ABSTRACT: The caste system has implications for the environmental experiences of Dalits (formerly “untouchables”). Dalits are disproportionately impacted by natural disasters and climate change because of their high dependence on natural resources and manual labor, including agriculture. Dalit viewpoints and ecological expertise nevertheless remain missing from the environmental literature and mainstream activism. Aligning with Black ecologies as a challenge to eco-racism, I use the term “Dalit ecologies” to conceptualize Dalit articulations with their environment and experiences of eco-casteism involving inequities such as their exclusions from natural resources and high vulnerability to pollution and waste. My analysis of scholarly literature finds that nature is caste-ized through the ideology of Hindu Brahminism that animates mainstream environmental activism in India. Dalit subjectivities and agency nevertheless remain evident in their literary and oral narratives and ongoing struggles for access to land, water, and other environmental resources.

KEYWORDS: caste, Dalit, ecological inequality, India, racialization, untouchability

‘Black’ is a powerful symbol that overcomes even the national boundaries of possibility of the word ‘dalit’. My heart pulsates when I hear [Mahalia] Jackson sing. Blackness is a representative term that unifies oppressed people the world over. (Raghavan Atholi 2018: 350)

In conversation with the burgeoning scholarship in Black ecologies, this article reviews broad bodies of literature concerning Dalit experiences of ecological vulnerability that may be read as the basis for a related subfield, Dalit ecologies. Dalit ecologies is proposed as a critical framework for examining caste-based segregation, dispossession, dehumanization, appropriation of Dalit labor and ecological knowledge, and the various ways the global ecological crisis disproportionately impacts Dalit communities in India. “Dalit” is a term of self-description that literally means “downtrodden” or “beaten down” (Teltumbde 2020). Inspired by civil rights activists in the United States self-identifying as Black, it gained popularity in India in the 1970s (Pawar 2018) to assert the political militancy and radicalism of groups of oppressed people formerly categorized as “untouchable” within the Brahminical (also spelled Brahmical) Hindu caste system. For centuries, the socioeconomic phenomenon of untouchability has mediated Dalits’ knowledge of their physical environment and their ability to survive in ways that mirror Black experiences of ecological discrimination based on race.

In the epigraph above, Dalit poet Atholi taps a long history of Dalit mobilizations and imaginations that, while drawing attention to their historically specific situation, seek to transcend boundaries, develop global alliances, and access a transnational platform by evoking Dalit–
Black solidarity and mounting similar critiques of global systems from the margins (Cháirez-Garza et al. 2022; Loomba 2009; Paik 2014; Pandey 2016; Ranganathan 2021, 2022; Reddy 2021; Thorat and Umakant 2004). Without conflating caste with race, Dalit activists have compared the ways the two social constructs function to prevent Blacks and Dalits from having reliable access to arable land, potable water, and other environmental resources necessary for survival and render them more vulnerable than other demographics to the effects of pollutants, climate change, deforestation, and other ecological concerns.

The need to incorporate Dalit viewpoints on environmental degradation and climate change stems from Nathan Hare’s assertion half a century ago that a solution to the ecological crisis cannot come without fundamental changes to unjust socioeconomic systems. Hare’s reasons for constituting a Black ecology remain pertinent today:

Black ecology accrues from the fact that: (1) the black and white environments not only differ in degree but in nature as well; (2) the causes and solutions to ecological problems are fundamentally different in the suburbs and ghetto (both of which human ecologists regard as “natural [or ecological] areas”); and (3) the solutions set forth for the “ecological crisis” are reformist and evasive of the social and political revolution which black environmental correction demands. (1970: 2)

Black ecologies scholars have since demonstrated how various efforts by dominant groups to protect the environment often reinforce existing social inequities rather than mitigate them (Bullard 2001). To address this problem, the guest editors for this special issue of *Environment and Society*, Justin Hosbey, Hilda Lloréns, and J. T. Roane, call for a greater understanding of the “global processes of racialization and dispossession as experienced by Black populations, the regions/territories in which they live, and the landscapes on which they depend for sustenance.” In keeping with Black and Dalit scholarship that views caste-based discrimination, particularly the phenomenon of untouchability, as a form of racialization and racialized prejudice (Cháirez-Garza 2021; Natrajan 2022; Omvedt 1997; Prashad 2000; Rajshekar 2009; Visweswaran 2010; Wilkerson 2020; Yengde 2019; Zelliot 2010), Dalit ecologies stands to make a unique contribution to global Black ecologies.

Before proceeding to review the literature, a note on methodology. Although a significant rise in caste consciousness since the 1990s pushed social scientists to incorporate caste alongside other social identities such as class, gender, religion, and race in their theories, the ways in which the caste system shapes and mediates access to nature, knowledge of the environment, and environmental activism has largely gone unrecognized in ecological research in India (Aiyadurai and Ingole 2021; Omvedt 1997; Sharma 2017). Keyword searches combining “Dalit” with ecological terms such as “land,” “water,” or “environment” rarely turn up academic publications that identify as “ecological” or “environmental” studies. This may in part be due to the dominant assumption that, unlike Adivasis (Indigenous groups in India), Dalits do not contribute to the ecological knowledge base. The two groups are not mutually exclusive, however. Adivasis and Dalits often experience similar forms of environmental exclusion and deprivation, especially when living in proximity with each other (Krishnan and Naga 2017). Some studies relevant to both groups have therefore been included in this review article. Combining “Dalit” with search terms such as “cow,” “shit,” “sanitation,” and “manual scavenging” yields greater results, but unfortunately indicates that much of the scholarship still naturalizes social hierarchies and inadvertently reproduces dominant stereotypes about Dalits and caste-based occupations (Rawat 2012; Sprague 2016). Due to the paucity of directly pertinent and unbiased empirical studies, I have also included publications that only mention the term “Dalit” in passing, even though caste is integral to their arguments.
To further uncover the ecological implications of caste and race for Dalits, I turn to anti-caste, Dalit, and transnational feminist scholarship that strategically forges alliances across borders “to diagnose how power operates within them in asymmetric and multidirectional ways” (Tambe and Thayer 2021: 2; see also Paik 2014, 2021; Vinayaraj 2014; Visweswaran 2010). Dalit ecologies thus comprises the radical, even utopian, visions of pre- through post-colonial anti-caste activists such as Iyothee Thass (1845–1914) and Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956) among others (Aloysius 2010; Leonard 2021; Omvedt 2008, 2011; Shepherd 2019), critiques of the disjunction between untouchability theorization and Dalit experiences of their environment (Bhimraj 2020; Guru and Sarrukai 2017; Omvedt 1997; Reddy 2021; Sharma 2012a, 2012b, 2017), and Dalit and feminist scholars who have located the roots of Dalit marginalization in a lack of control over factors of production such as land and water (A. Chakravarti 2018; U. Chakravarti 2018; Jodhka 2018; Rege 2006; Shah et al. 2006). Some scholars have built on Ambedkar’s conceptualization of spatialized inequalities to foreground the ongoing exclusion of Dalits from environmental resources (Doron 2021; Guru and Sarrukai 2017; Lee 2017; Moon 2001; Prasad 2021b; Rawat 2013).

