

Recall This Book
175 The Caste Pod: a
Crossover episode with Ajantha
Subramanian (JP)
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John Plotz

Hello, and welcome to the second ever recall this book presents today with the creator of a brand new podcast, The Caste Pod. We're going to hear a tempting highlight from a recent episode that brings caste politics into conversation with the ever timely topic of rising ethnonationalism, and we're going to do that with my dear old friend, and Recall this Book stalwart Ajanta Subramanian, Professor of Anthropology at CUNY Graduate Center. So, Ajantha, thanks for coming!,

Ajantha Subramanian

Thank you for having me.

John Plotz

I'm just gonna say a little bit about you before we talk about your podcast. As listeners who probably eagerly devoured her six part series on "violent majorities" will remember, or even her early recall this book episode on "the caste of Merit" (back in the days when we were still hanging up blankets in order to get the perfect sound) remember, she is a gimlet-eyed anatomist, not only of Indian caste politics and how they are internationalized, but also how spaces of international solidarity are up for grabs between what seems to be a waning left internationalism and a waxing set of far-right wing politics that somehow find ways to make nefarious common cause. I could talk about her for a long time, I could talk about the accomplishments of her first book, *Shorelines: Space and Rights in South India*, and her current scholarly work in progress, which includes a study of Dalit politics in a gold mining company town in South India, and also on the transnationalization of caste in the United States.

John Plotz

But instead I'm going to pivot back here to the thing we're going to talk about today, which is "The Caste Pod." Ajantha, you know it's standard to ask you to introduce your project to us, but I thought, since we're doing something a little bit unusual here, I would break that up into two different questions, and first ask you to just tell us about the current work in progress, what is it that interests you about caste and caste in international context, and how you came to that. Then we'll move

from there to the more specific question of why a podcast as a way of understanding and exploring that topic.

Ajantha Subramanian

My entire kind of scholarly arc has involved caste in one way or the other, and the way I explain that is that I've always been really interested in how older forms of inequality get reconstituted under conditions of capitalist democracy. So, how is something like caste, which is commonly thought of as an archaic social institution whose power is supposed to erode is flourishing and even arguably getting stronger in South Asia as it gets repurposed for new forms of social life or new forms of political life? I think for me what's really fascinating about caste is that it's old and new in that way, like race, which is also old and new.

John Plotz

Forgive me, you know I'm an interrupter, but can I ask about the word repurposed? Just because, as we've frequently discussed in previous episodes, you and Elizabeth are anthropologists, and you have a nuanced understanding of social forces. I'm coming from it a little bit as an outsider, as a literary person, but when I hear repurposed, I hear specific agency, like somebody is out to do this. Is it? Do you understand it that way, or do you understand it more in terms of impersonal structural forces? Yeah, are there black hats and white hats in your account, or how do you..

Ajantha Subramanian

I would say it's both. I'm really interested in how caste becomes a category of governance, and when you think about governance, it is both a sort of impersonal structural process, but it's also driven by people. States are populated, and a lot of these kinds of initiatives of recruiting cast for projects of governance are interested, right? There are people behind them that are aiming for certain outcomes, so I would say it's a bit of both for me. The sort of modern iteration of caste is really attributable to colonial governance, so that's really what I'm interested in, and what that means is that even if caste as a kind of mechanism of social stratification has remained in place.

Ajantha Subramanian

Often it's the markers of difference [that] change, right? That's something that really interests me. Just to give an example, like Brahmins. So Brahmins used to be associated pretty tightly with ritual authority or land ownership. People rarely think of Brahmins in those terms anymore. Right now, Brahmins are thought of as like a

hyper-urban professional class, often diasporic in their reach. So, these are, and yet they remain in some ways at the top of the totem pole. What Brahmin-ness means has changed over time, but. Not so much so that Brahmins have lost their kind of footing.

John Plotz

Yeah, so I've listened to every episode with great interest, and a couple of huge topics that come up here. Maybe just to throw it out there, you're interested in this as a problem on the Indian subcontinent, and you're also interested in its portability in a couple of different ways. [First] In the story that people tell about India, looking at it from afar, like this is a foreign problem, but also as a story of diasporic communities and what gets replicated in diasporic communities. Honestly, I remember somebody telling me when I was a kid that caste didn't carry beyond the Indian subcontinent, that it was disappeared by diaspora, but obviously that's not the case, and that's part of what your story.

