s behavior may seem, it always stems from concrete social and economic conditions. The review of contemporary research on witchcraft in this paper supports this notion.

I agree with MacDonald that across India, the witch—known by different names—can be regarded as “a key elaborating symbol that orders behavior to determine who the

socially included and excluded are in communities". I also support her introduction of the term "witch crafting" to stress the fact that we are talking about dynamic, non-static events and identities (Macdonald 2021, p. 14).

This paper shows that the interpretation of witchcraft practices depends largely on the perspective of the research. Therefore, I use the terms "witchcraft" or "witch crafting" to leave space for several interpretations and explanations.

2. Introduction and Argument

Cultural and religious practices connected to elements of the supernatural within Hindu traditions provide excellent opportunities for investigating how caste, class, gender and religious beliefs interconnect. Scholars and activists from Dalit¹ and Adivasi communities have emphasized the importance of an intersectional approach in the analyses of South Asian cultures and religions, starting from the perspective of lived experience. They have recently been consistently indicating that this perspective is not given enough attention in contemporary research.

Anthropologist Nathaniel Roberts supports this notion in *Anthropology of Caste*. He says that despite a growing understanding among social scientists of the complexity of the concept of caste, the basic interpretation is still flawed, mainly because of the lack of balanced representation in research, historically and currently. Even in contemporary research, the perspectives of Dalits and Adivasis are still largely missing (Roberts 2008).

Similarly, Dalit scholars show how the workings of the caste system have been misinterpreted because the focus of research was often on its ideological aspects due to the focus on accounts of high-caste members. The exclusion mechanisms and issues related to power therefore long remained unseen. Gail Omvedt, for instance, calls caste a 'material reality' with a 'material base' which has historically shaped the very basis of Indian society (Omvedt 2012, p. 12). Also Rupa Viswananth makes this point in *The Pariah Problem; Caste, Religion and the social in Modern India* (Viswananth 2014). Joel Lee describes it as follows:

An important aspect of the caste system is that those who have dominated the means of production have also tried to dominate the means of symbolic production. This symbolic hegemony then allows them to control the very standards by which their rule is evaluated, so that the perspective of the lower castes has no place in it (Lee 2012, p. 34).

Joan Mencher, in *Life as a Dalit; Views from the Bottom on Caste in India*, says that the perspective of Dalits provides a new understanding of the working of caste relations in terms of economic and political power: "It became clear to me that things just did not look the same from the bottom of a hierarchical system as from the top, or even from the middle" (Channa and Mencher 2013, pp. 159–61).

This statement may almost sound too obvious, yet Dalit feminists have been and are still calling consistently for an intersectional approach from lived experience in order to understand Indian society in general and Dalit and Adivasi communities in particular.² Sharmila Rege, for instance, contributed to this perspective in this respect in 2006. *Writing Caste, Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonios* (Rege 2006).

Moreover, this approach challenges the hegemony of supposedly fixed identities and stereotypes. Dalit and Adivasi scholars point out the limits of the 'subaltern theory', the supposed 'recovery' of the voice of the ones oppressed and therefore not heard. Gayatri Spivak defined the "subaltern" as groups that are hugely 'represented' by and in the elite, dominant discourses, but whose actual 'voice' is never 'heard', not even in the postcolonial critical enquiry initiated by the Subaltern historians. Dalit and Adivasi scholars warn that the subaltern theory is not sufficient to understand the nature of 'oppressed' communities from within. A further decolonization of structures of social analysis is needed, they say, for example, by stepping away from the binary of oppressor and oppressed, which leads to stigmatizing people as "the Other" in fixed identities (Singh 2018, p. 48).

Joel Lee raises the above-mentioned points in his paper *Dalit power in the old order* (Lee 2016). He claims that the anthropology of caste in India has tended to represent the

Dalit or “untouchable” as inhabiting one of two roles: the abject bearer of pollution in culturalist accounts of Hindu society, or the vanguard of political modernity in historicist, caste-critical narratives. Lee explores a third pattern of “Dalits as sorcerers, [and] of the segregated Dalit hamlet as a feared and sought-after site of supernatural power alternative to Brahminical power”. The pattern is as widespread as it is undertheorized, according to Lee. Drawing from fieldwork among the Dalit sanitation labor castes and a broad range of historical ethnographic sources, he builds his argument of how pollution, Dalit occult power and exclusion work in the “traditional” caste order (Lee 2016).