Because Dalit knowledge has been omitted from the ecological canon, Dalit ecologies must also include analyses of Dalit oral and literary traditions. Previously, Dalit songs, poetry, autobiographies, short stories, and novels were mostly read as protest literature signifying Dalit agency and resistance to oppression. Scholars have begun rereading such traditions to theorize Dalit relations with their environments, recognize them as key stakeholders in the environmental discourse, and address their ecological precarity (Kumar and Mishra 2022). In this regard, Mukul Sharma’s (2017, 2019, 2020, 2021) pioneering work on Dalit folklore has been instrumental in bringing caste into the Indian environmental literature. A growing body of Dalit autobiographies and literary anthologies translated from the vernacular to English, including the dossiers edited by Susie Tharu and K. Satyanarayana (Tharu and Satyanarayana 2011; Satyanarayana and Tharu 2013a, 2013b), are also important for understanding Dalit ecological experiences. Dalit oral traditions and literary works are currently being examined for their implications for the history of social movements and resistance to gender, caste, and other hierarchies by scholars such as Mukul Chaturvedi (2020), Toral Gajarawala (2012), Aditya Ghosh (2021), Pavel Hons (2013), M. Kannan and François Gros (2002), Purnachandra Naik (2016), Badri Narayan (Narayan and Misra 2004; Narayan 2006), Anne Placid (2021), Anamika Purohit (2021), Sharmila Rege (2006), among many others. Ecology as a critical lens is yet to be fully deployed in such analyses, however. Often collected into anthologies, the works of Dalit literary poets and authors, theorists and critics, and activists such as Arjun Dangle (1992, 2009), Aravinda Malagatti (2021), D. R. Nagaraj (2010), Baby Kamble and Urmilla Pawar (Rege 2006), Manohar Mouli Biswas (Sarangi 2019), and T. M. Yesudasan (Tharu and Satyanarayana 2011) could also be reread from an ecological perspective.

This exploratory article thus pulls together disparate materials in English that are not obviously ecological texts, but nevertheless provide insight into the ecological implications of concepts such as caste labor, purity, pollution, and untouchability that remain embedded in dominant Brahminical ideology in India. Baviskar and Gidwani explained why this is important:

How we regard those who deal with waste and pollution is influenced by enduring ideas about racial and ethnic difference as marked on bodies, rendering them susceptible or resistant to environmental ills in differing degrees. While the caste system is the most deep-seated and obdurate of such systems of classification, colonial ideologies of race and climate also continue to shape the epistemology of risk and resilience. (2019: np)
Towards Dalit Ecologies

The literature reviewed herein addresses Dalit efforts to challenge this ideology and imagine a socially just and sustainable relationship to the environment in future.

**Ecological Implications of Caste, Untouchability, and the Racialization of Dalit Bodies**

...what is peculiar about our touch that it pollutes water, food, houses, clothes, graveyards, tea shops, God, religion, and even man? (Limbale 2007: 81)

Dalit intellectual Limbale posed a question that should be central to all Indian environmental inquiry: why are some groups of people in India construed as inherently or naturally defiling of their social and physical environments? The answer to this question requires a critical analysis of the principles underlying the Hindu caste system and how it structures labor and social relations in India. We start with the works of the great Dalit scholar, political activist, and chief architect of the Indian constitution, B. R. Ambedkar, who led one of the first organized Dalit environmental struggles known as the Mahad Satyagraha in 1927 (Omvedt 2008; Teltumbde 2016). His works remain foundational to all anti-caste scholarship and by extension to theorizing Dalit ecological experiences (Kumar 2020; Sharma 2017).

Caste is a fixed, closed system that ensures that those placed lowest in the hierarchy have little opportunity to alter their lived realities (Ambedkar 1989; Guru and Sarukkai 2017; Teltumbde 2020). Ambedkar credited Brahminical Hinduism for prescribing a division of laborers instead of labor at birth. Hindu scriptures define four broad caste varnas in descending order of importance: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. They also describe a fifth category of outcasts, the “ati-Shudra,” later known as “untouchables.” Constituting the lower labor classes in Hindu economies, Shudras and ati-Shudras (i.e., Dalits) were both ordained “to subserve the ends of high Caste [sic] Hindus” (Ambedkar 1979b: 84, italics in original quote). Shudras were expected to carry out tasks related to primary production such as agriculture and cattle rearing, while ati-Shudras were required to deal with the treatment and disposal of any waste (e.g., garbage, human fecal matter, corpses) generated by those within the caste varnas, including the Shudras.