Ajantha Subramanian

Absolutely. And I think these two things coexist in a really interesting way, that the caste is seen as almost like paradigmatic of the subcontinent, stands in for India, right, for the sort of, for Indian cultural difference, which is partly what feeds this sort of assumption that once you leave that territory, caste gets left behind. But it's a social institution, that moves with the people who subscribe to it, and it come to different parts of the South Asian diaspora, it's taken different forms. I wouldn't say that caste in the US looks exactly the same way that it does either in South Asia or, say, the UK, partly because the migrant streams have varied, right? So, in the US, the South Asian community is overwhelmingly upper caste, and so that has meant that caste looks a certain way. The migration streams to the UK were quite different, right? They were working class, they were more religiously mixed, etc. right. So it looks different there.

John Plotz

So there's a model of what it means to be, I don't know, a hyphenated Indian American, say, or Anglo-Indian, respecting that difference between the UK and the US uptake, which is, which is partly structured by how race politics work, or like diasporic integration politics work in that country, but also partly shaped by, as you said, that sort of the cultural apparatus that people are bringing with them and developing?

Ajantha Subramanian

Yeah, so the fact that the floodgates really open in the United States, in the mid 60s, plays a huge part in the sort of construction of Indian Americans as a model minority, because the first significant wave was largely professional, right, so it was a professional class migration that allowed Indians a certain class positioning right in the US, which fit very well with liberal multicultural.

Ajantha Subramanian

The funny thing is the model minority status is so dependent on the caste inheritances that allow to migrate, right? So caste is integral to both transnational mobility and professional success in the US. Has to be negated,

John Plotz

Isn't there a rhetorical move that you talk about in which caste gets marked as a sign of cultural difference, so that to criticize caste becomes can be accused as being a form of racism because you're not tolerating the cultural diversity, which is expressed through caste?

Ajantha Subramanian

It's funny, because I think the people who are very nervous about the caste conversation want to have it both ways, right? They both want to say caste is culture, right, and so to criticize caste is to criticize Hinduism, and they want to say there is no caste in Hinduism, that Hindus are this sort of homogeneous organic whole that don't suffer from these forms of internal stratification, so they want to say both things, caste is culture, and there's nothing to see here, because caste is not character,

John Plotz

You just identified why things make for a great intellectual project, which is that when something that people desperately want to hold on to, but they also want to say there's nothing to see here, that's where academics do our best work, I think. Okay, so this is incredibly helpful, and we've already touched on a lot of the topics that come up in many of the episodes of your podcast, so now can we pivot to the how question, which is, you've identified a topic that is immensely interesting to you. Why did you decide that a podcast would be a good way of getting at it?

Ajantha Subramanian

I'm trying to remember when I first started listening to podcasts. I think it was during Covid.

John Plotz

My brother's family had a whole thing called the podcast walk. It took me a long time to understand it. Four of them would go out, and they would each listen to their own podcast separately during the pandemic. It would just be walking down the street in four different worlds.

Ajantha Subramanian

It became like a bit of a lifeline, right? And so I started listening to podcasts, I listened to. Recall this book all the time on my walks, and I just, I think it's a really great medium for curating conversations on contemporary issues that gradle the divide between the university and its outsides. There's an immediacy to it. There's a reach, which to me was very attractive, and I, it's not that caste has not been a topic of debate in the academy, it very much has been, but it's only recently that it became part of public debate in the US. I would say 2020 was a real moment when it broke through, and it was partly because of Isabel Wilkerson's book, which sort of brought a lot of these older conversations about how to understand caste and race as comparative and connected forms of stratification.

John Plotz

Would you say caste, race, and class, is that a triad, or would you just say caste and race?

Ajantha Subramanian

So, for me, caste, race, and class are necessarily interlinked.

John Plotz

Yeah,

Ajantha Subramanian

I would say that for Wilkerson, the class piece drops away

Ajantha Subramanian

she's much more interested in the kind of psychosocial dimensions of caste and race. She's not really interested in political economy, right? For me, political economy is key to the whole thing, right. So, there was her book, and then there was this case against Cisco Systems, that was brought by the California Department of Civil Rights on behalf of this Dalit employee, but I think these two events converged and caste broke into public consciousness in the US, and so it seemed so I was following that, and I was also part of this movement to make caste a protected

category in US anti-discrimination law, in fact, Brandeis was the first university to adopt caste as a protected caste.

John Plotz

I had no idea. Wow,

Ajantha Subramanian

Brandeis was the first.

John Plotz

Good for us. Good for us. Was it good for us?

Ajantha Subramanian

Absolutely, absolutely. And then there are a bunch of other universities that followed suit. And then Seattle was the first city to outlaw caste determination. It just seemed like a good time for a podcast.

John Plotz

And can I follow up on a point about that, which is that actually helps me understand you made the decision in your episodes. In fact, the episode we're going to listen to is an example of this. You often focused on groups of people, and not necessarily scholars, but more, I guess I would call them scholar activists, "Sch-activists". Is that they're more political, political collectives. So was that a podcast-related decision for you too? This is a good way to give voice to people, I don't know, a little bit on the edge of the scholarly conversation?

