



## Book Review

Shailaja Paik. (2022). *The Vulgarities of Caste: Dalits, Sexuality, and Humanity in Modern India*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. Pp. xvii+400. Price \$32.00. ISBN 9781503634084. Paperback.

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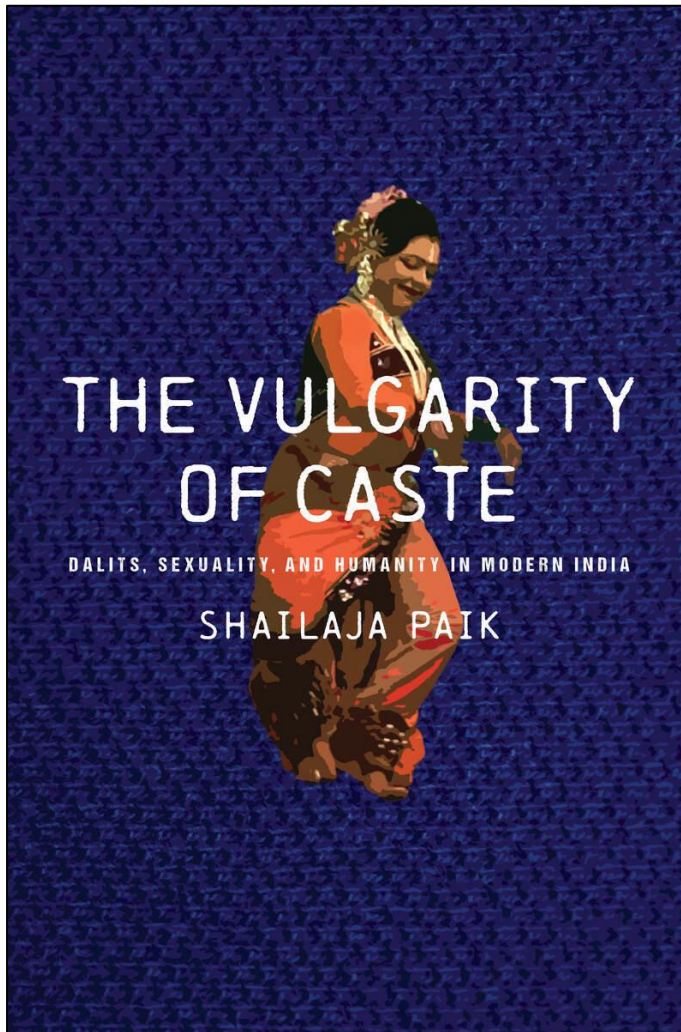


Image 10.1: Jacket Cover  
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Shailaja Paik's recent book *Vulgarities of Caste* (2022) explores the intersection between caste, gender, and sexuality in the context of Tamasha (a traditional form of dance performance carried out by women in Maharashtra). Shedding light on the historical and contemporary experiences of Tamasha performers and the challenges they face, the book highlights the exploitation of Dalit women's bodies and labour, meant for the pleasure of men, and for the construction of their masculinities.

The book is divided into three parts, each corresponding to socio-political as well as formal shifts that occur in the world of Tamasha. Chapter 1 explores the history of Tamasha and its connection to the sex-gender-caste system of early 20th century Maharashtra. In doing this, Paik examines how caste hierarchies marginalized and exploited Untouchable women, forcing them into servitude and using their bodies for entertainment. She shows how this system of caste slavery and sexual exploitation was further entrenched through the Victorian-brahmanical bourgeois alliance of the late 19th

century that labelled Tamasha and its performers as *ashlil* (vulgar), subjecting them to regulation, reform, and discipline. Chapter 2 explores the lives of particular Tamasha performers, Pavalabai Hivargaokarin and Patthe Bapurao, to examine how their professional relationships challenged the caste system. Though Bapurao's status as a brahman contrasts with that of Pavalabai's status as an Untouchable, Paik shows how their collaboration transgresses caste boundaries and threaten the established hierarchy. Chapter 3 locates the evolution of Tamasha and its constituent communities in the wake of Ambedkar's radical reinventing of Dalit selfhood. Paik carefully places the question of Tamasha on the theoretical pathway laid out by Ambedkar, explaining how the labour of Tamasha women remains

incongruent with the emergent Dalit collective. Chapter 4 records the emergence of the Ambedkari Jalsa that appropriated the Tamasha form to appeal to reformed Dalit sensibilities, wherein the form became sanitized through an alteration of its sexual appeal and excess. Paik records how female actors were eliminated in these appropriations, repurposed for articulating a new Dalit consciousness. In Chapter 5, Paik notes the demands that were placed on the Tamasha form to fulfil a role that affirmed regional, and the sub-national Marathi identity in the post sixties period. In this period, such affirming exercises were felt as necessary, especially in the wake of arguing for a separate Maharashtra state. The building of cultural codes in this context signified the presence of a broader Marathi identity that was contrasted and placed in opposition to the hegemony of the North Indian identity and Hindi.