Undertaking the labor appropriate to the position into which one was born in the caste hierarchy translates into performing “religious acts and observances” (Ambedkar 1979b: 363). Ambedkar explained that being forced to do tasks considered most polluting and closest to nature was deemed a necessary performance of one’s dharma in this life, meaning that doing so was following the moral code of Hinduism (Ambedkar 1989: 82). The Hindu notion of karma states that one’s present location in the caste hierarchy has been determined by deeds committed in past lives. Following one’s dharma, that is, following the moral code of Hinduism, is then necessary to ensure that one will be born into a higher caste level in the next life. The concepts of dharma and karma thus work together to simultaneously naturalize and justify the caste system and affirm Brahminical supremacy (Teltumbe 2020: 20). Ambedkar’s (1979b, 1989) writings on the perniciousness of the Manusmriti (or Manu Smriti, lit. “Laws of Manu”) in the lives of Dalits are particularly instructive. Purportedly written between 170 BC and 150 BC (Ambedkar 1979b: 271), this Hindu religio-legal text granted specific rights and privileges to men born into the top three varnas, while condemning all women, Shudras, and ati-Shudras to oppression on the basis of their relative impurity. For example, it declared that (male) Brahminical dominance superseded all secular laws and permitted Shudras to interact directly with those whom they served in the upper castes because they were all positioned within the caste system and...
hence “touchable.” Meanwhile, those without caste (i.e., ati-Shudras) were deemed “unfit for human association and common dealing” (Ambedkar 1989: 93) because they were associated with waste and pollution. *Manusmriti* edicts forbade these “untouchables” from owning land or cattle and drawing water from Hindu wells or even building their own wells (Ambedkar 1979b, 1989; Guru 2009).

Brahminical prohibitions produced the untouchable as a kind of “mobile dirt” just as “dirt was mobile untouchability” (Guru 2017a: 91), which mandated that they be separated spatially from caste Hindus (Prasad 2021b). Dalits were forced to live in what Ambedkar called “untouchable ghettos” (1989: 1) to ensure that nothing they touched would come into contact with members of the four *varnas*. Even allowing their shadows to cross those of “touchables” was an offense against religious law (Ambedkar 1989: 21). The text described violent punishments to be visited on anyone who failed to follow its dictates, with the worst reserved for those considered most polluting: untouchables and women. The *Manusmriti* and similar religious texts thus institutionalized the segregation of Dalit spaces and bodies, restricted their access to physical resources, and normalized violent retaliation should they chafe at their position of inequality. Violent coercion has remained intrinsic to structuring caste relations and determining who is allowed access to natural resources in India.

Ambedkar (1989) concluded that the practice of untouchability constituted a system of permanent indentured servitude akin to and even more rigid than racial slavery in the West. Some Dalit and anti-caste historians have read the forced labor of landless outcastes during the colonial period as slavery (e.g., Mohan 2015; Viswanath 2014) and consider the discrimination against and segregation of Dalits on the basis of untouchability to be “the great-grandfather of [racial] Apartheid” (Mahadeva 2013: 111). The logic of purity and pollution thus undergirds a process of racialization, understood here as “a complex set of historical and sociopolitical processes of attributing superior or inferior status based on the presumption of biological difference” (Pierre 2020: 220).

In his groundbreaking analyses of the songs and narratives of early bonded Dalit laborers and Dalit myths and metaphors around nature, read alongside Ambedkar’s discussion of the *Manusmriti*, Sharma (2017) demonstrated that caste has been naturalized since ancient times in India. Brahminical Hinduism conceptualizes caste as integral to nature (Nanda 2005; Thomases 2017) and Sharma (2017: 11) saw the *varna* system as laced with a sort of evolutionary theory of natural selection and “essentially ecological in its logic.” People born into caste categories traditionally assigned to non-manual or intellectual labor (e.g., academics, business managers, religious and political leaders) are considered “pure” and racialized as “lighter” than outcaste groups. Meanwhile, Dalit bodies, marked from birth as naturally impure (i.e., without caste), are racialized as being “darker” than those of privileged caste groups because they work closer to “nature” in outdoor jobs or in “polluting” forms of labor such as handling the dead and human bodily waste (Geetha 2009; Guru and Sarukkai 2017). The British colonial regime accepted “untouchability” as a natural, biological fact and classified Dalits as members of a subrace within British race theory. The nineteenth-century anti-caste activist Iyothee Thass observed that the Brahmins learned from the British to justify “caste in terms of science” to the benefit of “power-holders of both the systems” (Omvedt 2008: 144–145).

Although discrimination on the basis of caste and the practice of untouchability have been illegal in India since 1950, “untouchability” retains its social valence and rigid caste boundaries continue to be enforced, often with state complicity (U. Chakravarti 2018; Rao 2011; Teltumbde 2010; Yengde 2019). As with racial categories in much of the global north, caste is associated with class levels related to the assigned labor categories. As agricultural and manual laborers, Dalits are subsumed under the nebulous category of the “poor” or “disadvantaged.” Dalit and
feminist intellectuals have argued that conflating caste with class, gender, and other domains of sociopolitical analysis only confirms the tenaciousness of the caste-mandated divide “between theoretical brahmins and empirical Shudras” (Guru 2017b: 10; see also U. Chakravarti 2018). Positioning Dalit labor as “manual” and contrasting it with “intellectual” work further perpetuates casteism by failing to recognize that physical labor embodies spiritual practices and historically situated intellectual knowledge of the environment. Moreover, it ignores the full range of productive work done by Dalits, which is critical to maintaining life itself. For example, Ramanarayan S. Rawat (2011) showed how prejudiced mainstream scholarship mapped “untouchability” onto the Chamar community in North India by essentializing the inhabitants as leather tanners, while systematically ignoring local archives and narratives that would have revealed diverse occupations, including that of peasant farmers and landowners. In the end, treating Dalits as simply “poor” erases difference (caste and gender in this case) as a viable category of analysis and renders the complexities of identity-based discrimination opaque.

This has implications for Dalit relationships with the environment and environmental movements. Worldwide, the environmentalism of the “poor” tends to focus on the ecological struggles of Indigenous communities (Adivasis in India) against dams, deforestation, and extractive mining and fishing practices, while excluding the ecological concerns of other marginalized groups such as Dalits (Martínez-Alier 2020). Similarly, even as ecofeminist literature (Agarwal 2002; Jackson 2003; Kings 2017; Mies and Shiva 2014) has helped foreground women’s severely limited access to and control over natural and productive resources such as land, there has been little recognition of how caste discrimination impacts Dalit women who face multiple (caste, class, and gender, etc.) marginalities and disproportionately bear the brunt of climate adversity. The state’s failure to recognize Dalits as stakeholders in the environment was made evident by their exclusion from the otherwise progressive Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006 (Kodiveri 2016, 2021a, 2021b; Vaidya 2022). Even the struggles for human rights and social justice on the part of the Indigenous “poor” only found traction in environmental movements in India because they were led by privileged caste/class activists (Sharma 2017).