Ajantha Subramanian

Yeah, I would say that those are the two main groups represented on the podcast, it's scholars and activists or community organizers, yeah, and often the episode that we're going to listen to today is a collaboration between these two kind of people, right, but sometimes some of the episodes have been just with scholars and others have been just with activists, but I would say that the kind of ideological orientation of the podcast is a kind of transnational anti-caste approach, right, to thinking about society, politics, history, etc.

John Plotz

Great. And okay, so we're I think we're like a minute away from listening, but maybe a final question would be like, is there something about the decision to turn to podcasts that surprised you, ideally in a good way, but maybe in a bad way? Is

there some dimension that it opened up that was not available to you in your previous scholarly practice?

Ajantha Subramanian

It's been so fun to just come up with the with a kind of an ideal list of guests, and have it happen. I've been able to bring people on who I had imagined talking to, but I never figured out a way to access, and no one has said no yet. From my own sort of understanding of this incredibly complex phenomenon, it's just been so revelatory to talk to folks who are not scholars,

John Plotz

but as an anthropologist, you've already learned how to talk to non-scholars about your topics, right? But

Ajantha Subramanian

yeah, not always as experts, and here it's I'm talking to non-scholars as knowledge producers in their own right, Who are making sort of consequential interventions in the kind of sociopolitical spaces that they inhabit. So, yeah, it's been pretty amazing.

John Plotz

Yeah, that's very cool. Okay, so we're gonna now listen to a substantial chunk of episode 10, which is called the Diasporic Hindu Right. So maybe you want to just set it up for us a little bit, and then we'll listen to about half an hour of that conversation.

Ajantha Subramanian

Okay, so this is a this is an episode with Savera, which is this multi-religious, anti-caste, multiracial coalition of people who are dedicated to combating the rise of what they call the trend. His national for right has produced these three remarkable reports, which look at the growth of the Hindu right in the US from about the 1970s on, and you can see these distinct phases of growth. What happens with the shift from the migrant to the US-born generation? How does the politics of the diaspora change over time?

John Plotz

In a part that we don't hear in the excerpt, but I'll just mention it now. You also bring up the direct parallel to Zionism and to the question of the Jewish diasporic experience, and how we've seen a drift among i in Jewish immigrant

politics as well, like what it means to be defined as the diaspora, and that, of course, is totally familiar to people who listen to your Violent Majorities episodes with Lori Allen. You've been thinking about what we learned by basically putting Modi and Netanyahu next to one another. Okay, so with that, we're just going to step back here and we're going to join that episode in progress.

[from here to page 16 inserted from "The Caste Pod, Episode 10: Diasporic Hindu Right with Savera"]

Ajantha Subramanian

All of this is part of remaking the Indian state and remaking Indian society. So how does this project then link up to the other term, which is American Sangh? What is the American Sangh?

Ram

Yeah, I can try and take that on. And I think in one word or in one sentence, the American Sangh is the sort of segment or offshoot of this movement operating in the US. And I think in using, in these reports we use these terms. while drawing on a lot of new, both new and old work on the Sangh that identifies it as a networked entity rather than a single organization or a single ideology. In that the RSS has consistently written about how it understands itself as sort of diffuse and variegated, but ultimately a singular network, in that its basic purpose is not just, I would say, to bring together all Hindus into a commitment to Hindutva, nor is it simply to achieve state power in India, but something a lot deeper, I think, which is to sort of cure Hindus from the effects of what it sees as millennia of weakness and emasculation.

The RSS uses immunological language quite often to describe Hindus as a nation that requires organization to be quote-unquote unified and quote-unquote harmonized. And a lot of this is what we could call a sort of organicist ideology in that they see the Hindu nation as a single organism. And in that sense, this is where ideology and material organization actually overlap, in that the network is envisioned as prefigurative for the ideology. And so the network is something that will touch each organ within this organism, including if those organs leave the motherland.

And I think organicism is really, I find it a really useful way to think of the Hindu far-right, because you actually see that both caste and Islamophobia are prefigured in the idea of organicism, because the idea of organicism proposes that society is a sort of natural, integral and systemic unit. And that inevitably implies a

sort of binary of people who are natural or unnatural to that society, people who are internal and external to it. And so the Muslim, the Christian and often the Sikh, when they don't conform to that organicist idea, are seen as foreign and seen as worthy of expulsion.

But I think we also know that the history of Hindu society being imagined as a body has a long history, and that history is fundamentally rooted in caste. And with the RSS, this becomes a material, ecological organizing principle in that the RSS consistently talks of harmony and unity. But what they mean by harmony and unity, I think, are really key to understand where they see any conflict within Hindu society, including what I would say is a just conflict of fighting caste oppression, as aberrations. And if they understand Hindu society with its fundamentally caste nature as natural and divine, any attempts to fight caste are seen as aberrations, and most often not just as aberrations, they have to be described as the conspiratorial projects of these outsiders.

