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[Intro Music]

Lalita du Perron

Welcome to the South Asian Studies at Stanford Podcast, also known as the SASSpod. I am Lalita du Perron, Associate Director in the Center for South Asia. All our podcasts and information about the Center are available at southasia.stanford.edu.

[Intro Music]

Lalita du Perron

Today, I am beyond thrilled to welcome to the SASSpod Thenmozhi Soundararajan, Executive Director of the Dalit advocacy group, Equality Labs, and current Visiting Fellow of the Center for South Asia at Stanford.

Her book, *the Trauma of Caste*, a Dalit feminist meditation on survivorship, healing, and abolition, is coming out on the fifteenth of November, 2022, and has a forward by Tarana Burke and an afterword by Dr. Cornel West.

I do want to add a content warning that this podcast will likely contain references to violence, rape, and suicide. Thenmozhi, I know how busy you are, so I really appreciate you taking the time to talk to me today. How are you?

Thenmozhi Soundararajan

Oh, I am thrilled to be here and really excited to dig into this conversation with you. I respect you so much, and the Center so much, and really want to be able to open up this conversation with deep compassion for all of our listeners today. So, very excited.

Lalita du Perron

Thank you for framing it in that way. Now, we have a lot to talk about. The book is fantastic, but before we get into talking about the book. Can you explain for our listeners who may not know what the term "Dalit" means?

Thenmozhi Soundararajan

Sure. So, for folks that are just getting into the conversation related to caste, it's one of the oldest systems of domination in the world. It has its origins in 2,000 BC. And, like other social fictions, it divides people so that there's a select view at the top that defines all of the outcomes for people in the rest of society and for those of us who are caste oppressed, we were the ones at the bottom. In fact, they call this untouchable, because we were seen to be spiritually defiling to other people. As a result, we basically said, we refuse that epithet, and we call ourselves

Dalit, those who are broken, but resilient. And so, I use the term “Dalit”. But many caste suppressed people use other terms, and it's really the choice of that person that really matters. And so I think, as people start to get comfortable with anti-caste discourse.

There are so many resources, and my new book is one of them that helps you get familiarized with the logic of caste, but also how to become part of a global movement to resist and heal from it.

Lalita du Perron

Tell me a little bit about the book as a whole for, and obviously we'll talk about it in much more detail. But, for example, the chapters are referred to as meditations, and I'm curious. What made you choose that particular approach?

Thenmozhi Soundararajan

Well, as anyone who has experience with other dominator systems like that of race or patriarchy, I think that we can sometimes really intellectualize and have a very logical conversation about these systems, which actually are very multidimensional, and the way that they wound our bodies, our minds, our spirits, and our hearts. And I think that with caste, we have incredible documentation and literature and research driven by Dalit scholars who really examined the horrific nature of caste exclusion.

And the Institute for Dalit Studies in Delhi, Professor Sukhdeo Thorat is one of those kind of leading researchers as well as phenomenal scholars like Professor Chinnaiah Jangam and Shailaja Paik and Professor Konta Iliia have really talked so much about the dimensions of how this works in political and economic and educational spheres. But one sphere which we have very little conversation about is the psychosocial dimension and that of intergenerational trauma and harm, and that's really where I felt I could really contribute effectively to the conversation about caste, because as someone who is caste oppressed in the diaspora, there's actually no reason for caste to exist here, because caste is really predicated on the relationships, within a land base, and within existing structures where you have dominant caste people who run all of the institutions in South Asia. That's not the case for North America and for the United States. And so it's very peculiar that immigrants that left that world came here, and then we created these horrific dynamics here, and that only happens in the context of unconscious replicated intergenerational trauma. And that's why I wrote it in the context of meditations. Because I really had to look at my own pain. Look at my own experiences of discrimination and bigotry, and really think about how this suffering could be ameliorated both through kind of internal practices, of mindfulness and self reflection, and also mindfulness and action in terms of our relationships interpersonally. And then, of course then being in right relationship with each other.

Creating movements that can bring real structural change and ultimately healing to our community from this terrible wound that is caste. So the meditations are really meant to provoke and create empathetic and compassionate ways for us to confront this really tender taboo for

us, and so to bring us all together into the same sphere. I felt like meditation would allow us to slow down enough to be quiet enough and thoughtful enough around this pain, so that we could examine the cast's, so wound and tend to it and heal together.

Lalita du Perron

Thank you for that beautiful explanation. So, caste is as many people talk about it. Many people know a little bit, but not a lot. Now, whatever we feel about Isabel Wilkerson's book on Caste, I loved a lot of it. Not all of it. But I do think she put Caste on the map of a broader audience.

Do you feel the comparison of caste and race, and perhaps more importantly, the comparison of prominism and or a caste privilege and white supremacy is useful, or is it productive, or or maybe a bit of both?