Gail Omvedt (1997) was one of the first anti-caste scholars to realize that Dalit ecological experiences are mediated through caste. In an influential essay entitled “Why Dalits dislike environmentalists,” Omvedt drew attention to two social movement ideologies that have been responsible for Dalit disengagement and resentment toward contemporary environmental activism in India: the anti-caste movement and the environmental movement. Omvedt posited that the alienation between these two movements mirrors a historical schism between Dalit and non-Dalit perspectives on nature epitomized in the writings of Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi. Indian environmentalists favor Gandhi’s romanticization of the rural Indian village as a place where humans live in harmony with nature, while anti-caste activists usually align with Ambedkar’s view of Indian villages as cesspools because they naturalize an unequal and debilitating social order that excludes Dalits from physical, social, and ecological spaces and interactions.

Sharma reframed such exclusions as manifestations of “eco-casteism,” which includes eco-organicism (2017: 16) and eco-naturalism (2017: 20). To appropriate caste for the benefit of market and capital, new forms of casteism “aligned with Brahminical thinking . . . and developed a vocabulary of nature that eclipsed Dalits and their everyday environmental lives” (2017: xvii). Eco-organicism meanwhile turned bodies into “cultural spaces that could be dominated, written on, and regulated by the Brahminical system” (Guru 2017a: 86). Sharma (2017) pointed out that the eco-organicist approach conflates protecting nature (understood as the divine cosmos operating on the basis of natural principles) with protecting Indian society (as based on the “natural” principles of the caste system) against Western influences (i.e., modernity, technology,
materialist and consumerist culture). Eco-naturalism follows this reasoning in “the coupling of environmental protection with the protection of life in its natural order” (2017: xxi; emphasis in original). Despite all their efforts at caste blindness, Indian ecological organizations that emulate the Gandhian approach tend to reproduce the Brahminical hierarchy, condone patronage, and affirm the naturalness of the caste system (Sharma 2017).8

Caste ideology not only continues to deny subjectivity and personhood to Dalits, but also dictates who is allowed to dominate the means of production, such that access to the most basic material resources is denied to Dalits. Indeed, the spikes in caste violence may be an indicator of Dalit ecological assertions. Literature on caste wars in Bihar (Bhatia 2005; Kumar 2008; Kunthath 2018) and caste killings (Fuchs 2020; Padhi et al. 2012; Teltumbde 2010; Viswanathan 2009) demonstrate that struggles over control of land and other ecological resources are almost always met with (gendered) violence. Furthermore, while Dalits have high stakes in the environment due to their dependence on arable land, fresh water, and healthy forests for their livelihoods, the literature rarely documents the disproportionate burdens of ecological waste and pollution they bear in both rural and urban environments.9 Such neglect not only has grave repercussions for the well-being of Dalits, including Dalit women, it also reinforces the stigma of untouchability. These forms of ecological precarity are discussed next.

Ecological Precarity: Dangerous Labor, Waste, and Pollution

Here queue up they who want to taste
Poison’s sweet or salt flavor
Death gathers here, as do words,
In just a minute, it will start pouring here. ("Kamatipura," by Dalit poet Namdeo Dhasal 2007)10

The caste-designated occupations of Dalits and their segregation into unfertile, dried up, or poisoned landscapes has not only historically marginalized Dalits but also aggravated the impacts of climate change, ecological degradation, and environmental disasters in their lives. For example, while investigating a capitalist extractive economy dominated by the “upper castes” in Odisha, where “cyclones, floods and droughts are a recurring phenomenon,” Manoranjan Mohanty (2014: 39) found that the environmental destruction from large mining and industrial development operations has chiefly affected marginalized groups such as Adivasis and Dalits. Sudhir Pattnaik (2019) similarly revealed that Dalit youths in Odisha disproportionately bear the brunt of environmental disasters in terms of lost lives and livelihoods. The state government built shelters providing basic sanitation facilities and stocked with food so people could survive a natural disaster, but when a cyclone hit the area, officials did not intervene when non-Dalits refused to allow Dalits into the shelters, leaving them to ride out the disaster without state assistance (Pattnaik 2019). This presents yet another example of what Gopal Guru called the “dark hole” (2017a: 84), as Dalit bodies continue to be confined to the least propitious spaces in rural and urban environments.

The same neglect is seen at the national level, particularly in the government’s approach to dealing with sanitation, waste, and pollution, problems of increasing concern in India. Dalits disproportionately work in waste and pollution management, including the removal of fecal matter and dead human bodies and animal carcasses, but the government ignores the problems of caste and disregards the fact that people are stigmatized by their contact with sewage and other toxic garbage. Such experiences are revealed in Dalit literary works (e.g., Du Saras-
wathi’s contribution to Satyanarayana and Tharu 2013a). The stigma is also revealed by the violence meted out to Dalits. For example, the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA) program of 2014 was intended to address the problem of people defecating in public, but resulted in increased violence toward Dalits, who usually have less access to sanitary facilities than non-Dalits. Non-Dalit men from Bhavkhedi village in the Shivpuri district of Madhya Pradesh set upon two Dalit children who had defecated in the open and beat them to death with sticks (Dutta 2019).

The absence of informed sociocultural and ecological perspectives in the national discourse represents a particular jeopardy to Dalit survival because waste (especially human waste) and pollutants “contaminate” landscapes and designate those regularly exposed to them as “less or diminished-bodies” (Baviskar and Gidwani 2019: np). Dalits are most often responsible for removing, recycling, and repurposing trash discarded by dominant castes, yet Indian urban ecological discourse ignores their “infrastructural labor” (Gidwani 2015: 575) and contributions towards mitigating the garbage crisis, while naturalizing their proximity to filth. Government agencies never mention the dehumanizing conditions to which Dalits are subject when working with waste products nor do they compile statistics on Dalit injuries and deaths while performing dangerous tasks associated with sanitation.