And so very often you'll hear the VHPA or the Hindu American Foundation describe anti-caste work as colonial projects, as ploys to divide Hindus. And in that sense, the American Sangh is an extension of this work where this concept of organicism extends into the diaspora because they see the Hindu nation as having extended power beyond the boundaries of India itself. And I think Prachi mentioned the ways in which they're not particularly committed to 1947 borders of India in the first place.

I think in saying this also the one point or the one clarification we would also want to make is that when we use the word American Sangh, we don't mean that every entity in this network is remote-controlled by some RSS executive sitting in Nagpur or Delhi, but that it emerges very clearly genealogically from this network, has the same, not just commitment to ideology, but the same commitment to this ecosystem, this idea that we are all different nodes of a network, that we all have different purposes within this broader organizing project. And in that sense, I would say even more than an ideological commitment, there is a certain organizational commitment to this network. And in many ways, it follows not conspiratorially, but actually from the social networks that are produced by concerted organizing. And many of those social networks, I think, map on very closely to caste, and we can get into that as well.

Ajantha Subramanian

Great. So what I'd like to do now is walk us through the elaboration of this network and how it has shifted over time, both in terms of its composite parts, but also its tactics. From the reports, I got a clear sense of three distinct phases of the development of the American Sangh. And the first phase is the period from the

1970s through the end of the 20th century when, yes, it's not remote controlled, as you put it, Ram, by the Sangh in India, but in some ways it is in its organizational structures, it is a direct extension of the way the Sangh in India is organized. There's a mimicry of institutions and also the use of organizational diffusion as a strategy. So can you say more about how this strategy played out in the US in that first phase? And also if there were some early goals of the movement in the diaspora that are worthy of note?

Ram

Yeah, I can get us started. And I think your three phases is really on point as a division. And they actually sort of map on quite well to a generational understanding of our diaspora more broadly, in the sense that the first generation are some of the first immigrants after the 1965 Immigration Act. They are predominantly upper class and upper caste. And as you pointed out, they are quite directly genealogically and materially and organizationally connected to the RSS. It is in fact on the instructions of the second RSS Supreme Leader, Golwalkar, that a pracharak, Mahesh Mehta, made his way to the US to basically birth the American version of this banyan tree.

And I think what's interesting is that for the first two and a half, three decades, this movement is quite fundamentally apathetic to politics in the US. It's very concerned about politics in India and almost all of its work is, in that sense, it's the work and the organizing of a first-generation immigrant that still sees themselves far more tied to their motherland than to their new territory. And the way some actors would rationalize this was that they have left their Janmabhoomi, or their homeland, and they found a new Karmabhoomi. or land of work. But that Karmabhoomi is fundamentally, or their work in that Karmabhoomi is fundamentally in service of the motherland.

A lot of that changes with the second generation, and I think Prachi can speak a bit more about that. In some sense, Prachi is of that generation as well.

Prachi

That's right. I mean, yeah, I think the 2002 Gujarat pogroms and the visa ban, which many of some of the groups that...

Ajantha Subramanian

Can you say more about both for the listeners?

Prachi

Oh, yes. So in 2002, in the state of Gujarat, in which Modi at the time was a chief minister, there were pogroms that really targeted extreme violence against

Muslim communities and he in many ways can be held accountable both for allowing the violence to happen. And so a lot of the diaspora at the time that was in the United States was trying to call attention to what was happening and what had happened in Gujarat. And so the first time when, as a chief minister, Modi was coming to the U.S., people mobilized -- many of these groups who are part of Savera, were part of different formations then -- to get the visa banned. And it succeeded.

And then the diaspora also entered the second generation that Ram just mentioned. That's the second generation that many of us were part of. I mean, I came from India, I was born there. But many others who were actually born in the United States and were part of progressive South Asian organizing were getting attuned to what was happening because of Gujarat.

So while the American Sangh mobilized to defend Modi and then also attack his critics in the United States, the younger generation of leaders began pushing for a more sophisticated domestic strategy on behalf of that ideology, because they also recognized that the overt Hindu supremacy was not going to fly in the United States. It was a public relations liability. So they had to engage also with the U.S. politics, because the second generation was concerned about U.S. politics, what was happening to them as Hindus in the United States, given that in some ways they're also facing racism or xenophobia in the United States. And so the failure to acknowledge that for the U.S. Sangh or American Sangh was preventing them informing that distinct Hindu American identity in the U.S. And so among the second generation of Indian diaspora, establishing this Hindu American identity was very important. And I think it was a conscious strategic choice, which was designed to appeal to the U.S.-raised generation and also deflect this growing criticism that the entire network was just a foreign operation or foreign proxy operation to support Modi and Hindutva and its agenda.

