

How Do We Change the Mentality of the Dominant Caste Community? —Interview with Judith Anne Lal

The second person we feature is Judith Anne Lal whose mother is from the Anglo-Indian community and whose father is from the Dalit community. She holds a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in African Studies, Gender and Diaspora Studies and currently works as an Assistant Professor in India. One day in March, we had a conversation online.



[Photo: Judith was answering our questions. The below is Judith, the upper left is Megumi (IMADR) and the upper right is Moe (IMADR).]

Legally, Dalit is known as Scheduled Castes (SC) while the Anglo-Indian community refers to people whose father is of British lineage with a long colonisation history in India. Estimatedly, the Dalit population goes up to 166.6 million¹, and the Anglo-Indian population goes up to around 125,000² in India.

- How did you experience your childhood?

“I come from a family with a mixed cultural background. My father belongs to the Hindu religion that values villages as a primary unit of social organisation and my mother is Christian. Therefore, I experienced mixed cultural norms being followed by my family. I remembered that my father shared the stories of how he used to be discriminated against and how the caste system was deep-rooted in the village where he was born, the village name is Bulandshahr in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Somehow I also did experience a kind of gender discrimination from my father’s side, such as my grandmother. She opposed me going for further higher education because of a gender norm that girls should be raised to do

¹ <https://minorityrights.org/communities/dalits/>

² <https://minorityrights.org/communities/anglo-indians/>

the household chores. But, fortunately, my parents were progressive in a way that they, especially my mother, supported me in going to higher education. Another thing is that we had specific people assigned to come and take the garbage. I remember that one of our landladies said ‘Jamadar³’ had come, and I asked my mother why people do not call them by their name. Then my mom led me to ask my father, and he taught me the Varna System. These things opposed to the idea of equality made me question my family, friends, and community.”

In India, the last name denotes which community or caste people are from.

“My name is a mixture of Christian and Hindu names. So, whenever I meet new friends or go to new places, I am always asked which community I am from. I would say I come from a casteless community because my parents are from different backgrounds. Then, I gradually started to think about my identity. I am neither Christian nor Hindu but I have to focus on how better human beings are.”

The Indian government implements affirmative action programmes, ‘reservations’, to reduce caste-based discrimination. In its Constitution, the population belonging to Scheduled Castes (SCs), that belonging to Scheduled Tribes (STs) and that belonging to ‘Other Backward Classes’ (OBCs) are covered under this reservation system in terms of government employment opportunities and seats in higher education. These reservations are available only to Hindus and others except Muslims and Christians in most cases⁴.

- Did you find any difficulties in educational institutions?

“When I applied for university, I could not apply for it, using the quota system for students from specific caste communities as I did not have a certificate to certify that I come from a Dalit community since my mother was from a Christian community. Yet, as a female, I was able to avail myself of another quota system reserved to promote higher education for women. After I got into the university, I noticed that professors responded to students differently according to which community they were from. During my PhD, I remember many instances where SC and ST category students were told “You are here for the scholarship”, and “You are not here for studies”. Also, not everyone was given the chance, for example, to attend a conference. I was not informed about the conferences my colleagues attended. Only when I started to ask questions about the conferences enormous times, did I get accepted in some of them. So, information-sharing was very limited. I think there was a blocking of information to a certain group of students due to their community or caste. In terms of occupation, I think it just worked out how my mother from a Christian community background helped me. I think it would have been much more difficult for me if my mother was not Christian. But, because of that identity, it has helped me much more. It has given me that space that I was able to work things out for myself. When I decided to become a professor and started to apply for the position, the first positive response that came to me was from a Minority Institution, not any other university.”

³ ‘Jamar’ is a sweeper caste.

⁴ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/09/21/population-growth-and-religious-composition/>

Judith has been working on the issues of caste and gender as a civil society actor and researcher for decades.

- Have you noticed any changes in Indian society?

“I think there is a change in the sense that more people are asserting their identity and claiming their rights. People are more aware of their rights thanks mainly to the NGOs and civil society that have sprung up in India. But, we also see a backlash against people from other communities. Now, I would like to specifically mention the role of the media. What is happening in India right now is that people from the community tell their stories in the cinema. Now, there are movies about the experience of past violence or caste discrimination, which are narrated by people from discriminated communities. On the other hand, caste elements persist, and therefore there is a higher increase in caste-based violence and discrimination, especially against women. Can you just imagine the level of intolerance and the level of caste pride? We hear cases where people of higher caste communities commit brutal atrocities in case a Dalit groom rides a horse to go to the bride’s house before their wedding ceremony. There are also cases of Dalit communities' lands being encroached upon by the dominant community, or the community members not being paid just wages for the work they have done. When they question there have been instances of backlash and violence. ”

**Judith told us recommended films to know more about caste!
Please check them out:**

- Jai Bhim (directed by TJ Gnanaval)
- Maamannan (directed by Mari Selvaraj)
- Sairat (directed by Nagraj Manjule)
- Asuran (directed by Vetrimaaran)
- Article 15 (directed by Anubhav Sinha)

- How do you think people can work with each other in a true sense to eliminate caste-based discrimination?

“I think this is something that we all are trying to figure out because there is no end to this false caste pride. I think one possible solution is education. Although more people can access education, there still exists caste pride. Yet, to claim one’s own position and develop one’s own life, education is crucial. Also, raising awareness among the community is important. So, more engagement between civil societies and the government is required to raise more awareness. How do we change the mentality of the dominant caste community? We need to ponder upon it. This can be done by engaging with all communities and raising awareness of the Indian Constitutional ethics such as justice, equality, liberty and fraternity; these are crucial. Women are still struggling for safe spaces to claim their rights. It becomes essential to raise consensus and awareness on the same.

- **Are there any conflicts between Dalit women and men?**

“Yes, patriarchy exists within the community. Dalit community holds patriarchal ideas especially even within the Dalit civil society groups the leadership for a long time remained with men. Dalit women’s leadership have sprung up due to their own struggle to carve out spaces for our own voices to be heard. So, when I held public meetings in the village, it was men who were speaking from the community and women were sitting in or busy with food preparation. Leadership is something key. Even though we have had training on gender equality, law, and legal rights it is men who have more information than women, especially at the district and village levels. This must be changed. Therefore it is a priority for Dalit women to focus on building leadership and agency.”