Such lacunae are most obvious in the literature on manual scavenging. Manual scavenging is a caste-based hereditary occupation that “involves physical and manual removal of human excreta from dry latrines and sewers (using basic tools such as thin boards, buckets and baskets lined with sacking) and then having to carry the collected excreta on their heads for disposal” (Darokar 2020: np). Although manual scavenging has been illegal since the passage of the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act in 1993, Shaileshkumar Darokar (2018, 2020) argued that it continues because it has been considered one of the social obligations of Dalits for centuries.11 Shreyas Sreenath (2019) showed how manual scavenging has been reconstituted by tracing the deaths of three Dalits in Bengaluru City’s sewage treatment plants and underground drainage system. Sreenath demonstrated that “untouchable” caste bodies are routinely operationalized to maintain the functioning of modern sewage systems. Urban manual scavenging has reemerged out of the necessity to resolve excretal blockages in sanitation infrastructures due to monsoons or machine malfunction. As Sreenath argued, “ecological shifts have resulted in the intricate suturing of caste power into built systems that channel urbanization’s surplus wastes” (2019: np). In an edited volume on India’s burgeoning waste crisis, Assa Doron and Robin Jeffrey (2018) asserted that neither technological innovations nor deft governance will make much progress in addressing India’s polluted environment until caste has been annihilated and dignity restored to manual labor (see also Doron 2010, 2016; Doron and Raja 2015). Until then, Dalits will be deployed to fix ecological impasses.

**Environmental Exclusion and Vulnerability**

“The Well Belongs to the Landlord”
The fireplace is made from mud,
The mud is from the pond,
The pond belongs to the landlord.

A hunger for bread,
Bread made of millet,
Millet grown in the fields,
The field belongs to the landlord.
The bull belongs to the landlord,
The plow belongs to the landlord,
Gripping the tips of the plow is our palm,
The harvest belongs to the landlord.

The well belongs to the landlord,
The water belongs to the landlord,
The farm and the barn belong to the landlord,
The lanes that run through the neighborhoods belong to the landlord.
Then what is ours?
The village?
The city?
The nation? (Om Prakash Valmiki, November 1981)\(^\text{12}\)

Dalit writer Om Prakash Valmiki (1950–2013) poignantly described enduring forms of Dalit dispossession that remain blatantly visible in rural India. Using ecological terms such as mud, pond, food grains, fields, harvest, water, and well, Valmiki noted that all material resources belong to the landlord, then questioned where Dalits might belong in society. The poem links the tangible dispossession of outcaste groups to normalized forms of un-belonging instituted by dominant landowning groups known as Savarnas (privileged castes). It is symptomatic of Dalit oral and literary traditions, which often express historically specific experiences of their position in the caste hierarchy by invoking elements of their rural environments such as potable and irrigation water sources, agricultural land and forests, and food products. Such traditions demonstrate how the ideology of untouchability continues to determine the kinds of labor Dalits are permitted to do, while dispossessing them of land and other natural resources. The history of Dalit activism also implicates the many ways the edicts of Brahminical Hinduism have worked to prevent Dalits from gaining reliable access to water and land.

**Pure Water**

20 March 1927 is the date of the first public assertion of the rights of Dalits as citizens to access natural resources such as water. In a protest later known as the Mahad Satyagraha, Ambedkar burned a copy of the *Manusmriti*, then led a procession of untouchables to the Chowdar reservoir in Mahad, where they drew water from the public tank and drank it. Caste Hindus were so shocked by the act that they filed a civil case against Ambedkar (later dismissed), claimed the reservoir was private property, and then held an elaborate ritual to purify the body of water. The ritual involved drawing water from the Chowdar tank in 108 earthen pots, mixing in cow milk, curds, dung, and urine, then dipping the pots back into the tank before finally declaring the reservoir water now pure and fit for use by caste Hindus (Samel 1999).\(^\text{13}\)

Esha Shah (2008) explored the idioms of caste as historically embedded in tank irrigation technology by examining folk narratives alongside contemporary policy to discuss the social shaping and romanticization of pre-modern knowledge systems with respect to irrigation. Voddas (the caste name for a specific group of Dalits) are prominently mentioned as tank builders in “stories narrated by higher-caste farmers and temple priests and the songs sung by Dalit women” (Shah 2008: 663). Although the folk literature “commonly describe[s] the large number of Voddas employed for tank construction . . . over the span of several centuries” (Shah 2008: 663–664), they do not appear in inscriptive sources or South India historiographies. However, Dalit folk literature punctures the myth of the idealized rural past, since “the Voddas’ own nar-
ratives hint that they may have been under some form of coercion” when they were building the tanks (Shah 2008: 664).

David Mosse (1997, 1999, 2006, 2018) and other anthropologists studying water in India have examined the ways in which social structures simultaneously are embedded in and constitutive of the environment. In delineating the long history of the decline of pre-modern tank irrigation systems in South India due to factors ranging from increased water demand and groundwater exploration to changing land use patterns and the weakening of village structures of authority, Mosse helps us understand the ways in which tank irrigation ecologies have been shaped by caste power, governance, and warfare. Dominant castes controlled the water and dictated the repair of irrigation systems, while those doing the labor were often deprived of water.

Studies conducted in North India have focused on ways in which caste and gender mediate access to drinking water. Anthropologist Deepa Joshi (2011) provided an intersectional ethnographic account of deepening water inequity in the central Himalayan region as the state moved from social welfare-based to a market-driven supply mode. Treating caste and gender as separate categories has worked to restrict Dalit women from claiming their right to access potable water (Joshi 2011).

Alankar (2013) examined how caste mediates access to water in urban environments, specifically the cities of Delhi and its neighbor Ghaziabad. The government caters to the water needs of “better off” (i.e., non-Dalit) migrants and occupants housed in new developments at the expense of those housed in “poor” localities, which include mostly Dalits and Muslim minorities (Alankar 2013). The ecological implications of caste for water bodies, whether stagnant or flowing, are further revealed by Sharma (2017) in a chapter on “Dalit Memories and Water Rights.”