My own research on Dalit emancipation movements in South Asia supports the significance of the Dalit and Adivasi perspective from lived experience in order to understand cultural and religious South Asian phenomena.³ Concerning witchcraft, for instance, my research suggests that accusations of witchcraft are not happening to Dalit and Adivasi women by sheer coincidence. Newspaper articles such as the one below are unfortunately not rare in India and Nepal:

About a year ago, 45-year-old Parwati Devi Chaudhary was beaten to death. She was severely abused throughout the night. The villagers accused her of witchcraft and were determined to kill her. While Parwati Devi was attacked, many villagers stood by and no one did anything to save her. Nothing can make up for the trauma of women who, for example, are forced to eat urine and human feces because they are accused of witchcraft. These women are ostracized and humiliated to such an extent that it is too bad to express in words”.⁴

Lawyer Gautam of the Institute for Women, Law and Development in Kathmandu explained:

“It is hard to believe that in the 21st century women from marginalized communities are being accused of witchcraft and are being punished or even killed on that ground. The present legal system is not sufficient in terms of laws and implementation to protect women against this. Recently I dealt with a case of a Dalit woman in the Kathmandu Valley who was imprisoned for fourteen years because she was supposedly a witch. Her family-in-law had drawn this conclusion because she gave birth to a mentally handicapped child. The woman had two more children and was not allowed to hug or touch her children, not even their clothes. The family treated the woman very cruelly. One day they wanted to kill her in a well-known way here in Nepal: to hit her on the head with a bamboo stick with a rope with a sharp iron tip on it. But the woman survived and managed to escape. However, since she had been locked up all these years, she had no idea how to find her way to a safe place. By chance, she was recognized and returned to her parents. Her husband was sentenced to two years in prison and a fine. Her sister-in-law tried to defend the family, arguing that they had been ordered by a Goddess to act so cruelly. The victim is doing well according to circumstances. She now works in a crèche and this gave her the insight and confidence that she is not a witch, because she had come to believe that herself.” (Brunnekreef 2019).

Cases such as these raised my interest in the intersections of caste, descent, gender and cultural/religious practices. For this paper, I chose witchcraft as one such practice to investigate further. Since the above mentioned research did not explore the practices of witchcraft in depth, I analyzed contemporary research on this topic. I specifically tried to find out more about the significance of perspective and intersectionality, as underlined by Dalit and Adivasi scholars.

The review below indicates that most contemporary researchers recognize the importance of intersectionality. One of the researchers even introduces the term ‘witch crafting’ for that reason, pinpointing that witchcraft is the outcome of an organic, intersectional cultural practice instead of a static marker of identity (Macdonald 2021). Yet, many researchers

seem to struggle with pinpointing how exactly intersectionality results in practices of witchcraft, without falling into the trap of re-casting stereotypes.

The review also suggests that researchers who integrate the perspective from lived experience end up with a better understanding of the practice of witchcraft itself, the persons involved and intersectionality connected to the community level and to the larger Hindu society. Interesting research in that sense also takes place around literary production and film.

The perspective from the lived experience of Dalits and Adivasis can help us to pinpoint more precisely *how* caste and gender patterns lead to practices of witchcraft and witch hunting. It also explains how a relatively unconscious practice—since the practice is naturally internalized as spiritual and cultural, making it “the way it ought to be”—has become part of normalized Indian cultural behavior. Witchcraft studies can contribute to new knowledge, provided they are carried out the right way, say [Alam and Raj \(2017\)](#). A significant amount of the contemporary research I reviewed for this paper seems to possess a notion of the importance of this perspective; however, it is still hardly explored in these scholarly works.

All things considered, this article suggests a reassessment of focus going forward, namely the shift toward the lived experience of Dalits and Adivasis. The paper ends with some notes on the specific, contemporary (academic) knowledge drawn from the perspective of (subaltern within) Dalits and Adivasis and the relevance of this for the larger South Asian society and for scholarship.

3. Research on Witchcraft in South Asia

There has always been a fascination for the supernatural, and more specifically, witchcraft, in the gaze of anthropologists and other social and religion scientists. During colonial times, this focus fit perfectly with orientalist and racist ideas about ‘others’, who are seen as ‘wild’, ‘uncivilized’ and ‘closer to nature’. Ashforth refers to this attitude regarding African spirituality. Colonial attitudes toward African spirituality were “a mixture of revulsion and fascination that served to perpetuate stereotypes of African irrationality and grounded colonial claims that Africans were incapable of governing themselves without white overlords, being as the Africans were, wild and uncivilized” ([Ashforth 2015](#), p. xiii).⁵ Comparisons to “witchcraft” in historical Europe and the US also led to flawed interpretations due to ethnocentric approaches.⁶

Regarding South Asian religions, research reveals that in ancient times, witchcraft or “demonology” was a practice sanctioned by Hindu scriptures. Witchcraft was mentioned as a profession in the Rig Veda, an ancient Hindu scripture ([Gopalakrishnan 2019](#)). In the mid-1800s, ethnology and anthropology began emerging as scientific disciplines undertaken by colonial researchers and officers. Colonials also investigated matters related to witchcraft in order to control and regulate subjugated people in colonial India. This led to the stereotyping of Adivasis and Dalits regarding how they were affiliated with the supernatural and witchcraft, “being regarded as wild and uncivilized in varying degrees” ([Chaudhuri 2013](#), p. 5).

