

Caste, Environment Justice, and Intersectionality of Dalit–Black Ecologies

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■ **ABSTRACT:** Caste and race, Dalits and Black people, and the common ground between them have been analyzed in many areas, but their conjunction in the environmental field has been neglected. This article locates Dalit ecologies by examining the close connection between caste and nature. Drawing from a plural framework of environmental justice and histories of environmental struggles among African Americans, it focuses on historical and contemporary ecological struggles of Dalits. It contemplates how their initial articulations under the rubric of civil rights developed into significant struggles over issues of Dalit access, ownership, rights, and partnership regarding natural resources, where themes of environmental and social justice appeared at the forefront. The intersections between Dalit and Black ecologies, the rich legacies of Black Panthers and Dalit Panthers, and their overlaps in environmental struggles open for us a new historical archive, where Dalit and Black power can talk to each other in the environmental present.

■ **KEYWORDS:** Dalit, Caste, Race, Black people, Environmental Justice, Pollution, Untouchability

On 15 August 1973, the twenty-sixth anniversary of Indian Independence, Dalit Panthers, an organization founded by young Dalits in 1972 to evoke ideas of blackness and Black power for representing Dalit politics, took out a march on Mumbai streets. The march was called the Black Independence Day (Kala Swatantrya Din), where a Dalit Panthers Manifesto was released. Questioning the dominant narratives of independence, democracy, government, and political parties in India, the manifesto identified three “burning questions of Dalits today”: “1) food, clothing, shelter; 2) employment, land, untouchability; 3) social and physical injustice”. Key programs, carried on under this manifesto, have extensively focused on Dalit access to natural resources: “The question of landlessness of the dalit peasants must be resolved”; “Dalits must be allowed to draw water from public wells”; “Dalits must live, not outside the village in a separate settlement, but in the village itself”; and “all means of production must belong to the Dalits” (Dalit Panthers Manifesto 1973: 6-8).

Political links between the Dalit Panthers and the Black Panthers, common legacies of B. R. Ambedkar¹ and W. E. B. Du Bois, and numerous initiatives and academic writings by organizations, activists, and academicians have aligned anti-caste struggles of untouchables and low-caste people in India with anti-racist articulations of African Americans in the United States (Kapoor 2003; Namishray 2003; Slate 2012; Yengde and Teltumbde 2018). Amid this long tradition of intersections between anti-casteist and anti-racist positions (Natrajan and Greenough



2009), Dalit-Black solidarities have encompassed questions of social and economic inequalities, civil and political rights, possibilities of democracy, development, gender, empowerment, and formation of organizations of the oppressed (Fair 1999; Horne 2008; Parikh 1997; Prashad 2000). In history and economics too, caste and race, Dalits and Black people, and the parallel connections and common grounds between the two have been widely analyzed. Caste and race have often been considered interchangeable, in terms of their overwhelming potential for damaging human society (Cox 1948; Myrdal 1968; Pandey 2013; Rajashekar 1995; Robb 1995; Visweswaran 2010; Wilkerson 2020).

However, the age of civil and political rights for India's Dalits and America's Black people is also a time of environmental inequalities and social and ecological movements in both communities and continents. Yet, the search for shared histories and struggles of Dalits and Black people have not entered the unquiet world of environmental struggles. This disjoint between the dynamic and long history of Dalit-Black solidarity, and the near absence of an overlapping environmental discourse, is something of a historical puzzle. Amid this background, this article analyzes how ecologies of Dalits and Black people are similar and/or different. It focuses on a comparative structuring logic between environmental racism and environmental casteism, as both are forms of racialization and spatialization, and both fundamentally pivot on embodied and lived experiences. The article attempts to think of dynamic intersections between Dalit and Black environmentalism for future work in academia and activism.

The article hinges on four broad themes. The first is the articulation and expansion of environmental justice movements of color and low-income communities in the United States, and how these can be useful in framing Dalit responses, and for conceptualizing their environmental struggles against protean forms of eco-casteism. Based on a broad literature review, I outline the dynamic, heterogeneous, and plural discourses of environmental justice, and its specific histories among African Americans. As has been stated, "In this sense, the discourse of environmental justice may be seen as a unifying process, bringing together diverse situations and sharing understandings and experiences" (Agyeman et al. 2003: 9). Second, I draw on certain key literary writings to study some historical and contemporary ecological struggles of Dalits. Deploying three case studies, I demonstrate how environmental articulations under the rubric of civil rights developed into significant struggles over Dalits' access, occupation, and rights in the natural and physical environment, and how in the process, themes of social and environmental justice appeared on the forefront. Through contemporary cultural, social, and political assertions on land, water, and commons, Dalits are opening up a new ecological universe, which is often outside the dominant discursive framework. In the third rubric, I draw on a subset of literature by anti-caste and Dalit writers to capture Dalit caste conceptions of environment, and the making of Dalit ecologies. Purity and pollution of body, touch, taste, space, place, and people are key markers of caste, creating essential qualities and differences within and outside of naturescapes. In Dalit relations to environment, they articulate certain notions of nature that go beyond physicality, possession, and distribution of resources, as environmental justice discourses have done in the past. The language of experience, feeling, humiliation, and dignity, ubiquitously used in Dalit movements, also gets integrated into conceptions of environmental justice. Finally, based on the parallels drawn between environmental casteism and environmental racism, and simultaneous struggles against them, I contemplate how we can conceive of a new counter-archive, where a rich repertoire of Dalit and Black ecologies—their cultures and memories, stories and struggles, systems of knowledge and technological skills—can talk to each other. Cornel West and Suraj Yengde (Menon 2020) call this an exercise in connecting histories, building power, fusing something, and creating "a new historical archive" to strengthen a long tradition of Dalit-Black solidarity. Inspired in part by Black fem-

inist and critical race and caste studies (Shankar and Gupta 2019), my approach draws from an understanding of intersectionality as a conceptual tool. Intersectionality underlines how identities and systems intertwine to produce individual and relational experiences. As Patricia Collins states: “As opposed to examining gender, race, class and nation as separate systems of oppression, intersectionality explores how these systems mutually construct one another” and that “certain ideas and practices surface repeatedly across multiple systems of oppression” (1998: 63). The intersections between Dalit and Black ecologies can help in creating a robust archive of environmental justice.