So this kind of transition from an extremely focused support system only to support the work and the politics of the Janmabhoomi in India to now domestically embedded political force in the United States, which was also, given that the wealth and the growing kind of wealth of the Indian and Hindu community in the US, there was a lot of opportunities there to become that political force.

So during that period is when organizations like Hindu American Foundation are formed and they are offering a way for second-generation communities to come into their fold. So these groups established this unique Hindu American identity by appealing to the second generation of Indian Americans who are seeking really a cultural connection to Hinduism. They want to know about this religion that their parents are part of. They want to connect with that and have pride in that, right? This wasn't just a cynical ploy, it was also an attempt to really genuinely construct

this fusion of a milquetoast American liberalism and right-wing homeland conservatism as well.

Ajantha Subramanian

It seems like the Hindu American Foundation is a key marker of this transition, right? So HAF is founded in 2003. It identifies as a U.S. civil rights organization. And that self-definition seems critically important. So what is significant about this claim to being a U.S. civil rights organization and how is it different from the public stances of the predecessors, whether it's the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, which is modeled after the RSS, or the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America, which is modeled after the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of India, or the Hindu Students Council, which is also modeled after the student wing of the movement in India? So what is it that the HAF is signaling through this claim to being a civil rights organization, and why is it significant?

Ram

Yeah, I can try and take that. I think the starting point is just that the VHPA or HSS did not see themselves making representational claims to start. They didn't see themselves as an American constituency in the sort of multicultural fabric that we'd seen emerging.

Obviously, I think the Hindu American Foundation describing itself as a civil rights group was something that they could do and have that self-definition received with a degree of deference, as Prachi described, because there was no one else on the table, so to speak. And so by default, they sort of anointed themselves and then had that anointing accepted by the rest of the civil rights world as the representative of not just the Hindu American, in fact, but the Indian American community or even the South Asian American community more broadly.

Ajantha Subramanian

One thing that's quite striking is that the cracks in the Hindu American Foundation's façade -- I'm going to go ahead and call it a façade -- of progressive advocacy emerged very soon after the organization is founded. One of the co-founders of the HAF, Aseem Shukla, comes out against a Human Rights Watch report on the Gujarat pogrom, accuses Human Rights Watch of character assassination, blames Muslims for the violence. So it seems like, yes, they're projecting themselves as this civil rights group that is principally about minority religious and cultural rights, that they're very much aligned with progressive American values. But very soon after, they start taking these public positions that seem antithetical to progressivism. My sense is that doublespeak doesn't really explode into the open and become consequential until the 2010s, when there's a more overt alignment

with the far right. So tell us a little bit more about this middle period, right, from 2003 to the 2010s, when they're trying to have it both ways.

Ram

Yeah, I think, or one way to put it is that this facade or the reality behind that facade was always visible internal to the community, I would say. My elders and mentors have always seen HAF for what it is, and I think along multiple axes, whether that's caste, whether that's the way in which groups like HAF understood the relationship between the Hindu community and sort of sibling communities like the Muslim or Sikh American communities, and indeed their relationship with foreign politics and their continued defense of the Hindu right in India. On all of those axes, I think, HAF made its colors quite clear. We've documented a pretty extensive record of anti-Muslim speech, of hosting or defending or collaborating with anti-Muslim actors, and a continuous attempt to influence policy in Washington DC in a way that cannot really be justified as protecting the interests of a domestic minority. The only consistent pattern we found in that research, and we documented quite extensively in the report, was its fidelity, I would say, to the RSS-BJP project and its need to defend them by instrumentalizing this language of civil rights and minority representation to say, and it's quite powerful, I think, when you are able to claim this defense in the language of the rights of your constituents as Hindu Americans. And I think that sort of connection is quite pernicious. It weaponizes the genuine need for Hindu Americans and all minorities to have representation and weaponizes it for this quite pernicious purpose.

Ajantha Subramanian

So this third phase -- 2014, Modi becomes prime minister, 2016, Donald Trump becomes president. Would you say that this is the period when the true face of the Hindu American Foundation comes to be seen not just for internal critics but also to the larger landscape of progressive organizations in the United States?

Ram

Yeah, and I think this accelerates especially after 2019, I would say. And what I think is quite a landmark moment is the honorary chairmanship of the Republican Hindu Coalition by Steve Bannon. It sort of sends a signal, I think, to the Hindu right that the most avowed white nationalist is willing to build a multiracial coalition and willing to work with you.