Interesting in this respect is that contemporary research indeed suggests a connection between practices of witchcraft and Adivasi and Dalit communities, as we will explore later in this paper. The argument that is being reassessed in this paper shows that a proper analysis should investigate specific backgrounds and intersectionality from lived experience deeper. The particular circumstances and characteristics of specific Dalit and Adivasi communities and individuals within should be taken into consideration as much as possible, since “The Dalit” or “The Adivasi” are evidently empty concepts. Many contemporary witchcraft researchers still seem to be struggling, though, with the way out of the pitfalls of ethnocentrism, neo-colonialism and lacking perspectives.

[Kelkar and Nathan \(2020\)](#) regard witchcraft as the product of “normative ambiguity” created by gender relations within communities and larger structural transformations related to economic changes, resulting in the growth of inequality in indigenous com-

munities. They see witch hunts as an extreme form of gender struggle through which, in some indigenous societies, men established their domination over the various sites of society, polity, and economy. They also identify the invoking of the potential of witchcraft as a means of control by women themselves defying the patriarchal bargain, breaking the normative rules regulating gender relations and the explicit code of behavior expected of a 'good wife'. Essentially, witchcraft is seen as struggles over control of household income and over norms of women's behavior. Remarkably, Kelkar and Nathan do not specifically mention the intersection of caste as contributing to social stress created by macrolevel socio-economic factors.

Macdonald (2021) agrees that witch accusations in India are undoubtedly gendered in nature: women are much more likely to be accused of being witches than men. She adds, though, that if a man is being accused of being a witch, research shows a much higher chance of him being killed. Contrary to Kelkar and Nathan, Macdonald does include caste as a factor in explaining inequality that, despite government policies, 'gets in through the backdoor' and plays a part in the social stress experienced in daily life by the ones involved in what she calls 'the crafting of witches'. Caste also plays a role in who becomes the target of witch hunts (Macdonald 2021, p. 26).

Macdonald mentions research by the Indian research group Partners for Law in Development, showing that people most often targeted by witchcraft accusations belong to castes and communities in the weaker socio-economic strata, officially called 'Scheduled Castes', 'Scheduled Tribes' and 'Other Backward Classes'. Nevertheless, Macdonald claims that no research findings indicate significant inter-caste/intercommunity dynamics. She thinks it is not likely that witchcraft accusations are a social arena for inter-caste and communal tensions and caste conflicts (Macdonald 2021, pp. 115–16). Despite her recognition of caste and gender being part of the problem, she concludes that dismantling the nationalist ideology of 'The Indian family' is the key solution to fighting witchcraft: "As long as the Indian family is held together at all costs then women accused as witches will always be expected to place the preservation of the family above their lives" (Macdonald 2021, p. 257).

Macdonald does report that many of the actions directed at witches follow a structured and structuring logic similar to "the style of violence" shown towards Dalits: "There are accounts of women being dragged by their hair or having their hair tonsured, of being stripped naked and publicly paraded. They are often forced to drink urine or eat animal and human excreta. Their eyes are targeted: chillies are rubbed in eyes, chilli infused smoke fills the eyes or witches are blinded with knives and scissors. Beatings are done with leather products (belts) or tree branches. Fire is used for threats, branding or 'swinging' the witch" (Macdonald 2021, p. 136).

Alam and Raj articulate, similarly to Macdonald, that violence associated with 'caste-based atrocities' is often similar to that of witch hunting. They go one significant step further by saying that "caste-based atrocities often coincide with incidences of witchcraft" (Alam and Raj 2017, p. 136).

One of the older relevant post-colonial accounts on the issue of witchcraft is that of G.M. Carstairs (1983) in *Death of a Witch; A village in North India 1950–1981*. He identifies incidents of witchcraft as a way for communities to deal with psychological stress due to the "problems of living" created by inequality and poverty due to interrelated patterns of class, caste, gender and religion and superstition.