Environmental Justice in Historical and Global Context

The evolution of the environmental justice movement among Black people in the United States in the 1980s has been widely researched. Its historical roots can be traced back to a fundamental reorganization of space in America after World War II, and the state-sanctioned racial discrimination and segregation of people of color, in terms of housing, workplace, location of dangerous and polluting-emitting factories, and disposal of toxic wastes (Wells 2018). Bullard (2000) brings out how toxic dumping, municipal waste facility siting, and discriminatory land-use decisions in areas of color and poor communities were a central concern of the Black activists in the early environmental justice movement. Warren County, North Carolina, became a symbol of the environmental justice movement when a large number of African American protestors laid down on the highways for weeks, and were arrested in big numbers, for blocking dump trucks carrying dirt laced with high concentrations of cancerous polychlorinated biphenyls toxic chemicals from entering waste landfills. Whispering Pines Sanitary Landfill and protests by the Houston Northwood Manor subdivision residents, outcry over the prevalence of toxic chemicals in Louisiana’s Cancer Alley; and many such instances in Black localities prompted research, publications, and activism around disproportionate siting of hazards, toxic, and industrial polluting facilities in Black and Brown communities. Simultaneously, farm workers’ struggles against the use of dangerous pesticides and their impact on health, industrial action against environmental hazards at the workplace by industrial labor organizations, such as the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers Union; and concerns around occupational health and working conditions of sanitation workers appeared prominently on the agenda of working class and environmental justice grassroots groups. During this period working class environmental groups were formed to reduce pollution in the community. Focus was on air and water pollution, factory emissions and improved sanitation (illegal dumping, garbage removal) (Taylor 2002). Researchers like Jediah Britton-Purdy (1996) adopt a historical lens to describe “a long environmental-justice movement”, of more than a century, in the US. Several examples, like the Wilderness Act 1964, and a great victory for a long political drive to preserve 100 million acres of public land, or the proposal of Miners for Democracy, which briefly took over the United Mine Workers of America in the early 1970s to enforce safety regulations and environmental principles in the workplace, or the Earth Day 1970, with the largest mass mobilization in American history, demonstrated that historically, environmentalism was also a social justice movement. At the same time, Purdy pinpoints three central criticisms made by environmental justice scholars and activists regarding mainstream environmentalism. First, it does not recognize the distribution of environmental harms and benefits along the lines of poverty and race. Second, environmental justice questions the mainstream environmental idea of what environmental problems are in the first place. Third, mainstream environmentalism over-emphasizes elite forms of advocacy and has less space for people’s mobilization.

Critiques have also been offered against the “whiteness of the environmental movement” (Sandler and Pezzullo 2007) and the exclusive nature of major environmental organizations (Letter to Big Ten Environmental Groups, 16 March 1990). Historians have pointed out that the first national People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, held in Washington DC in October 1991, represented a historic moment in the environmental justice movement. Among the delegates of African American, Native American, Asian American and Latino origin, Dana Alston, an African American environmentalist, delivered her now-famous speech, “the environment, for us, is where we live, where we work and where we play,” which was a shift from mainstream environmentalism (Mayer 2003: 2).

Seventeen “Principles of Environmental Justice” adopted at the summit, and a defining document of the environmental justice movement, emphasized the importance of racial justice for people of color. Simultaneously, it affirmed “the fundamental right to political, economic, cultural and environmental self-determination of all peoples” (Adopted at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit Washington, DC, 24–27 October 1991). Thereafter, conceptual and organizational trajectories of the environmental justice movement multiplied many-fold, though the context of injustice remained central, and race continued as its key component. Alongside, the movement reflected the pluralities of justice discourse, and encompassed civil and human rights, injustices, inequalities, exclusion, and victimization; politics of place and spatial dimension of justice; and recognition of experience, difference, diversity, and participation of Black ecology (Cole and Foster 2001; Steady 2009; Taylor 2002).

Social justice has found frequent mention in the vocabulary of environmental justice (Bullard 2000; Sandler and Pezzullo 2007). Key elements of social justice have been defined in terms of environmental inequalities, exclusion, discrimination, harms, victimization, distribution, access and rights, and their relevance to specific social groups (Dobson 1998; Taylor 2014). David Harvey (1996) concretizes “the environment of justice” by positing nature as internal to society and all ecological projects as political and social projects. Nature would not have existed in its present form had humans not been mixing their labor with the land all along. For him, the present and the future of nature—the new earth and the new humanity—should be understood through labor and spatial and social change (also see Braun 2006). According to William Cronon (1996), from the perspective of justice, the central question is, “Whose Nature?” He suggests that the mainstream environmental politics and ethics should frontally acknowledge the deeply troubling truth that “nature”—which they seek to understand and protect—is not “out there” but is produced in experiences, ideas, and imaginations “right here”. There are many “human versions of nature” and they will be jostling and contesting against each other. A social justice framework includes dignity and respect, protection of human rights, social equality, and economic egalitarianism, where each person has the same rights, opportunities, and services as all other people. It marks active participation in sociopolitical institutions and decision-making, which affects individuals, groups, and collectivities, of which they are a part. Four concrete propositions have been placed to make eco-justice more relevant: justice as an active process, justice through maximizing liberty, justice dealing with issues holistically, and justice’s temporal and spatial dimensions (White 2013).