Indulata Prasad (2021b) used ethnographic with social mapping methods to examine qualitative shifts in the spatial practices of untouchability, including Bhuiyan Dalits’ access to water in a rural village in Bihar. Bhuiyan is a caste name for Dalits specific to this region. For centuries, they were not permitted to draw water from the village well. Although the local government loosened the control non-Dalits had over the only local source of potable water by installing hand pumps in other parts of the village, the pumps built near Dalit houses still run dry during the hot season and the water from these pumps is often contaminated during monsoon season because they do not go as deep as the well, which is used primarily by non-Dalits. Prasad (2021b) not only demonstrated that covert forms of untouchability continue to be practiced through water infrastructure, her spatial analysis suggested why Dalit communities are more vulnerable to disease, natural and human-generated disasters, and other dangers than non-Dalits living in the same general environment.

**Arable Land**

Scholars centering their work on Dalit perspectives and experiences are often critical of traditional understandings of the caste system as a mere vestige of a feudal land system justified by religious philosophies laced with ideas of purity and pollution (Teltumbde 2020: 119). Apart from naming the unmarked dominant Hindu viewpoint “Brahminical,” they provide more capacious readings of the ways in which the caste system is intrinsically enmeshed with ecology, in particular questions of land (Aloysius 2010; A. Chakravarti 2018; U. Chakravarti 2018; Jodhka 2018 Omvedt 2008; Rege 2006; Sanghatana 1989; Sharma 2017; Viswanathan 2009). For example, in *Gendering Caste*, Uma Chakravarti (2018: 75) demonstrated the malleability of the
caste system in adapting the assignment of labor categories to local specificities (e.g., ecological features, modes of production, population demographics, cultural practices). Uma Chakravarti (2018) also pointed out that *varna* stratification, the practice of endogamy, and control over women’s sexuality and the reproductive process were all legitimized through Brahminical rituals and texts such as the *Manusmriti* “to ensure an adequate labour supply” following the establishment of private ownership of land (2018: 33, 43, 66). Social control as well as control over nature are thus achieved through controlling women.

Scholars have looked from pre-colonial to postcolonial, anti-caste land movements as evidence of the ways in which land has historically been the basis for securing caste dominance over local ecologies. Omvedt (2008) demonstrated the rise of Brahminical power through the proliferation of land grants in seventh and eighth-century India, which anti-caste intellectuals contested in “true enlightenment movements” (2008: 26) from the fifteenth to mid-twentieth centuries. G. Aloysius pointed out that dominant narratives, such as those attributing the relative success of Kerala’s development model to education, foreign influence, and land reform, often obfuscate the role played by the “number of anti-ascriptive (caste) struggles” that threatened the “colonially propped up and politicized traditional-hierarchical social order” (2005: 4). Aloysius read agrarian struggles under colonialism as anti-caste movements because they challenged the practice of “customary services based on ascriptive and caste status of the agricultural laborers and marginal landowners” (2010: 90).

Although land reform is no longer a priority of the Indian government, land remains central to Dalit assertions, since landlessness remains acute among Dalits and landless labor continues to be their primary occupation. Land marks material, political, and symbolic privilege while modulating caste-laced idioms of inequality, dominance, and subordination. Their position in caste hierarchies has rendered most Dalits landless, even though the majority work as agricultural laborers in rural areas (Bhimraj 2020). In the article “Dalit Emancipation and the Land Question,” Ishan Anand (2016) questioned the construction of the category of “landlessness.” Using empirical data, Anand found that redistributive land reform policies have been used by the state merely to give small plots of homestead land to Dalits without providing agricultural land on which they can make a living. State-initiated land reforms have thus failed to make a dent in the high incidence of landlessness among Dalits (Anand 2016). For example, Kerala is touted as the most progressive state in India because it is believed to have successfully implemented land-reform policies. Although Dalits have registered more social gains in Kerala compared to other Indian states, their basic living conditions have not been fundamentally transformed because they still do not have access to agricultural land and resources. Dalits (and Adivasis) continue to agitate for land restoration without success (Sreerekha 2010).

Empirical studies on village economies and land struggles indicate that some Dalits have contested their historical exclusions from land by identifying vacant land owned by the government or privately, then bringing it under cultivation. Suryakant Waghmore (2013) detailed Dalit political struggles to reclaim grazing lands for cultivation by strategically encroaching on them in Western India. Attempts at occupying productive land is one strategy by which Dalit communities attempt to mitigate the widespread problem of landlessness. Dalits assert that they are no longer content with being allocated small plots of homestead land or unproductive land on which they cannot earn a living. State apathy toward Dalits mitigates their agency, however. For example, M. S. Sreerekha (2012) described landless Dalits and Adivasis in Kerala taking over parts of a rubber plantation that an agricultural corporation had earlier leased from the state, then allowed the lease to expire. The corporation tried to force the landless to vacate instead of renewing its lease. The government thus ignores the illegal use and appropriation of
public lands by agribusinesses, while failing to address the problems of the landless poor, who are mostly Dalits.

Even more egregiously, the state often assists people from dominant castes in taking over the small parcels of land owned by Dalits. R. Ramakumar and Tushar Kamble (2012) documented the efforts of a Dalit family to retain control over their land as members of a landed caste attempted to encroach on it with the support of local police and administrative officials. Even in those parts of India where Dalits have obtained legal titles to agricultural land, they are constantly at risk of having the land taken away from them by the state. Dispossession from land has been justified under the neoliberal economy as necessary for “development,” a concept that collapses trends such as “urbanization, industrialization,” and “infrastructure creation” led by the private sector (Chandra 2015: 50). The development agenda has pushed “the transfer of land towards non-agricultural activities” throughout India (Nielsen et al. 2020: 3; also see Shiva et al. 2011), with repercussions for agricultural laborers and the environment. Ritanjan Das (2020) deconstructed the “development” story of Rajarhat, an upcoming “global city” adjoining West Bengal’s capital Kolkata, by interrogating the caste implications of its land struggles. Jyoti Rao (2019) used a “capability approach” to examine the losses incurred by Dalit communities following compulsory land acquisition by the state in areas in and around Bengaluru. Rao explained that once their land is taken over by the state, Dalits “lose their identity” as landowners and are often “forced to migrate to the city in search of employment” (2019: 79), where they become anonymous nobodies. Both Das and Rao concluded that non-Dalits benefit from such projects, while Dalits lose agency and personhood. Such forms of structural violence are another manifestation of eco-casteism (Sharma 2017).