The analysis of Carstairs concerning stress created by inequality due to intersectional power structures matches with the findings of more recent researchers such as Soma Chaudhuri (2013). Chaudhuri reveals that social stress in the community exists before the hunts take place. This social stress related to the oppressed position of workers in tea plantations results in conflicts and stress about wages, job security, living and working conditions. The extreme hierarchical nature of the relationship between workers and management "based on rigidity of power and ignorance" is crucial in this social stress.

Contrary to Macdonald, Chaudhuri identifies inter-caste relations to be of great importance to practices of witchcraft. She highlights the powerplay at hand, calling it a "web of

conspiracy” victimizing the ones on the end of the rope with least power: Adivasi and Dalit women. This is a conspiracy in which the power of high-caste men conspires with that of the patriarchal nature of relationships between men and women within Adivasi or Dalit communities. Instead of blaming oppressing parties responsible for the ailments in the first place, the community scapegoats a local village woman whose reputation can be easily maligned. This serves as a strategy for stress release that turns inwards, through which rumors and gossip spread through conspiracies and play a crucial role in displacing reality in the minds of the community. Chaudhuri makes clear that social stress is involved in the community before witch hunt incidents take place. That social stress is often related to plantation management-worker politics connected to issues regarding wages, job security, and living and working conditions. Chaudhuri suggests that all factors leading to higher levels of social stress within a community, such as feelings of being trapped, isolated, exploited and powerless, contribute to higher instances of incidents around witch hunts:

(...) a seemingly micro conflict between men and women, as it becomes a macrolevel conflict that is the outcome of oppressive relations between the plantation management and workers. I argue that the alienation experienced by the workers, who have no opportunities for social mobility or protest, is the dominant cause behind witch hunts. As seen in similar situations, the workers deal with stress caused by economic, social, and medical factors by looking for a scapegoat. As protest against the real causes of misfortune is not possible because of their alienation, the Adivasi women provide the perfect scapegoat for witchcraft accusations (Chaudhuri 2013, p. 17).

Chaudhuri points out how power relations are being manipulated by the plantation owners and management to further isolate the community from the mainstream population, which she calls “The Politics of Witchcraft Accusations” (Chaudhuri 2013, p. 12). The incidents of witch hunts further establish the image of the Adivasi as ‘primitive’ and ‘violent’ in the eyes of the mainstream population. Consequently, this helps in maintaining the lack of interest on the parts of both government and the mainstream population in improving the lives of the Adivasi migrant workers in the plantations, since these workers are perceived to be “incurable from their traditional practices” (Chaudhuri 2013, p. 17).

Alam and Raj similarly conclude that witchcraft accusations are a way of coping with the uncertainties of human existence. Therefore, in measures for preventing practices of witchcraft, the crime itself should not be the focus, but rather the underlying structures such as ‘abysmal health services or lack of land or means of livelihood’ (Alam and Raj 2017, p. 133).

Aditya, Shamsheer and Chaudhuri are of the opinion that not enough proper research has been carried out on Indian witch practices. They believe this is the case “because it is largely assumed that most witchcraft accusations take place within Adivasi communities and as such are not recognized as a problem of much importance for mainstream India” (Alam and Raj 2017, p. 125). They stress how analyses from lived experience show how intersectionality is situated in time and place and how practices at the community level are related to the larger, mainstream Indian society.

Dalit and Adivasi human rights groups similarly say flawed approaches towards practices of witchcraft lead to the recasting of prejudices and inappropriate action. They argue that witchcraft laws must include offences such as sexual violence and public humiliation, targeting mainly women of lower castes and other minority communities. The present laws are inadequate in covering the entire range of crimes associated with witch hunting, human rights groups claim. They ask for a new approach that is “multi-layered and integrative” (Gopalakrishnan 2019).

Regarded from a bottom-up perspective, witchcraft can serve as a field of learning about intersectionality as an aspect of a contradictory modernity making ‘the politics of the everyday’ visible. As Cooper and Steyn offer:

Witchcraft practices are telling us a lot about the failure of our discourses of practical reason, rational economics, established religion and moral issues that

vex people in their daily lives. They show us occurrences at moments when the hold of mainstream modernist institutions and categories is slipping. They are an effort to embody, to bring down to earth, abstract forces that seem to dictate the rhythm of peoples' lives; to attribute to human agents the experience of loss, of inequality, of threat, to give fear hand and feet (Cooper and Steyn 1996, pp. 48–50).