Environmental justice activism has been grounded locally; at the same time, it has continued to evolve globally (Adeola 2000; Agyeman et al. 2003; Byrne et al. 2002). Not only has its initial perspective been anchored in burgeoning thinking about the interconnectedness of environmental justice with “different cultural and political histories” and “the rejection of any form of racism, discrimination and oppression” (Second People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit), it also has had good traction in different continents around broader concepts of justice. Horizontal and vertical globalizing of environmental justice has found echoes in different

countries and continents. Going beyond national borders, its concerns have encompassed trade agreements, transfer of wastes, climate change, and the Rights of Nature (Martinez-Alier et al. 2016). Drawing strong connections between environmental and social issues, environmental justice provides an opportunity for developing diverse politics and broad-based coalitions all around (Bryant 1995). Environmental justice research and publications have flourished through several country-specific studies (Alleson and Schoenfeld 2007; Fan 2006; Grineski and Collins 2008; Ikporkpo 2004). While Black people have laid the foundations of environmental justice by questioning the dominant paradigm of environmentalism, the globalism of the movement has raised some pertinent questions about its conceptual trajectories. However, the moot question is whether “the popular understanding of environmental justice is based on too narrow a view of ‘environment’ and too narrow a view of ‘justice’” (Anthony 2005: 92). Does the concept encompass realities of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and articulate a wide range of specific social, cultural, economic, and environmental issues? Further, how should the global discourse on environmental justice, generated by Black Americans and others, take note of the role of caste in organizing social and environmental relations, and the complex ways in which the Indian caste system creates hierarchical power structures, and works through other centers of power, to naturalize and organize environmental inequalities?

Even the “new pluralism” of environmental justice, which offers ways to include diversity, difference, recognition, and participation, for unpacking histories and geographies of exclusion, makes no reference to caste and Dalits. Indian environmental discourse, otherwise sensitive to the issue of environmental justice, too falls short here. For example, “A history of environmental justice in India” succinctly traces the history of Indian environmentalism from the lens of social justice. According to the author, the country witnessed the emergence of issues of differential access to natural resources and ecosystem services in the 1970s and 1980s. Thereafter, two other critical environmental justice issues—development-induced displacement and gender-based discrimination in accessing natural resources—were articulated. The Bhopal Gas Disaster of 1984 raised new issues related to the impact of toxic contamination on individuals and communities, where the heavy burden on the poor was also realized. The study claims that the sensibility of environmental justice has been a “central meme in Indian environmentalism since the 1970s” (Rajan 2014: 120). However, the criticality and specificity of caste and Dalits in accessing natural resources and ecosystem services has remained on the fringes in such studies. Similarly, discourses of “environmentalisms of the poor” have been repositories of vocabularies and languages of rights of the subordinated. Through historical and comparative perspectives, which encompass gender and class, environmental authors have argued that varieties of environmentalism in South Asia “originate in social conflicts over access to and control over natural resources” (Guha and Martinez-Alier 1998: xxi)—for example, conflicts between peasants and industry over forest produce; rural and urban populations over water and energy; or struggles of the poor against corporates, markets, and state to retain their control over natural resources. Yet, the authors treat struggles for environmental justice by various social groups as separate from Dalit issues, and they elide or subsume the “caste question.” Consequently, there has been little understanding of how caste intersects with environment to create socio-environmental inequalities in South Asia.

Most Dalit movements too have not seriously tried to conceptually intersect the cause of Dalits with environment, in the way Black people and other people of color have. There could be at least two reasons for this. First, some Dalits, like many others (for example, a section of working class, trade union, and left movements), perceive the environment movement as elitist in nature (*The Bhopal Document* 2002). Second, in a specifically Indian context, being largely concerned with communities (for example, the indigenous forest-inhabiting populations), whose dispos-

session is tied to modern development and capitalism, environmental movements here have largely focused on the protection of villages, and rural and traditional livelihoods. This has often been anathema for a large section of Dalits, for whom the whole point is precisely to get away from stigmatized traditional occupations, as I demonstrate in my next section on Dalit ecological struggles. By bringing these dimensions in, the reasons for the studied distance between the two—anti-caste and environment movements—certainly become more comprehensible (Omvedt 1997).

Taking this into account, there has emerged a “Dalit critique of environmental justice in India,” which has also specified the need to evolve new perspectives and priority areas in various movements, which include Dalits and low caste people (Bhimraj 2020). Some stray research efforts have tried to redefine environmental justice in South Asia by including caste and discrimination (Vani et al. 2007). However, the caste perspective of environmental justice has not been much articulated.

Dalits Ecological Struggles: Where we Live, Where we Work . . .

This water lake of Mahad is a public property. The Touchables of Mahad are so generous that they allow all the people to draw water; even the Muslims and persons of other religions also are free to draw water from there. Not only that, they do not have objection to even animals drinking water from this lake. They allow all animals even those belonging to the Untouchables. . . .

The Touchables of Mahad are opposing Untouchables in drawing water from Mahad lake not because its water will get polluted or it will vanish in thin air. They oppose it because they do not want to accept that the Untouchables are equal to them. (Ambedkar 1927. Quoted in Jadhav 2013: 93–94)

This was B. R. Ambedkar, launching the Mahad struggle and the burning of the *Manusmriti* (an ancient Hindu law text that condemns untouchable castes) in 1927, at the core of which was an assertion of untouchables’ right to take water from public waterbodies. When the struggle over Chawdar tank was at its peak, the agitators also publicly burnt the *Manusmriti*. However, the above passage or other similar ones have not found a place in the standard chronicles of Indian environmentalism and, even when they do appear, they are read not as an expression of an environmental tradition, but simply as discourses on social justice. It is true that Dalits have generally articulated their struggles under the rubric of the “social” as opposed to the explicitly “environmental”. At the same time, Dalits are excluded from natural resources, live separately in villages, suffer from landlessness, have restricted access to waterbodies due to purity–pollution taboos, and live in segregated and dirty city spaces, working in “dirty” occupations. Viewed from this perspective, Dalits have had a long history of social and environmental struggles, which have manifested in regular conflicts against Brahmin and *savarna* (higher caste) domination of eco-space, as well as in assertion and creation of an autonomous Dalit eco-space. Based on Dalit and anti-caste literature, in this section I offer snippets of three such struggles—of the 1920s, 1950–1960s, and 2000s—from different regions of the country, where human and environmental rights overlapped with social and ecological justice and shared a common ground. At the same time, it needs to be noted that Dalit is not a homogeneous category, in terms of labor, occupation, knowledge, and cultural practices.² Studying Dalit ecological politics provides us with not only Dalit perspectives, but also points to the significant differences in environmental attitudes among them in different regions, and reveals the possibilities of debate and varied practices within Dalits.