And so I think what you see then is the category of the Modi Democrat that I think had been quite active and live for the decade before 2019, let's say, you see that start to collapse and you see that start to collapse out of both a push and a pull, in that there is this pull coming from segments of the American far-right and the

MAGA coalition that are trying to bring in non-white groups. And this is really accelerated by the two events with Modi and Trump that you have in September 2019 and then February 2020 in Houston and Ahmedabad, respectively.

But I also think it's important to mention that there is a push as well in that within the Democratic Party and then within the sort of progressive landscape and then within the Indian American community, there is more and more opposition to HAF and less and less of an ability for it to walk into those sorts of spaces and be accepted as the sole representative of the community.

And so more and more HAF's position in these spaces is challenged. I think that's visible, for example, in the way the Hindu right responded to quite limited mentions of the abrogation of Article 370 in Joe Biden's manifesto or his concern over the CAA/NRC. Those are the types of things that make the Hindu right feel more and more that if Joe Biden is saying this and if all of these progressive actors are critiquing us or showing our true face in these spaces, why not go to the right who's really welcoming us in an unprecedented manner? And after that Republican Hindu coalition, I think the number of groups that fuse a Republican and a Hindu identity really mushroom.

And I think where we are today, it's obviously much more difficult to be analytical when moments are so, when the moment we're in is so crazy, but it does feel like the Modi Democrat has cracked in a way that is probably likely to be irreplaceable. I don't think we're going to come back to a type of liberalism that can hold that right-wing coalition. And this is even though there are pretty deep contradictions that have emerged between the MAGA coalition and the Hindu right. But I don't think the people who are finding discomfort with MAGA are necessarily going to fall comfortably into being progressives or Democrats.

And so for a lot of us, I think the question of what happens is still unknown, but I don't think we're just going to return back to where we were 20 years ago.

Ajantha Subramanian

I want to talk about Hindutva and Zionism because I think that there's very similar processes underway in terms of the increasing inability to hold that contradiction between claiming a progressivism in the United States and defending the emergence of an ethno-nationalist far-right in one's putative homeland. I want to get to that a little bit later, but I want us to focus just a little bit more closely on the role of caste.

So in 2010, the Hindu American Foundation published this report entitled, "Hinduism not Cast in Caste" -- not C-A-S-T in C-A-S-T-E. And that report acknowledged caste-based discrimination as a serious issue, one that needed to be addressed, etc. A year later, it reissued the report with major revisions. I wonder if you can say something about what these revisions were and what they suggested

about the organization's shifting stance on the relationship between Hinduism and caste.

Prachi

Yeah, it's a really good question, and I think it gets to the heart of HAF's evolving caste positions and also the limits of its ideological flexibility within the Hindu far-right. 2005, two years after its founding, HAF first teamed up with other groups and other Hindu supremacist groups in California to aggressively push for public school textbook revisions. And the central demand then was deleting the references to caste and or benignly reframing it as mere social classes, or this innocuous division of communities. And they tried to remove the term Dalits, which is a term that's a chosen political self-definition of groups that's previously called untouchables. This is an important term that comes from the community. So they wanted to remove the term. They also made attempts to frame Hinduism as this single monotheistic religion or overlooking its kind of diverse and non-standard interpretations and effort to depict Christians and Muslims as foreigners. So that was part of what they tried to do within that too. And this established their initial goal to systematically erase and whitewash caste-based discrimination and understanding of what caste looks like from the public narrative in the United States.

And then you go to 2010, HAF publishes this "Not Cast in Caste" report. And on the surface, it was an outlier. It acknowledged, like you said, caste discrimination is a serious civil rights and human rights issue. So this document perhaps existed at the peak of HAF's attempt to present itself as this liberal alongside the effort on kind of queer rights, environmental justice, as, you know, be standing with these issues as well. So then 2011, HAF, I think because it got serious pushback from Hindu far-right siblings or the organizations they were truly connected to, then they capitulated and then produced this update.

So I think, you know, really this, it shows that, you know, acknowledging the existence of caste would have meant to existentially disturb the edifice upon which the entire project of U.S. Hindutva is based, the claim to a homogeneous kind of ethnic identity without talking about the internal differentiations

I think in short, the 2010 report was an intellectual engagement that angered its political base, and then 2011 revision is a political corrective that maintained their broader project, which is to secure a sanitized, monolithic, historically oppression-free narrative of Hinduism, of caste as this benign division of different people existing, you know, equally within the communities. So, yeah, I mean, I think it's strategic, really.

Ram

Yeah, the one thing I would add is that this whole incident, I think, also speaks to the ability of the Sangh to discipline the groups within it, that if HAF was as committed to civil rights as it was to its partners in the American Sangh, it would have perhaps been able to stand by the 2010 report, but it was not. It was embedded in these networks and it were their donors and their fellow Hindutva organizations that spoke out against it.