By integrating the perspective of lived experience, we can go beyond the binary of 'oppressed' and 'oppressor', a binary we know all too well in traditional research concerning 'witchcraft' and 'the supernatural' in relation to Adivasis and Dalits, leading to the perception of women or "witches" as mere victims. Macdonald agrees that it is largely unknown what accused witches thought and felt:

Even when they escape with their lives, their stories are silenced by others who dominate the narrative and distance us from the immediacy of the victim's experience. (. . .) Women's lives do not become public easily, and when they do, they tend to be of the 'man bites dog' variety—dowry deaths, rape, sati, kidnapping, suicide, infanticide, trafficking etc. While clichéd treatment of *ṭonhī* [witch] stories will portray women as victims 'in need of saving' or 'in conflict', contradictions and ambiguities can and do exist (Macdonald 2021, pp. 190–93).

The lived experiences of Dalit and Adivasi women reveal that witchcraft practices entail subversive, ambiguous forms of resistance against traditional suppressive power structures. They show how inner tensions and struggles of daily lives, a meshing of submission and resistance, form the core of change-seeking restlessness to counter a culture of violence and punishment leading to result-based activism (Singh 2018, p. 19).

4. Witchcraft and Lived Experience in Writing and Film

Research on witchcraft takes place in the fields of literature and film. Here, perspectives play a large role, too.

Although indigenous and Dalit knowledge is not always recorded in written texts, Dalit and Adivasi texts have become a strong field of literary production and resistance based on lived experience of caste oppression in all shades. Folktales, for example, have long existed in a complex relationship with the dominant culture, and therefore form an excellent locus to unravel cultural meaning in a larger socio-economic context. Dalit Queer Project (n.d.)⁷ says in this respect:

Stories have been the oldest and staunchest allies of Dalits, where ideologies and governments have failed, our storytellers have preserved the most honest of our memories. Our stories, in our hands, have paved the way for a community of trillions to find its voice across borders, religions, and ethnolinguistic backgrounds.

Connected to the issue of witchcraft, I would like to delve deeper into Amitayu Chakraborty's analyses of a story by Sowvendra Shekhar Hansda called *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*:

Witch-hunting can be construed as violent means through which 'gender and social tensions' are resolved and gender discrimination institutionalised. In fact, denial of land rights, control over women's sexuality, prevalence of comprehensive taboo regimes, and absence of political representation, formed some of the many 'established traditions' in Chotanagpur (Chakraborty 2019).

Chakraborty obviously finds factors connected to caste, indigeneity and gender in the story of Hansda. According to Chakraborty, the story—by voicing the lived experience of the witch—questions the dominant discourses on indigeneity. By hearing the story of the witch herself, it becomes clear to Chakraborty that intersectional factors contribute to social tensions and eventually to the construction of witch hunting.

In the analysis of the film *Roohi*, Hema Gopinathan shows how the film draws on traditional stereotypes concerning gender and caste through the figure of the ‘chudail’, another word for witch in the South Asian context.⁸

The chudail or ‘churel’ is a mythical creature resembling a woman said to occur in South Asia. Typically, this creature is described as ‘the ghost of an unpurified living thing’. This ‘living thing’, for example, a woman who dies during childbirth or pregnancy, or a woman who has reason to take revenge especially on males in her family, can shape-shift into a beautiful, seductive woman. Throughout South Asia, there are different names for this creature, such as ‘Pichal Peri’ in Punjab (India and Pakistan), or ‘Jakinh’m, ‘Jakhai’, ‘Mukai’, ‘Nagulai’, ‘Alvantin’. Circumstances for a woman to be considered unpure (period of impurity) include her period, the days after childbirth, death during childbirth, or a girl dying before she is twenty days old. Another reason for a woman to be considered unpure is, of course, low caste status (Gopinathan 2019).

Another example where the figure of the chudail goes beyond typical stereotypes is the story *Chudail in love*, by Shivani Kamal-Bhasin (2020). The story is written from the perspective of an imaginary modern-day chudail, addressing underlying gender and caste issues:

Chudails leave no DNA. We don’t leave bodily fluids, marks, hair, imprints or indentations of any kind. Hell, we don’t even leave our shadows. I was sad that I would remain invisible to them, once again.

Then, Kamal-Bhasin’s chudail meets “Bhim”, not coincidentally referring to Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, a famous leader of Dalits:

I crossed him as he hauled cement onto the road. He was working hard and I could see his muscles roiling with the effort of hauling and unloading. (...) Bhim’s people have spent years in Bombay serving the whims of corrupt contractors. (...) All at once, I see myself in his eyes. In all my terrible beauty, unmasked and free. He gives a great big cry and I turn and I flee. I saw my lover and he saw me. I run faster, deeper into the dark, alone, scared, terrified but understanding the meaning of love for the first time in my 500 years.