Let me begin with the above stated Mahad *satyagraha* (peaceful resistance) in Western India, which has been researched widely, and described as an epoch-making moment, with far-reaching effects on untouchables, leading to the emergence of a new Dalit politics (Rao 2009). Thought-provoking anti-caste interpretations of Mahad *satyagraha*, however, can be complemented and enriched by employing the lens of environmental justice. This struggle symbolized the ties between untouchability, civil rights, and environmental sensibilities. The centrality of access to natural resources for untouchables, and Hindu religious-based caste inequality and injustices in nature, became a converging point for divergent Dalit political and social traditions.

Hindu Brahmanical scriptures have colored water with caste. Ideas of ritual purity and pollution, and daily practices and habits of drinking, bathing, fishing, and transportation have been profoundly affected by caste, sanctifying the social order of water. Caste and Hindu religion have critically come into play when determining Dalits' contact with water, resulting in a tense relationship between water, dominant Hindu discourses, and Dalits. It has been an association of domination on the one hand, and marginalization and exclusion on the other.³ In his political journey, Ambedkar time and again narrates the tales of water and the Mahad struggle. Located in the Kolaba district of the then-Bombay Presidency, Mahad town had a population of around eight thousand, of whom fewer than four hundred were untouchables. The Chawdar tank, an old public tank owned by the municipality, was a vast expanse of water, mainly fed by the rains and a few natural springs. The tank lay at the heart of the Hindu quarters and was surrounded by upper-caste Hindu residences. The untouchables had to come to the town for various purposes: shopping, paying government revenues, or performing their duties as village servants. This was the only public tank in the town from which an outsider could get water. Even then, untouchables were barred from fetching its water, causing great hardship. In 1923, the Bombay Legislative Council and the government passed a resolution and issued orders that the untouchables be allowed to use all public water places, wells, and *dharmashalas* (resting inns), which were built and maintained out of public funds. However, orthodox caste Hindus refused to comply with the order.

It was thus decided to hold a Conference of Untouchables at Mahad, presided over by Ambedkar, on 19–20 March 1927. On 20 March, the Conference decided that, as a collective body, they should go to the Chawdar tank and help the depressed classes in establishing their right to take water from the tank. The delegates accordingly began to march peacefully towards the Chawdar tank. Ambedkar narrates that the procession marched past and went to the Chawdar tank, and the Untouchables for the first time drank its water. However, the religious orthodoxy felt threatened, and the priest of the temple next to the tank spread a rumor that the untouchables were also planning to enter the temple. A riot broke out. Caste Hindus attacked Dalits, many of whom were severely wounded. Caste Hindus declared the Chawdar tank to be desecrated by the touch of the untouchables and, soon after, ritually purified its water for their use.

Dalit struggles, however, continued, and another *satyagraha* was started on 25 December 1927, in spite of caste Hindus' aggression in between: the Mahad Municipality revoked its 1924 resolution of opening the tank to the depressed classes, and leaders of orthodox Hindus filed a suit against Ambedkar and others, requesting a temporary injunction. However, in December 1927, thousands of Dalits gathered in Mahad. The mood was to defy the injunction and take water from the tank at whatever cost involved. However, amid several twists and turns, Ambedkar decided to fight the matter in the courts rather than on the streets. On 27 December, a symbolic procession was taken out through the streets of Mahad to the tank, but it did not stop to take water. The court case was finally decided by the Bombay High Court in 1937 in favor of Ambedkar, stating that the caste Hindus' right to exclude untouchables was not based on immemorial custom. The Mahad struggle brought out a complex set of interrelated issues,

structures, and aggregates in a caste society—environmental, human, religious, historical, local, legal, political, governmental, and organizational—which were bound together by Dalit resistance and anti-caste struggle.

Let me move to my second example. Based on historical research and oral narratives, Badri Narayan (2011) has extensively studied the *Nara-Maveshi* movement of the 1950s–1960s in north India. Largely unknown till his study, the movement forcefully brought out and challenged the close links between the caste system, occupational segregation, and Dalits. Caste creates a concept of natural and social order, where people, place, occupation, and knowledge are characterized by pollution and ritual cleanliness; where bodies, behaviors, situations, and actions are isolated, “out of place,” and “untouched,” because of deep-down hierarchical boundaries. Casteism often rests on naturalism, where nature is used and abused to provide a body of knowledge, including bonds, locations, and landscapes, for determining individual–collective identities and relationships, in an ecological setting. In such hereditarily ordered categories, Dalits are particularly tied with degrading (“polluting”) traditional occupations.

Nara-Maveshi signifies two occupational activities, designated traditionally to the Chamar caste: women as midwives cutting the umbilical cord (*nara*) of newborns, and men manually disposing of the corpses and carcasses of dead animals (*maveshi*). Both these occupations have historically been tied with untouchability. Faced with everyday humiliation of their caste-based polluted labor, while also receiving meagre grains and clothes in lieu of wages, Chamar men and women, mainly from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar states of north India, decided to stop skinning and tanning dead cattle and cutting newborns’ umbilical cords. Narayan takes us through life narratives of several Chamars in villages of Uttar Pradesh to show how they felt dirty and demeaned in their occupation. The movement spread widely, but also invited a range of painful and insulting backlashes from the higher and middle castes of the villages on the Chamars—physical attacks and destruction of homes and property; imposition of “economic sanctions,” including no work on agricultural fields, no loans, no permission to collect firewood from the trees, or to walk through their fields; and prevention of their walking on the roads, drinking water from the wells, or using water for irrigation. Even the local shopkeepers were pressurized not to sell grains to them, while other communities such as washermen and barbers were asked not to render any services to the agitating Chamars.

The movement played a significant role in liberating Chamars from their caste-based “natural” and social spaces. It expanded in its scope, to include issues of rights and dignity. While most intensive in the 1950s–1960s, the campaign continued in Uttar Pradesh till the 1980s, and attempted to fracture the links between place, occupation, inherited status, and social hierarchy. It brought new perspectives on Dalit meanings of labor and environment.