A special issue on “The Politics of Caste in India’s New Land Wars” addressed the ways in which “caste and land are recursively linked categories that are produced and reproduced in continuous interaction, even as multi-scalar political economies (re)shape them” (Nielsen et al. 2020: 1). The “new” in “new land wars” marks current conflicts over land dispossession stimulated by the neoliberal market economy as significantly different from agrarian struggles of the colonial and post-colonial periods in which the focus was on instituting and implementing redistributive land reform policies to democratize the land holding base. It also signals the alarming rate at which people are disposing of their land for purposes of private-sector accumulation rather than the public good. For example, Samantha Agarwal and Michael Levien (2020) discussed instances of neoliberal processes of land dispossession to demonstrate that they have disproportionately impacted Dalits by reinvigorating caste-based exploitation. The articles showed that, just as Dalit labor is appropriated as surplus labor under the logic of caste, there is a similar appropriation of the surplus value of Dalit-owned land. While land is considered an important and valuable ecological asset under neoliberal capitalism, Dalit ownership is viewed as unworthy of compensation. Not only are Dalit spaces abandoned by capital, Dalit efforts to retain them are deemed unworthy of economic support. This further cements Dalit marginalization.

The studies in this issue demonstrate the importance of including caste in analyses of state-sanctioned land dispossession and contemporary land movements. In his work on an anti-dispossession movement in Singur, West Bengal, Kenneth Bo Nielsen noted that land dispossession is “refracted through local caste and class relations in ways that tend to reproduce pre-existing inequalities, albeit in an uneven manner” (2020: 780). Similar outcomes were observed by Asmita Kabra (2020: 785–786) in the context of land dispossession under the garb of “green grabbing” or conservation displacement in which land is appropriated for environmental ends. Such land acquisition “involves not just the national, regional and local state, but also non-state actors like NGOs, civil society groups and social movements” as gatekeepers in a new “economy of resettlement and rehabilitation” of displaced populations (2020: 789).
Patrik Oskarsson and Siddharth Sareen (2020) deployed a caste lens on Adivasi groups struggling to secure land rights in the face of industrial determination to dispossess them of their land. In the absence of state support, both Dalits and Adivasis lack political and economic influence, which restricts their agency (Oskarsson and Sareen 2020). Dispossession of land due to mining and other industrial activities was also foregrounded by Minati Dash (2020), who noted that when companies are in the process of acquiring land, they promise jobs and welfare to the current occupants, but once they take over the land, renge on their promises and even sue the people who dare to continue farming or living on the land. According to Dash, “between 2004 and 2012, at least a thousand Dalit and Adivasi men and women had criminal cases registered against them” (2020: 3) in Kashipur, Orrisa after mining companies acquired their land. Loraine Kennedy claimed that the limited success of an anti-dispossession movement in the northern state of Haryana was due to its failure to address “pre-existing conflicts of interest between landed Jats and Dalits” (2020: 743) and a state bias towards landowners over agricultural laborers (most of whom are Dalits) when it came to disbursing agricultural compensation.

Dalit environmental movements must be viewed as struggles against local structures of social domination rooted in the historically exclusive ownership of land and related resources by non-Dalits. Some of their struggles have been effective. Anand Teltumbde (2015) documented the success of Dalits in Pathapally, Telangana, who forced the state administration to accept most of their demands to secure land rights or be compensated for the loss of their land when it was taken over by dominant castes who wanted to construct a water tank in the village. The Pathapally movement demonstrated a shift in Dalit strategies as they prepared to confront the dominant castes as well as the state (Teltumbde 2015). Similarly, Prasad (2021a, 2021b) traced the long-term effects on Dalits of having participated in the peaceful Bodhgaya land movement in the late 1970s in Bihar. Prasad (2021b) showed how obtaining control over redistributed land that had previously been owned by a local Hindu religious institution fundamentally reoriented rural public spaces. Ongoing contestations over Dalit access to those spaces resulted in a qualitative shift in practices of untouchability, as what had once been overt was rendered hidden and difficult to discern, though no less prevalent. Overcoming landlessness remains critical for Dalits seeking to improve their social and economic status and challenge the covert manifestations of untouchability that are still represented in ecological and sociological forms of discrimination in India (Prasad 2021a).

**Conclusion: The Future of Dalit Ecologies and Environmental Activism**

Black and Dalit scholars alike have found that discrimination, exclusion, and systemic violence are interlaced with ecology through relations of power and domination. The devaluation of Dalits is based on the mutual constitution of caste and their status as surplus, which is analogous to conceptualizations of racialized capitalism (Gupta 2022; Pulido 2016; Ranganathan 2021). As a field of study, Dalit ecologies posits a theory of marginalized and stigmatized existence undergirded by an ancient Hindu ideology of purity and pollution. It describes the destructiveness of the outlawed practice of “untouchability” when it comes to Dalit relationships with their environment. Finding issues of environmental marginalization of Blacks relevant to the Indian context, I anticipate that Dalit ecologies has the potential to be developed into a theoretical framework that would support the agenda of Dalits to become “the subject of their own thinking rather than the object of somebody else's thinking” (Guru 2017b: 25). The Indian environmental discourse needs to learn from the environmental experiences of Dalit because they are
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best suited to articulate a response to these challenges. As Shepherd (2019: 114–115) pointed out, the solutions coming from Dalitwadaas (Dalit neighborhoods) are egalitarian in scope and thus positioned to benefit the entire Indian society (see also Omvedt 2008; Waghmore 2013). The inclusion of Dalit ecologies under global Black ecologies may also contribute to elucidating the structure of environmental anti-Blackness in Euro-America, thereby enabling “margin-to-margin” dialogue and solidarity (Paik 2014: 74). In rendering visible the processes of racialization of Dalits and ecological casteism in general, Dalit ecologies should allow for the marginal spaces historically occupied by Dalits in India to be re-envisioned as productive spaces and sites for theorizing environmental relations.