Here, obviously, the figure of the chudail represents a means of empowerment. In the first quote, we see the main character referring to the crime of “untouchability” leading to invisibility. However, in the story, she steps away from victimhood and shows the power of her being a chudail. In addition to that, she learns to love and respect herself for what she is.

Another research area that I would like to mention here is that of ‘South Asian Gothic’. This their research on contemporary South Asian horror stories as:

A diversity of various vernacular fates and beliefs which coexist and influence one another. They see the genre as a representation of folk-inspired pan-South Asian creatures such as ghouls, jinns and chudails fused with Hindu beliefs. This results in a transcultural, all-encompassing bhoot (ghost), which transcends and permeates all the religious traditions of the subcontinent and which presents a critical commentary on social and political tensions in the subcontinent (Ancuta 2022, p. 26).

It will be interesting to investigate further if and how the field of ‘South Asian Gothic’ may contribute to knowledge generation on lived experience of caste and indigeneity, intersectionality and South Asian society.

Another interesting field of academics is that of narrative theory called ‘Storyworlds’ and ‘Mythopolitics’.⁹ Concerning Adivasi in India, recent research by Theang Theron is a good example of this type of theory. Theron reports an analysis of clashing storyworlds of Hindu myths and that of the indigenous Karbi community. Based on that, he argues that the conception of the identity and history of the Karbi is a “classic case of hegemony, domination, marginalization, misappropriation and misinterpretation” (Theron 2022).

5. New (Counter-Hegemonic) Knowledge Production

Steadily, new knowledge from lived experience of Dalits and Adivasis is generated, mainly via discourses such as “Dalit Studies”, “Indigenous Studies”, “Ambedkarite Studies”, “Dalit Feminism” and, presently, “Critical Caste Theory”.¹⁰ This happens in close cooperation with activism such as the ‘Dalit Lives Matter’ and ‘Adivasi Lives Matter’ movements. These fields challenge, critique and add to traditional academia. A few recent interesting examples of Dalit scholars adding to counter hegemonic knowledge from lived experience I would like to mention here specifically include *The Vulgarities of Caste: Dalits, Sexuality, and Humanity in Modern India* by (Paik 2022), *The Wounds of Caste: A Dalit Queer account of Savarna Injury* by (Kang 2021), and *Aesthetics and Politics of Dalit Women’s Writings Within Indian Pedagogic Practices* by (Kalyani n.d.).

Collective experiences of Dalit and Adivasi communities involve the ‘doing’ of intersectionality in efforts to dismantle dominant structures such as caste, class, gender and religion (Singh 2018, p. 28). These new discourses underscore that knowledge does not simply exist but is socially constructed and indicative of the existing power structure and its intentions in relation to how it wants to govern the powerless. Among the subaltern voices, the ones who are subaltern among the subaltern—Dalit or Adivasi women, homosexuals or transgenders for example—are new knowledge generators par excellence, one could say.

The perspectives from Dalits and Adivasis also make clear that the mainstream view of discourses from South Asia scholars, including, paradoxically, Gayatri Spivak, carries an inner tension. They address the decolonization of (academic) knowledge. Singh poignantly points out, for example, that Dalit agency in India today is sustained by an international community:

This is a necessary reality that will continue to haunt the minds of the South Asian postcolonial elite in American and other academic circles who raise questions and initiate debates on who is authorized to “redeem” a social condition, while Dalit women are raped every day, and thirteen Dalits are murdered every week (Singh 2018, pp. 52–53).

Macdonald even calls it “academic incest”:

(. . .) publishing repeatedly in the same journals, the quoting circle syndrome and examining each other’s graduate students—that focuses on works and academics located in the metropolitan centres. What we see is an embarrassing desperation to be internationally recognised within the ‘publish or perish’ paradigm—which essentially means having connections and publications in European or American contexts (Macdonald 2021, p. 7).

Despite the acceptance of the critique of colonized knowledge building, especially since the 1980s, and despite claims to respect the intellectual, epistemological and philosophical knowledges of the ‘other’, it seems near impossible to break away from these pitfalls, Macdonald explains. Apart from that, there is a ‘brain drain’ going on that snatches away the most impressive researchers from South Asia to be taken up by these European and North-American institutes, thereby raising questions about the type of knowledge that is produced and reproduced (Macdonald 2021, p. 7).