In my third example, I focus on Dalits’ nationwide long march, *Bhim Yatra*, which was set off on 10 December 2015 by the *Safai Karmachari Aandolan* (SKA: Movement Against Manual Scavenging), and concluded in Delhi on 14 April 2016, the 125th birth anniversary of Ambedkar, after covering 35,000 kilometers in 125 days, across thirty states. The march included caravans of vehicles, processions, meetings, different groups fanning out in different areas simultaneously, street theater, and cultural performances. Taking on issues of manual scavenging, dry latrines, sewers, and septic tanks under the slogan of “Stop Killing Us—Stop Killing Us in Sewer and Septic Tanks,” the march demanded that the Government “tender an apology to the scavenger community for the historical injustices and centuries of humiliation of making us manual scavengers” and “eliminate manual scavenging immediately, without any further delay.” The movement strived to “break the link imposed by the caste system between birth and the dehumanizing occupation,” and to reclaim “our dignity, equity and human personhood” (Safai Karmachari Andolan 2016). The march went around hundreds of villages, cities, colo-

nies, public places, and neighborhood areas. It addressed meetings of Dalits and non-Dalits, performed plays and songs, and organized community dining and overnight stays, to forge a broader understanding and unity. SKA had been engaged in various struggles since 1983 by deploying different campaign strategies: conducting surveys to identify dry latrines, users, and those forced into manual scavenging; filing petitions and complaints with government officials at local, regional, and national levels; educating and sensitizing the civil society, especially dry latrine users; filing a Public Interest Litigation in the Supreme Court; and networking with individuals, media, and civil society organizations to form wider solidarity and pressure groups (Wilson and Singh 2016).

Across much of India the practice of manually cleaning excrement from private and public dry toilets and open drains persists. Manual scavengers are mostly from caste groups customarily relegated to the bottom of the caste hierarchy and confined to livelihood tasks considered as deplorable or deemed too menial by higher-caste groups. Their caste-designated work reinforces the social stigma of being unclean and untouchable and perpetuates widespread discrimination. Since the early 2000s, various movements of manual scavengers have been quite vocal and militant. In 2012–2013, thousands of women scavengers organized *Maila Mukti Yatra* (Dirt Liberation March) in 200 districts of eighteen states, covering more than ten thousand kilometers, under the banner of *Rashtriya Garima Abhiyan* (National Campaign for Dignity and Eradication of Manual Scavenging). Liberated women scavengers took a lead to reach out to colonies and houses of those women who were still engaged in the practice, and motivated them to leave it completely. The march became aggressive many times, as “pots were burnt at public places” and “dry toilets were broken at some places.” The march also made it a point to enter public water sources, parks, tea and barber shops. It was stated: “In villages where Dalits were not allowed to wear chappals in non-Dalit colonies, and weren’t allowed to take marriage processions, rallies were organized with drum beats, and these were headed by women who used to practice manual scavenging” (Rashtriya Garima Abhiyan 2013: np).

Manual scavenging in India has largely been addressed as an issue of social justice and human rights. However, Dalits have also articulated various labor, health, and environmental concerns associated with it, with a greater focus on sanitation. The bios of humanity as part of nature, with caste as its social determinant, is as critical as access to natural resources. The substance, direction, and rates of change in manual scavenging depend not only on the state of organization and technology, but also on the condition of social and physical environment. In a set of various effects on human biology, caste, social, and natural factors remain the leading ones. Dalit struggles on sanitation take note of different kinds of biological reactions to a number of socially conditioned processes.

Some of the fundamental themes of environmental and social justice—Dalits’ access, ownership, rights, and participation in land, water, forests, and commons—have appeared frequently in these movements. A large number of environmental conflicts and violence against Dalits in India are found to be related to land, water, forest, and sanitation issues (Saxena 2004). Infrastructure, real estate, industrialization, and mining have led to new forms of dispossession, displacement, and resistance, where the loss is much greater for Dalits. Recent research shows the prominent role of caste in India’s contemporary “land wars,” as caste remains firmly entrenched in various land struggles (Nielsen et al. 2020). Dalits have also asserted their right to water by questioning various tenets of Hindu religion, caste, culture, institutions, and practices, which have prevented them from accessing water due to entrenched notions of untouchability, impurity, and pollutants. Simultaneously, there have been numerous violent incidents perpetrated against Dalit water assertions (Adagale 2021; Crowley 2020). The passage of the Forest Rights Act 2006, which was enacted to address the “historic injustice” to the indigenous people living

in the forest region, witnessed Dalit movements to reclaim their rights in forests (George 2011; Vaidya 2017).

Commons—land, forests, waterbodies, ponds, groves, parks, pavements, streets—have a distinctive valance for Dalits. These are places, spaces, sites, and regions of social conflicts and political protests, domination and resistance, construction and destruction, exclusion and violence. From a Dalit perspective, commons have a multilayered environmental, economic, and social importance. They have been articulating distinct meanings and imaginations of commons, which have both oppositional and alternative aspects. Dalits have brought to the fore the strange semantic of the word “common.” Ravikumar, a well-known Dalit writer, notes: “A ‘common well’ means one from which an untouchable cannot draw water, a ‘common funeral ground’ means a place where the body of an untouchable cannot be cremated, a ‘common market’ is where an untouchable cannot even sit” (2007: 246). Dominant village elites usually control the common lands and water resources, and cannot tolerate the demands of Dalits for new entitlements. The right to equal social space that “essentially consists of the right to enter and use public space” is the new right claimed by Dalits (Nagaraj 2010: 133). Not only in the present, Dalit writers and historians narrate many instances of struggles by Dalits over public spaces during the colonial period (Chentharassery 2011).

The above examples demonstrate how, in different historical periods, Dalits have shown an awareness of their physical environment and labor, and the dangers that caste-based social ecology poses to their health, community, and well-being. Their actions have had clear civil right agendas, which also underscore their links with environmental concerns. They have given vent to their environmental imaginations and, in the process, created a collage of Dalit ecologies.

Environmental Racism and Environmental Casteism: Key Convergences and Divergences

Dalit and Black ecologies have convergences and divergences, and it is important to assess a few structural similarities and differences between the two, as these can provide a broad road map for future work. For instance, there are some important ecological (political, cosmological, psychic) factors that have profoundly and distinctly shaped Dalit environmental experiences. Dalits can be characterized as a subaltern population, subjected to several millennia of cosmological essentialization *in situ*, that is, being “of the land” in a primordial sense, and simultaneously abject in the cosmological sense of not having been born of the *Purusha*,⁴ and thus out of human universe. Conversely, the subaltern existential condition of Black Americans is different. In the colonial phase of early capitalism, they were uprooted from their African homelands and forced into slavery, enduring the Middle Passage, to become an essentially different people, stripped of personhood, in an alien land. This distinction shapes different kinds of spatial/ecological, economic, and political deracination, and generates distinct experiences of abjection, alienation, violence, despair, and hope, as well as diverse possibilities for resistance, action, and emancipation.