And I think the other quite interesting parallel is that if you look at sort of reform or Hindutva's emergence from 19th century reform movements, many of these reform movements emerged from a similar encounter with the West. And at least a minority of these movements in moments sought to dismantle caste. But a majority of them did precisely what Prachi mentioned, which was more interested in protecting Hinduism and Hindu pride and the image of Hinduism than actually addressing the scourge of caste within them. The RSS and the Hindu right we know emerges from that specific strand of, I don't think you can call it reformism anymore, of a sort of wounded chauvinism. And it added onto it this a sort of militant outlook and a desire for organized power.

And so I think what you see is that, and I think in thinking about Hindutva and caste, I wouldn't say that the Hindutva movement is always the most explicitly casteist force around. There are more casteist forces out there, I think. But the way in which, as Prachi mentioned, the Hindu right has this sort of reactionary response to anti-caste activism through the organs and the appendages of the RSS is, I think, quite unparalleled. And I think it goes back to understanding the ways in which their ideas of harmony and unity, that lower caste, oppressed caste groups have to stay within the hold of Hinduism. I think that's sort of core to this. And if anything, it's more, it's sort of especially virulent in the diaspora simply because of the demographic dominance of upper caste groups, where if you looked at the Hindu right today, the Hindu right in India is much more wary and seeks much more to appear conciliatory along lines of caste. And that's really not the case. And both this incident and the type of politics we have in 2026 speak to that.

[end insertion from "The Caste Pod, Episode 10: Diasporic Hindu Right with Savera"]

John Plotz

Okay, that is great. Unpack and contextualize it for us a little. How do you think about what we heard there? Can you say more about the specificity of caste? So, there's all these complexities of caste sedimentation, so how does that play into this politics?

Ajantha Subramanian

One of the things that Ram says in the episode, which I think it's super interesting, is he talks about how this ideology of organicism is really key to Hindu right, and so this is this notion that all Hindus have this kind of like blood tie, this sort of familial connection to one another, and within that framing of the Hindu anti-caste politics, so any sort of challenge to the caste order is seen as this grave threat, right, to this kind of to this organic integrity, of the Hindu community.

Ajantha Subramanian

So anti-caste politics is in some ways seen as an internal threat to this organic integrity, and non-Hindus, sort of Christians and Muslims in particular, are seen as an external threat of organic integrity. So it's really important for the Hindu nationalist movement to respond to the threat of anti-caste politics by both incorporating oppressed caste groups and suppressing dissent. This is really key. And one of the things that Prachi says in the episode is that the very origins of the Hindu right in India, which is the 1920s this movement emerged in Nagpur, which is this city in western India, and it was intended to be a counterweight to forms of anti-caste politics that were gaining ground.

Ajantha Subramanian

Right, so from the very outset, the forging of Hindu unity was seen as a necessary counterweigh fracturing of the Hindu polity, and the reason why this becomes so important in the 1920s is not just because they're picking up on growing fascism in Europe of ethno-states that emerge out of European fascism, but they're also dealing with an emerging electoral politics, a politics of representation within colonial India, right, in which a Hindu majority has to be both conceptualized and forged, and there too caste becomes this incredibly threatening source of disintegration.

John Plotz

Yeah, so that's incredibly helpful, and I think I imagine we have a lot of listeners here who probably need to get educated on some of the subtleties of this, but one topic that you brought up in an earlier episode, one of your two California episodes was about, is there a King Ambedkar reading group, is that right, that you were talking, the

Ajantha Subramanian

Ambedkar King Study Circle,

John Plotz

Ambedkar King Study Circle. Yeah, so I was wondering if you could say a little bit about Ambedkar as a potential revolutionary pathway in India, right alongside Gandhi, and I think it's so easy. Gandhi had this migratory possibility for Western uptake that Ambedkar never quite had, and it feels like it might be bound up in the point you're making there about the electoral politics of the late colonial era.

Ajantha Subramanian

one of the things that has come out in several of the episodes is this tension between anti-caste and anti-colonial politics that actually, for a lot of caste oppressed communities, and especially for Dalits, colonial modernity was a site of promise, right? It promised an escape from certain forms of caste labor, caste disability,

John Plotz

And there's a story of conversion as well to Buddhism, or I imagine to Christianity as well as a way of like

Ajantha Subramanian

there were these mass conversions to what were seen as more universalist faiths that held out the promise of equality in a way that Hinduism never could. So, yeah, and Gandhi, of course, becomes the kind of icon of anti-colonial nationalism, and as you said, John, Gandhianism as a philosophy travels, and it's carried to places well beyond the subcontinent in a way that Ambedkarism doesn't.