These issues concern my own position as researcher as well. Since I am a complete outsider to these communities, consciousness of validity issues such as the outsider/insider dichotomy are important. During a discussion with a selected company of prominent Dalit scholars in Nepal June 2022, we agreed that solidarity as an activist or researcher can only be a “negotiated” relationship, where privileges of the “ally” are recognized and acted upon accordingly and where proper allyship is considered useful and important.¹¹

Kelkar and Nathan state in this respect: “Knowledge is socially situated, but it is the social situation of the marginalized in the particular relation being considered whose standpoint allows one to develop a critical theory that can overcome the contradictions or relations being considered.” (Kelkar and Nathan 2020, p. 39).

Kelkar and Nathan promote the use of academic knowledge in order to challenge oppression, battling for recognition within the dominant disciplines of knowledge production, within which concrete categories of human beings are seen as objects rather than knowledge-producing subjects.

This approach adds to the academic methodology called ‘standpoint theory’, contending that humans produce knowledge through power relations that construct and divide social groups into dominant and nondominant categories. Experiences within those categories produce different, unequal opportunities that cultivate distinct ways of knowing and being (Allen 2017).

Dalit and Adivasi scholars are inspiring other fields of study concerning marginalized groups and vice versa including African American Studies, Roma Studies, and Jewish–Non-Jewish Relations.¹² The construction of identity and the creation of ‘otherness’ is an important theme these discourses have in common. Other overlapping topics are the interdependence and mirroring of communities, violence, discrimination and silence. A shared concern of both communities involves, for instance, (different kinds of) ‘silence’, namely that of the silence of indifference and the silence of ignorance or lack of information. Concerning the Jews, this point was epitomized in ‘the silence of the world’ during the Holocaust.

Very much comparable to Dalits, the Jewish identity was also constructed as a source and site of “cultural anxiety” through which negative characteristics were and are attributed to Jews, including supernatural elements such as sorcery and magic. Additionally, perceptions of Jewish bodies are similar to those of Dalits, insofar as they are characterized as smelling bad and connected to bodily fluids. There is a common thread in monstrous allegations, torture, and executions to which individuals prosecuted for sorcery and Jews were subjected in early modern Europe (Jones et al. 1998). All of this is strikingly similar to the persecution of Dalit and Adivasi witches in contemporary India.

What these discourses especially share is the call for social change. Jewish intellectuals and Dalit intellectuals, for example, stress the importance of not asking so much what it ‘means’, but rather ask what the ‘use’ of the oppression is—what use it has in the logic of the larger cultural community, instead of looking for its essential meaning. As Kelkar and Nathan say:

The reason for the neglect of the nature and processes of witch persecutions is possibly related to the preoccupation with the ideology of witchcraft beliefs and their meaning, rather than the practical consequences of these beliefs, manifested as witch persecutions. An obsession with meaning can blind us to the murderous consequences of beliefs.” (Kelkar and Nathan 2020).

Within the discourses from Dalit and Adivasi perspectives, the issue of agency is prevalent, since the danger of “hijacking” is never far away. Discussions are going on about Isabel Wilkerson, for example, who adopts the concept of caste in order to explain justified inequality through a hidden hierarchy of human rankings as it existed throughout history and today in the United States (Wilkerson 2020). Similarly, Rosa Braidotti is being debated, as she claims that submerged knowledge traditions including Indigenous and Black perspectives should be framed as “Posthuman Feminism” (Braidotti 2022).

The level of scholarship in this sense differs within South Asia (and the diaspora). Academic studies on Dalits in Nepal for example started only in the 1970s. Since then, a gradual change of from areas of interest in sociology to political science is visible. One example is the work by Pandey, Tulsi Ram, Tika Ram Gautam, and Madhusudan Subedi of 2021 called *Empowering Dalits Through Knowledge* (Pandey et al. 2021). With raised political consciousness, academic studies on Dalit identity and space are growing. Yet, “the argumentative Dalit voice is still young” in Nepal (Suwal 2012, p. 63). Knowledge generation from the lived experience of subaltern groups related to caste and indigeneity in Sri Lanka is the topic of my PhD research.¹³

6. Conclusions

This review of contemporary research on witchcraft in South Asia emphasizes the need for the perspective of the lived experience of the ‘subaltern’ Dalit and Adivasi. Scholars and activists from these communities have both historically and currently indicated that this perspective is still underrated in both academic research and policy measures.

This paper supports the claim of Dalit and Adivasi scholars that an approach from the perspective of lived experience on witchcraft unravels the mechanisms of social inclusion and exclusion. Further, the perspective of lived experience reveals the relationship between violence and ideological norms in a predominantly Hindu society, which is in itself often ambivalent and dynamic. It can serve as a mirror to the mainstream hegemonic Indian and South Asian society by avoiding (the reinforcement of) traditional stereotypes. The kind of knowledge drawn from this approach also challenges and adds to mainstream scholarship by demanding, for example, further decolonialization of academia.