Reflecting on the unique trajectories of Dalit and African American struggles, historian Gyanendra Pandey points to several social divisions among the Dalits themselves. At the same time, Dalit identity has been carved in the course of their sociopolitical struggles, where histories of labor and exploitation, hierarchy and stigma helped in creating a common ground for a new political community. Dalit conversions to Buddhism were also meant to establish a new identity, politics, and culture. In contrast, “the separate identity of the African American people and culture seems to be in place from their arrival on American shores—or so the legend has it. The

experience of slavery, the legal and social barriers against access to basic resources for people of African descent in much of the US for much of its history, the visibility of skin colour, and the discourse of 19th century ‘science’, ‘civilisation’ and ‘race’, have served to establish this as common sense” (Pandey 2010: 66).

Taking “racialization” and “racial capitalism” as key analytical concepts, some notable researchers have talked about caste and Dalits in India as the “production of racial difference,” which is “reproduced through Hindu nationalist, casteist, and colonial projects that generate tacit and explicit consent for continued violence against racialized others” (Chairez-Garza et al. 2022: 193). According to them, there is a close connection between regional forms of racial difference and forms of global racial capitalism. Racialization in India is calibrated through shifting capitalist political economics, and caste, like race, is inextricably bound with capitalism’s dehumanizing impulse. However, capital, industry, development, modernity, and globalization have contradictory implications, with no clear-cut homogeneity of connotations for Indian Dalits. Traditional stigmatized occupations and jobs, with which Dalits were previously associated, had signaled increasing aggression and violence against them. Thus, urbanization, modernity, and development are viewed by a number of Dalits as liberating forces. They can aid in opening new opportunities of employment, which can be more emancipatory and materially beneficial. Technological progress particularly attracts the middle-class segments of Dalits. Ambedkar was equally emphatic in his understanding that the transformation of nature by powerful economic and technological forces not only had a living impact on separate components of landscapes, but was closely associated with the possibility of changing society altogether, and with it, its inseparable biosocial organ, namely human and humanity (Sharma and Bharti 2005).

At the same time, there are several convergences between Dalit and Black struggles in the environmental arena. Dalit lived and embodied experiences of casteization and spatiality, along with their conception of new commons, land, labor, and environmental rights are some of the pegs that connect environmental casteism and environmental racism. In this section, I focus on the critical relevance of caste studies and anti-caste literature in India, to show the ways in which casteism, social inequality, and untouchability interact with physical and natural forces to create specific forms of environmental domination and exploitation. Anti-caste literature emphasizes that everyday practices, of what constitutes environmental activity and thinking, are structured by an archaeology of untouchability in body, contact, touch, smell, feel, belonging, work, and sociability.

What actually is the environmentality of caste? How does caste demonstrate its environmentality, its social nature, and everyday personal and social experiences? Environment is constituted not just by natural resources, but also by a combination of social and physical structures. Caste structures are important components of what constitutes the social and the physical, as caste naturalizes human and social phenomena. Naturalization “refers to ways of fortifying various social, cultural, economic, or political conventions by presenting them as part of natural order” (Daston 1992: 209). According to this view, humans have wrongly considered themselves as *above* nature, whereas they should be viewed as *in* nature, which is rich, permanent, and cultural, and often provides national values to guide human actions. The supremacy of “natural order” is affirmed in major spheres of caste society—life, labor, livelihood, food, animal, and space—which is often synonymous with a conservative Hindu *savarna* belief (Sharma 2017).

In their ground-breaking work, Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai (2019) explain the many ways in which the natural essentially creates the everyday social of caste. According to them, the conceptions of caste as a natural biological process, casteist constructions of social nature; metaphorical descriptions of caste, other social explanations through images of nature, and natural expressions of domination and authority variously demonstrate the formation of a naturalized

social, based on hierarchy. Even the natural senses of seeing, touching, smelling, tasting, and hearing have a caste sociality. History, culture, and religion further strengthen the intertwining of naturalism and casteism. For example, the “naturalized” *varnashrama* or *chaturvarnya* system, in which people were believed to be born with natural characteristics and inclinations towards a particular occupation, forced Dalits to continue with certain “polluted” occupations (Sharma 2017).

Naturalized environments, however, are lived environments, where experience is central to building recognition, dignity, respect, and justice, since each can be understood in terms of its potential to create new relationships to natural resources, landscape, and human society. Experience becomes primary to human access, assimilation, and agitation. Several contemporary thinkers have emphasized the importance of a subject’s experience in varied historical, political, social, and cultural contexts (Kaufman-Osborn 1993).

Particularly with regard to casteized nature, any analysis of the nature of justice has to consider the objective and subjective dimensions of environmental experiences. Within the figured world of social nature, “the environment is associated with the daily smells and sights of blight, along with an awareness of ever-present danger and insult to one’s body and to the community. Accompanying these threats are the experiences of other forms of injustice and disregard” (Allen et al. 2007: 127). In the specific context of India and Dalits, Sundar Sarukkai outlines three important characteristics of lived experiences: one, the freedom to be a part of an experience; two, the freedom to leave any time if the experience is not satisfactory; and, three, to modify the experience, if necessary, to suit one’s needs. However, in Dalit lives, “lived experience is not about what there is but is about what there is not. *Lived experience is not about freedom of experience but about the lack of freedom in an experience*” (Sarukkai 2012: 36 Italics in the original).