Given that gender and sexuality are critical to the formation of caste, Dalit ecologies must be undergirded by Dalit feminism, which to date has largely been ignored by mainstream Indian feminists and environmentalists. Gender-specific concerns are also remain mostly absent from Dalit social movements, politics, and literature (Paik 2021; Pan 2018; Sen 2019). Dalit ecologies would not only trace the figurative and literal processes of erasures and silencing of Dalit ecological experiences and knowledge, but also enable us to critique, intervene, and stage transgressions. Thus, although publications directly relevant to Dalit ecologies still appear to be limited, this is bound to change. In the past two years, there has already been an increase in the number of publications that explicitly engage questions of ecology with caste. The emergence of a diverse body of Dalit (and Bahujan) literary and oral traditions on the international platform is providing new approaches for examining the ecological knowledge of marginalized groups in India. Although the Dalit-Bahujan activist and scholar Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd (2019) posited a Dalit-Bahujan theory of knowledge and knowledge production as based on their everyday interactions with nature, the research remains scant.14 This alludes to deep-seated caste biases as well as the pretense that caste is no longer salient to Indian identities and everyday experiences. Exploring the interconnectedness of caste, gender, and nature enables us to understand how these domains work together to reaffirm Brahminical dominance. Environments, places, and people are legitimized and delegitimized as social hierarchies are reproduced and reinscribed in new ways. While engendering conflict and violence, such processes nevertheless offer possibilities for transforming social hierarchies and challenging caste domination. The literature reviewed here thus indicates that the continued salience of the Manusmriti in the present, along with the experience of untouchability, must be central to theorizing Dalit ecologies in conversation with other forms of marginalization and racialization in India and beyond. For example, it is imperative to develop a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of Dalit and Adivasi communities who, although distinct in terms of their historical and political situatedness, often experience similar forms of ecological marginalization. Such differences and similarities should be addressed in future research.

The inclusion of scholarship that examines anti-caste and land movements from pre- to post-colonial times in Dalit ecologies should also enable researchers to shed light on the intrinsic linkages between socioeconomic systems of inequality and control over environmental factors of production. Such research has become increasingly salient in light of the Hindu Right’s appropriation of ecological movements and forays into religious environmentalism (Nanda 2005). It is also important to document Dalit environmental victories. For example, Patrick Kilby described how the dozen NGOs in the East Coast Development Forum were able to respond effectively to the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami by drawing on the “trust and capacity built up through past network activities of the fisher, dalit, and tribal communities” (2008: 120). Similarly, the Koel-Karo Jan Sangathan success in Jharkhand (Chandra 2013), Dalit victory in Pathapally (Teltumbde 2015), various effective land movements (e.g., Prasad 2021a; Sanghatana 1989), and even struggles that are “discreet, low-key and non-heroic
in nature” (Mukherjee 2020: 58) should be foregrounded. Unlike other popular environmental movements, such victories were led by Dalit and Adivasi. Unfortunately, documenting Dalit–Adivasi victories continue to be the exception to the rule.

However scant, this review of literature pertinent to Dalit ecologies offers a corrective to Indian environmental scholarship and activism that have to date been bereft of an accounting of Dalit lives. In this I see the continuities between Black and Dalit ecological traditions as having the potential to contribute towards theories of global Black ecologies. The dynamic, vibrant lived experiences and environmental expressions of historically marginalized and racialized people who have negotiated and challenged eco-racism and eco-casteism suggests an urgent need for alternative forms of environmental co-existence centered on social justice for all. Dalit ecologies holds that potential.

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**NOTES**

1. The term “Dalit ecologies” has been used by Mukul Sharma in some of his foundational work bringing caste analysis to the environmental discourse. See, for example, his lecture: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9jvEs-Wy3M
2. And vice versa. Isabel Wilkerson (2020) offers a structural critique of racial hierarchy in the United States by arguing that it constitutes a caste system. Also see Goyal (2019), Keenan (2021), and Palley (2021).
3. Ambedkar noted that while religious institutions had aided Black slaves in their fight for freedom, the Hindu religion worked against the untouchables in India.
4. This contrasts with western ideologies, which place humans outside the realm of nature (Gold and Gujar 1989: 224). Also see Nelson (1998).
5. Control of the means of production often coincides with dominion over symbolic production; intellectuals from the dominant _varnas_ dictate the standards by which their theories are evaluated, leaving no space for Dalit-Bahujan input (Guru 2017b; Shepherd 2019). Bahujan literally means majority and refers to Dalits and Other Backward Classes (OBCs).

6. The uncritical adoption of terms such as “traditional,” “community,” and “indigenous” in “standard environmental narratives” may prevent people from recognizing that these concepts are administrative inventions intended to facilitate governmental strategies for dealing with the environment (Mosse 1999: 62).

7. The FRA 2006 granted forest-dwellers “rights to forest land, right to access forest produce, and the right to conserve areas that were recognized as community forest areas” (Kodiveri 2021b: 1151).

8. Sharma (2017) gives as an example Sulabh International, a social service organization working for the liberation and rehabilitation of manual scavengers.

9. After noting that urban ecologies are largely missing from Indian environmentalism, Baviskar and Gidwani discuss the degradation of Varthur Lake on the outskirts of Bengaluru and state that the new urban environment has “no place for the fisherfolks who once netted a livelihood from these waters, nor for the Dalit cultivators who tilled the fertile foreshores in the dry season to supplement their earnings” (2019: np).


11. The dominant (eco-casteist) viewpoint is represented by Gandhi’s comment: “I call scavenging one of the most honourable among the occupations to which mankind is called” (quoted in Darokar 2018: np). To which Ambedkar replied, “Under Hinduism scavenging was not a matter of choice, it was a matter of force” (Ambedkar 1979a: 292).


13. The irony of cow dung and urine being considered sacred, purifying, even health-giving, while their own bodies and labors are seen as inherently defiling is not lost on Dalits. See Reddy (2021).

14. Shepherd defines Dalit-Bahujan as “people and castes who form the exploited and suppressed majority” (2019: xii).

**REFERENCES**