To demonstrate this effectively, Paik summons the large archive of the *tamashapradhan chitrapat* or 'tamasha-cinema', a popular genre that evolved in the field of Marathi language cinema discussion. This genre centred on the narratives of Tamasha practitioners. Chapter 6 demonstrates how a significant number of Dalit women necessarily remained within the sex-gender-caste complex, despite the efforts undertaken to reform Tamasha of its eros, through statist and Ambedkarite interventions. The book concludes by examining the contemporary transformations in Tamasha, particularly the emergence of all-male troupes, and the exploration of queer performativity. It also reflects on the individual successes of Dalit artists in challenging the stigma associated with Tamasha women and reclaiming their humanity. Overall, the book aims to unravel the historical, institutional, material, and ideological politics surrounding Tamasha

The book rests on two analytical axes. The first is the sex-gender-caste complex and the second is the tripartite moral framework of *ashlil-manuski-assli* (vulgarity-humanity-authenticity)—an independent complex, in which Tamasha women find themselves. Not only is the sex-gender-caste complex a sexual and gendered arrangement of the caste system, operating to oppress Dalit Tamasha women', but it also acts as a locus from where Tamasha women seek to reinvent themselves as artists with agency. Paik postulates this reading in parallel to the problem posed by a surplus of women arranged within caste hierarchy, and how Tamasha women consistently produce anxiety about sexual transgressions among caste-bearing people. Paik borrows from Butler's theory of performativity for Tamasha, where the performance of 'stylized repetitions' normalizes the sex-gender-caste complex and simultaneously produces new Dalit and Marathi subjectivities (p.12). Paik invokes the tripartite frame of *ashlil-manuski-assli* to further explain how these vernacular categories are used by constituent actors themselves. Arguing that it was the colonial state and later, the independent state of Maharashtra that fixed Dalits within realms of the vulgar, the outward movement from this fixing resulted in trajectories of *manuski* or humanity, a praxis espoused by Ambedkar. While *assli* or authentic signifies the tension between Marathi elites and the Tamasha people, who are engaged in the process of appropriating Tamasha to reinvent regional Marathi identity, the terms *ashlil* and *assli* become mutually counterposed. *Manuski*, on the other hand, a term amply theorized by Ambedkar, imagines it as a force that propels Dalit worldmaking.

*Vulgarity of Caste* reworks our understanding of caste, asserting that caste cannot be studied by divorcing it from questions of gender, region, labour, and the regulation of sexuality. Paik's research rests heavily on the vernacular print archive as well as on photography and cinema. She demonstrates a careful and empathetic way of carrying out ethnography, which does not seem like an overreach into the private lives of her subject. In fact, Paik is quite candid, letting the readers in on her own through thought bubbles, as she interacts with Tamasha artists, remaining acutely aware at the same time, of her own positionality in the world she attempts to write. While the author underscores the gamut of disciplines that the book is in conversation with, I think scholars of performance in India would greatly benefit from this work. In the

scholarship regarding Indian performance cultures, there is serious dearth of scholarship that analyses the subject cultures of performance in as much totality as Paik has managed. There has been tacit acceptance of categories, like 'folk', 'modern', 'political' in the scholarship of Indian performance without necessarily placing these categories under scrutiny of caste. Though caste has operated, and is at the very core of performance economy, there has not been much scholarly attention to theorizing the experiences of marginalized caste identities entwined with performing arts as caste occupation—that is, with exception to Davesh Soneji's *Unfinished Gestures* (2011) and Brahm Prakash's *Cultural Labour* (2019). *Vulgarity of Caste* precisely addresses this gap and provides scholars with a methodological framework for future inquiries of such kind.

## References

Prakash B., (2019). *Cultural Labour: Conceptualizing the 'Folk Performance' in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Soneji D., (2011). *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.