The production of caste spaces of environmental inequality along multiple axes, and their subjective and objective forms, are intersectional themes. Anti-caste thinkers often articulated that experience, space, and justice matter for formation of thought and action. Recognizing an overarching influence of space on Dalit lives and thinking, it is argued that in the case of Ambedkar and Gandhi, space determined the emergence and efficacy of their thought. The language of discrimination, humiliation, and segregation in Ambedkar was a result of his location and space, a social ghetto that was historically produced and reproduced. Gopal Guru explains that experience is subjectively realized but objectively produced through the logic of space. The production of space hinges on the reproduction of space. For a tormentor, space is a certain supporting condition to produce tormenting experiences, which become stable across time in restructured spaces. According to Guru, in Dalit life, spaces have complex, multiple connotations. “Spatial experience” leads to a language and politics of mobilization of Dalit masses, to radically subvert dominance; “experimental” space creates a social thought of non-Brahmin thinkers, in opposition to sacred, dominant, closed, and rigid space; “space as culturally constructed phenomenon” turns untouchable bodies into cultural spaces to rule over and write on them; “hierarchical spaces” yield different concepts like service, sacrifice, practice, self-respect, labor, dignity, rights, and social justice with different degree of emphasis; and “material space and social justice” in both sacred and profane locations are sites of intervention where language of dignity and rights takes precedence (Guru 2012).

The stated ideals of commons—that they are supposed to be collective and inclusive, capable of supporting people’s lives and livelihoods—makes them ideal sites for Dalits, in their quest for equitable distribution of physical and social spaces. For a section of Dalits, in contrast to the traditional and the rural, urban spaces have often symbolized freedom from caste segregation, and sites for entry into the modern. The journey from the village to the city has often

been considered by Dalits as a leap into a new world space. Nagaraj thus states: “This idea has all the exodus motifs, including an escape from persecution and a journey towards a Promised Land” (Nagaraj 2010: 162). However, in her recent work Malini Ranganathan notes that in parts of urban India, particularly in Dalit majority slums, racialization and environmental casteism operate through criminalizing discourses and planning policies, which organize urban spaces and ecologies by containing, disciplining, and evicting Dalits from particular areas of the city (Ranganathan 2022).

Some recent research on practicing caste in India has opened new ways to describe caste society, sociality, and sociability, which has implications for understanding Dalit environmental justice in theory and practice. Caste is concretely generated through a divide between touching and not touching in body and space relations, thus creating inside and outside divides. Aniket Jaaware analyzes the core of caste society in “Touch” as it constitutes (and is constituted by) touchability/untouchability (a matter usually understood as part of the more general theme of caste) in society (Jaaware 2019). The fundamental characteristics of touch have material-physical and non-physical elements, which include inertia (contact between skin and something else), density (threshold of density to the sense of touch), reality (non-fictional), contact (quantitative physical element), repetition and attention (the number of times touch sensed), emotion (emotional charge), sociality (a social phenomenon), and intimacy (the varying degrees of the senses of closeness and distance in social relations). Space manifests itself, phenomenally, as touch. Spatial distance is experienced in something located beyond one’s reach. There are social organizations of touch, based on physical and non-physical elements. Place always accompanies touch in materializing caste. Similarly, stench and smell, as experienced in and around waste, open garbage dumps, larger landfills, slums and waste-pickers, has been identified as a main source of ritual pollution, risk, and exclusionary cultural politics. Emergence of dirty, decaying, diseased, and pathogenicity can be addressed by the knowledge of smell (Doron 2020).

Dalit movements that charted the interrelationship between caste, nature, and unequal distribution of natural resources marked just a beginning of unraveling complexities of environmental injustices. Notions of environmental human rights—resource and subsistence rights, equal distribution and access to natural resources, right to information and partnership—have also enthused Dalit movements into articulating environmental issues. Issues of land reform/distribution, caste segregation, discrimination and atrocities in Dalit villages, unequal access to water, forests, commons, and housing, and spatial dimensions of Dalit subjugation, and a minimum of environmental health and occupational safety have appeared frequently in Dalit agendas. Dalit livelihood issues and rights in the context of conservation, pollution, extraction of raw materials, alterations of ecosystems, environmental degradation, resource pricing and marketing, impact of climate change, and the making of environmental policy have been prominent in the past two decades (Sharma 2022). Still, Dalit estrangement goes much deeper and their detachment from mainstream environmental movements continues, in spite of their increased access and participation in the recent past. This means that an understanding is required of the existential, experiential, spatial, and cultural blinders, such as soil, water, air, touch, taste, smell, and space, which carry distributional and participatory software to build Dalit environmental justice and ecology. This also brings to the fore the pluralizing scope and meaning of justice theory *vis-à-vis* caste issues. In environmental justice, recognition of difference and diversity of experience has integrated some new elements of inequalities, and the processes through which they are reproduced. However, a recognition of caste, and the deep natural, social, and cultural processes involved in the making and unmaking of touch, taste, smell, and senses in a caste society, which crushes people’s sense of freedom and belonging and devalues their use, access, and participation in naturescape, can take us towards a richer understanding of environmental

justice. Focusing on Dalits as subjects, and the everyday social processes of construction of their environmental subjectivity, can open up new possibilities of their agency.

Conclusion: Future Archives of Dalit-Black Ecologies

There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.
(Walter Benjamin)

This famous quote suggests that the creation of any civilization involves a heavy cost in terms of lives and ecologies of toiling masses—Dalits and Black people—who have been responsible for making that civilization possible. Environmental histories are always an exercise in framing people, place, voices, and visions (Schlosberg 2003). The exercise of exploring and forming a future archive of Dalit-Black ecologies rests on focusing on their roles in environment, continuing forms of environmental racism and casteism, traditions of environmental justice, preservation of Dalit-Black visions of social change, and an updating of arenas, languages, and consequent prescriptions of environmental justice. Such an archive can take inspiration from the exchanges and bonding forged between Black and Dalit women's movements. This is a "margin-to-margin" approach that invites "different social actors, including scholars and activists, inside a region, nation, or even transnationally to construct shared goals and new bonds of sentiment as well as bodies of knowledge among those most exploited, excluded, or pushed aside" (Paik 2014: 75-76).