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Notes

- ¹ The more accurate term for Dalit is Dalit-Bahujan, as it offers a broader definition of the oppressed, including Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes and lower-caste Muslims. In this article, the term ‘Dalit’ refers to ‘Dalit-Bahujan’.
- ² An interesting work in this regard is that of Sunaina Arya’s *Dalit Feminist Theory* (Arya and Rathore 2019).
- ³ Between 2007–2015, I got involved with the issue of caste discrimination and Dalits through a Dutch-based NGO that was part of the International Dalit Solidarity Network. Between 2015–2019, I carried research out on the same topic in India, Nepal and Sri Lanka, which resulted in a book published in the Dutch language in The Netherlands. Presently, I am doing PhD research with the Radboud University Nijmegen in The Netherlands, after a career as advisor in several human rights and peace organisations since my graduation in Cultural Anthropology in 1993.
- ⁴ As cited in Brunnekeerf, J. *De Karma Revolutie* (Brunnekeerf 2019).
- ⁵ For more interesting work on this see also: Inden, Ronald. 2001. *Imagining India*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. And: Saletore, R. N. 2003. *Indian Witchcraft: A Study in Indian Occultism*. Rajasthan: Abhinav Publications.
- ⁶ A rather new phenomenon outside the scope of this article is that of South Asian women using European Wicca traditions as a means of women’s empowerment and solidarity. In this new phenomena, Wicca is mixed with elements of witchcraft rooted in Vedic Hindu religion, such as parts of Tantra. There is a thriving Wiccan-based witch community in South Asia, mostly practiced by women, and especially by joining through social media and mixing with pop culture (Ancuta 2022). It would be interesting to investigate this practice of South Asian Wicca from the perspective of lived experience and what it may show us.
- ⁷ @dalitqueerproject is a community-driven initiative that uses visual narratives to challenge what it means to be Dalit and queer the ways in which our discourse has been set by Caste. See also: Available online: www.outlookindia.com/national/glimpses-of-the-dalit-queer-movement-in-india (accessed on 29 June 2022). Interesting sources of information for further reading on this are, for instance: *A Critical Discourse on Dalit Literature and Literary Theory* by Babar (2018), *Writing Resistance: The Rhetorical Imagination of Hindi Dalit Literature* by Brueck (2014). For Nepal a good example of contemporary storytelling and Dalits is the work of Sarita (Pariyar 2021a, 2021b).
- ⁸ More interesting sources on the Chudail can be found in: Spano, I., ed. 2021. Un Churel Mandir in Gujarat: Note sulla Diffusione delle Rappresentazioni Della Figura Della Strega in India. In *Etnografie del Contemporaneo*. Palermo: Museo Pasqualino, vol. 4
- ⁹ See also: *Mythopolitics in South Asia*. København: University of Copenhagen Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, Department of Political Science (2022), and: *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*. 2023. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- ¹⁰ Interesting works in this respect are: Agarwal (2016), Available online: <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/summer-2016/the-rise-of-dalit-studies-and-its-impact-on-the-study-of-india-an-interview-with-historian-ramnarayan-rawat> (accessed on 1 November 2022); Available online: <https://www.rajivmalhotra.com/books/snakes-in-the-ganga/noteworthy-excerpts/the-indianization-of-critical-race-theory> (accessed on 1 November 2022), and: Available online: <http://www.outlookindia.com/national/glimpses-of-the-dalit-queer-movement-in-india> (accessed on 1 November 2022).

- 11 For instance, I believe that the articulation of awareness of how my own lived experience with intersectionality differs from that of Dalits and Adivasis has played a part in being accepted as an ally. I have been in an intercultural marriage with a Sri Lankan man since 1987. Moreover, he suffers from a chronic illness; as a man of colour with an illness, life in The Netherlands has proved to hold particular challenges, for him in the first place, but also for me for me as a partner. In addition, I am a woman. As such, I have lived, to some degree, with intersectionality. It has enhanced my understanding of how intersectionality can work. This does not mean I can claim to have a lived understanding of other intersections. Moreover, it is of crucial importance to show awareness of privileges attached to other identity factors connected to me, such as being white.
- 12 Fascinating information about the village of Sajozaka in Hungary where there is a Ambedkar-inspired movement “Jai Bhim Hungary” can be found in: J. Brunnekeerf (2019). *De Karma Revolutie*.
- 13 In Sri Lanka, there are no groups who identify as “Dalit”; yet, caste dynamics play an integral throughout all levels of the Sri Lankan society, including untouchability and discrimination based on caste.

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