Ajantha Subramanian

Which is interesting, because Ambedkar himself came to Columbia University, he got his PhD at Columbia, he worked with Dewey, so he's a fascinating figure, but for reasons that should be obvious, he didn't have the kind of leverage that a Gandhi did, right, and in fact for anti-colonial nationalists his unwillingness to accept kind of caste Hindu leadership as inherently emancipatory was a real problem.

John Plotz

Just to bring this back to what I think of as the agential take on it, which is that you're always looking for moments where people have clocked what other people are doing elsewhere in the globe, and it does feel like a sad missed connection of history that Gandhi got taken up for, as you're saying, because of the anti-colonial politics, but that the full implications of the anti-caste politics of Ambedkar were

missing. I think people were.. I don't know, people outside India didn't know how to read it in a way.

Ajantha Subramanian

it's interesting. It's one of the episodes is with this historian, Nico Slate, [the connection between] that's these movements in India and the United States, and part of what we puzzled through in that episode was, yeah, not just why Gandhi then, but also why Ambedkar now? Because it does have traction now in a way he didn't then, right? And now it's more sort of bi-directional. So, in the 1970s in India, you had the formation of the Dalit Panthers, right, who took the cues from the Black Panthers, so the American American black power, American civil rights had traction among kind of Dalit movements in India as far back as...One could even date the kind of caste race or untouchability slavery analogy to the 1870s There were writers in India who talked, who were talking about untouchability as a form of slavery then. But today, if you look at the way Ambaker is circulating, it's amazing, right? And I think it has to do, in part, with the changing demographics of the South Asian population in the US. You have more oppressed caste communities who have made their way over here, they have become much more politically visible,

John Plotz

So I think it's a tribute to the success of your podcast that we've just kind of dived into the subject matter. But can we conclude by just stepping out and doing a meta-reflection on what it has been like for you to do this as a podcast? So you have an arc, you have 10 episodes already, I know from talking to you've got a music episode coming, you have other things coming. Tell me about the trajectory of deciding to do it as a series, a series of podcasts.

Ajantha Subramanian

Yeah, it's again, it's been really fun to just brainstorm guests and reach out to them and create a platform for these conversations. I am going to try to maintain this kind of dual focus on scholarship and activism. I think it's important to place the kind of knowledge production that comes out of organizing labor on par with knowledge production of the academy. I want us to be able to think of these as different genres of knowledge production about caste, right? And to think about what we gain from one or the other,

John Plotz

Can I just say that's an amazing argument in favor, which I never thought of before, in favor of the genre of the podcast.

Ajantha Subramanian

There's something about the format that that levels some of these different, yeah, so somebody can be a scholar who's published 10 monographs, but they're talking about their work in similar ways to a group like Saveria that produces these reports, and I want to take the report as a kind of, as a sort of intellectual artifact, obviously.

John Plotz

Yeah, that's great. Footnotes matter so much. Show notes are basically just footnotes, and we shouldn't denigrate that. That's a great thing. The show-notes are for people who want to go further. For me, it was great to have a link to those reports.

Ajantha Subramanian

Yeah, exactly, exactly. And in some ways, I think activists have a more capacious and Catholic approach to knowledge than scholars do. Most activists are voracious, they read everything, right? Scholars tend to be much more tied back in what, so in a way, this is about forcing scholar listeners to, you know, pay heed to these instances of intellectual labor, yeah, to return the favor, in a sense,

John Plotz

Dude. Again, I just have to say, I really think what you have done, even just in these 10 episodes, is super inspiring, and I hope you will continue, because it seems to me you've tapped into a really rich vein here, and the point you're making there about the this kind of activism, yeah, the distinctive intellectual project of activism, and that this is a way to make it visible, I just think that's such an important angle for thinking about what this new medium can do.

Ajantha Subramanian

Yeah, that's taking my cues from Gramsci, for whom you need these blocks that cross-cut what could be these siloed spaces, right? And I want the podcast to do its part in trying to illuminate existing blocks and maybe even contribute to making new connections.

John Plotz

So, what you're saying is, we need transnational podcast walks, is that crossing borders with the podcast? Yeah, okay, cool. Thank you, Ajanthan, So, thank you so

much for coming on. The podcast is The Caste Pod. Yes, who do you give credit to for coming up with the title of The Caste Pod? Is that Vince? Is

Ajantha Subramanian

it.. I think that was Vince. I think that's my partner who comes up with all of my titles, because.. oh, good. Okay, yeah. Keep up the good work.

John Plotz

Yeah,

Ajantha Subramanian

it has been really fun. And I have to say, you are the one who pushed me to do this. The first time I ever hosted a podcast was on Recall This Book, and I got a taste for it. And you are the one who's like the first..

John Plotz

The first sample.. the first sample is free. So, yeah, okay, okay, keep up the good work. We admire you from afar, and Ajantha thank you so much. And to everybody out there, thanks for listening.