In the broader and inclusive framework of environmental injustices, race and caste are widely seen as the key drivers of exclusion and discrimination in social systems and political economies. Several such struggles can be narrated, which mark similarities between African American and Dalit resistances. It has been pointed out that "access to water is an effective metaphor for characterizing the struggle of the Indian Untouchable and African American to escape oppression, for freedom, justice and equality in the new millennium" (Hall and Mishra 2018; also see Noor 2020; Spronk 2020). To take a few examples, the Jim Crow laws that lasted officially from 1877 to 1964, and can be felt even in present times, institutionalized the denial of access to public and clean drinking water to African Americans. Martin Luther King Jr.'s final campaign in 1968 on the striking sanitation workers of Memphis, Tennessee, during which he was assassinated, again shows these linkages. "Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Community on the Move for Equality" called on a "March for Justice and Jobs" for the city's almost exclusively African American garbage haulers, and demanded equal pay and an end to dirty, hazardous situations. At a time when environmental justice was not on the radar of environment, government, civil rights, public health, or social justice groups, this struggle signified a combination of "environmental, social and economic justice mission" (Johnson 2009: 17). This is equally true for Dalit struggles over sanitation and "polluted" occupations.

Analogies of Dalit-Black ecologies can relate to the past and present of castesization and racialization, spatial segregation, sanitation, environmental human rights, organizational mobilization, and movements. Amid this background, three elements give the archive of Dalit-Black ecologies its specific character. The first is an attempt to look systematically at the meaning of ecology itself. This entails a group of interrelated questions: How do Dalits and Black people figure in ecological studies and amid conditions of existence of living organisms, and what is the interrelationship between these organisms and the environment in which Dalits and Black people live? Does an ecological approach provide a critique of the links between centuries of racialization and casteization, as experienced by Dalit-Black communities, and the global legit-

imization of biotic, abiotic, and technogenic changes, created by activities of casteist and racist human societies? How can an examination of ecology as an expanding concept, and its practical application in changing situations over the past century, bear directly on crucial problems of natural and social environment? The second element relates to concerns of dignity and dignified living, rights and justice, in a contemporary crisscross of environment, caste, race, democracy, participation, recognition, labor, occupation, climate, commons, imaginations, hopes, and struggles in everyday lives of Dalits and Black people. The third involves a combination of contextual enquiry with concrete steps, with a commitment to environmental rights for every Black and Dalit person.

With a substantial number of interventions that explore the nature and meaning of ecologies for Dalits–Black people, one central question is on the context in which environmental politics has to be generated. From the perspective of Indian Dalits, it is worth analyzing as to how a neoliberal, capitalist growth impacts the natural–social base of lives and livelihoods, and replaces/reproduces structures of hierarchy; how increased mobility, migration, and movement of marginal population enhances/destroys conditions of dignity of labor; and how a global capitalist project legitimizes certain environmental discourses, like green growth and low carbon economy, and de-legitimizes environmental struggles of Dalits on livelihood, occupation, land, water, and forests. Perhaps the most important source feeding into today's Dalit environmental justice movements would be to comprehend the historical trajectories of civil rights movements, anti-caste writings and campaigns, social justice and land rights struggles, labor movements, and the everyday resistances against caste atrocities, segregation, and alienation over natural resources. The archives of Black environmental struggles can provide an important reference here.

Dalit–Black ecologies can try to capture the positive elements of all the above streams, though in the case of Dalits its present dominant themes are developmental, distributional, and life with dignity, recognition, and power. Dalits are some of the most wretched people on earth. They are denied access to basic natural resources—their women spend many hours each day waiting for a faint trickle of dirty water from the polluted municipal tap or contaminated well; Dalit young girls spend their youth scouring the arid and empty landscapes for fuel to cook their single daily meal; landless laborers are transformed into cycle-rickshaw pullers; domestic workers dance to the whims of masters, for whom they represent nothing but hands that perform invisible services; Dalit children are employed in dangerous metal factories; factory workers are locked in during the night shift, and if a fire breaks out scores are trampled to death; people are evicted from their places, and forced to migrate to the pitiless squalor of urban peripheries (Seabrook 2005). Alongside, a Dalit perspective emphasizes a deep urge for a sense of selfhood and freedom as a human being, so that an individual can breathe, inhabit, and cohabit in nature, against natural, physical, spatial, and social structures of domination. These deeper impulses and reckonings mark Dalit environmentalism, which is visible in struggles at local and regional levels. Similar to Black environmental struggles, when aggregated together, they voice a Dalit politics of environment justice.

Dalit ecologies is a plural term, as there are multiple ways in which several ex-untouchable castes, haunted by internal divisions and differences, forge larger collectivities, as well as assert individual identities. The plurality of Dalit communities means that such differences are potentially mobilizable in a wide variety of forms, of which issues of natural and physical environment are among the most prominent. Environment is central in the sense that Dalits can feel a fresh sense of life and living, with a different occupation, place, space, politics, and associated changes in their feel, touch, taste, and representation. Environmental right is justice in action, and Dalit environmental agency is a critical context for a new environmental politics. Black environmental struggles have invested their energy in searching for alternative institutions and organiza-

tions of governance and power. From organizing local protests to formulating wider agendas, from negotiating on polluting industries and health hazards to legislative reforms, a detailed charter for democratizing governance and power systems has evolved out of these journeys. Black local organizations, publications, performances, and political movements have extensive experimental experiences regarding structures of participation, access, and inclusion in natural and social environments. Such treasures of ecological democracy can be collated to enrich Dalit environmentalism in India.

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■ NOTES

1. Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956) has been a central figure in the political history of India and a multidimensional personality—the first prominent “untouchable” leader of the country, the chief architect of the Indian constitution, a great scholar and statesman, leader and liberator, a historian, an economist, and one of the makers of modern India. He served as the Law and Justice Minister in the first cabinet of the Republic of India, after independence. He renounced Hinduism and converted to Buddhism, also initiating mass conversions of Dalits.
2. Rawat (2012), for example, tells that Dalits straddled a variegated occupational spectrum, which also included subsistence cultivators in the erstwhile United Provinces in British India.
3. For a deeper understanding of the politics, availability, and ecology of water through caste, see Sharma (2017: 161–211).
4. According to the *Rig Veda*, an ancient collection of Vedic Sanskrit hymns, earth and all its creatures, eternal life, air, and animals filled up with the sacrifice of primordial, cosmic man, *Purusha*. The Brahmin originated from the mouth of the Purusha, the Kshatriya from the arms, the Vaishya from the thighs, and the Shudra from the feet.

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