Thenmozhi Soundararajan

It was useful for me, as someone who was both born in the United States, because I was both racialized as a South Asian, so I have a deep, experience and understanding of what white supremacy is, and how that's dehumanized me as a person of color. And also, caste across people are essentially minorities within minorities, and I think that's actually very hard for a lot of people who aren't South Asian to understand is that we may have been flattened into being a South Asian American, but it's a category fraught with tension, because there's all these communities that actually back home have very, very traumatic histories and fault lines related to geography, language, caste, and religion. And that's why caste oppressed people have, really talked about, not only being minorities within minorities, but requiring explicit caste equity, civil rights, protections, because we are facing such significant rates of discrimination from the other South Asians, and that's not visible with people outside of our community, because their only framework of domination, they understand, is white supremacy.

So, I think that the thing I really appreciated about Isabel's book was that they globalized a conversation about race and caste in a way that I saw oppressed people looking at each other. You don't necessarily have to agree with her point of view about it, but she has a right to be able to look for the lens of black internationalism for frameworks that help to understand her experience, and there is a legal understanding of how specifically in the United States caste was used to build the legal framework for abolitionism here, at a time when our laws were so racist, and there was no framework for racial civil rights. That's why, in so many historic legal cases related to race, you see, people referring to the term caste, it's there even in Plessy versus Ferguson. So, I would not get too hung up on whether or not race and caste are the same thing, because they're not.

But are they useful analogies for oppressed people to understand their experience? Absolutely, and for me as a Dalit feminist, I never found the kind of a political home within postcolonial writers and texts because I didn't see myself in them. But I was mentored by BIPOC women of color, leaders that came out of the BIPOC feminist movements of the seventies and eighties. And they were the ones both through their writings and through their mentorship that gave me

home and gave me confidence to lean into an intersectional identity as a Dalit and caste oppressed feminist. And so the work of Gloria Anzaldua, and Ruthie Gilmore and Angela Davis and Patricia Hill Collins. That's where I found my voice. That's where I found my place.

And so, I think that it's a particularly appropriate thing for us to be able to look at texts of oppressed people when they're in conversation and relationship with each other, because we're not just theorizing from above. We're actually in a conversation about mutual liberation and that's why so much of my book really weaves the Dalit experience with other lessons from Black and Indigenous, and Asian and Latinx thinkers, because that is very much true to my own practice, like both in my work as an individual organizer, but also in the work of Equality Labs, which is the Dalit civil rights organization that I run.

We are very committed to mutual solidarity and learning from other movements, and certainly in the realm of intergenerational trauma and how to look at caste stress over generations. Some of the best thinkers of this are Indigenous and Black, somatic abolitionists and healers, and so I really leaned heavily on the idea of intergenerational harm that was sketched out by Maria Brave Heart, and Eduardo Duran, and how they spoke about the caste, the racial soul wound that is at the heart of colonization, and also how in turn, Resmaa Menakem took that idea of the soul wound and talked about it in terms of the racial soul wound, and it's just that embodiment piece. It's so critical for me, and I think that kind of mixture that happens between oppressed people is where you're rising and finding joint joy and possibility in each other's life worlds. That is the possibility of this beautiful theoretical space that's created by theorists of color in this moment.

Lalita du Perron

Thank you. That was amazing. I appreciate you so much. So, to continue on the theme of shared activism, you write in the book that Tarana Burke, the founder of the #MeToo movement, so this is your words, "Tarana Burke and I have known each other since our 20's. A constant theme of our conversation is what it would mean for Dalit and Black survivors to have power in society. What does survivor power really look like?" And that's the end of the quotation. Can you Thenmozhi, can you speak to that a little? I feel the way that quote unquote victims have reclaimed survivor status rather than being identified by victimhood, is an act of power, but to me that still feels a little different, or perhaps a little bit less active than survivor power. What does that look like for you?

Thenmozhi Soundararajan

Well, I think one of the things to keep in mind is that I use a very expansive notion of survivor within this book. I think typically, when we're using the discourse of survivor, we are certainly only talking about gender-based violence. But I actually use it in multiple domains. First and foremost, one of the things that is never really discussed, because Dalit experience is not centered in the examination of caste appropriately is that fundamentally because caste has its origins in religious scripture, and is now found in the religious practices of all South Asian communities of faith, is that we are fundamentally survivors of religious abuse, because we are

not allowed the same pathway to the Divine that other people are. In fact, we are seen as spiritual criminals, because we did bad things in another life. Therefore, we deserved to be punished and excluded in this one. And we focus a lot on what is that practically material look like, but on an existential level, it is a very deep wound, because you never feel like you are part of the fabric of the universe. You never feel like you have a right to be the way that other people do, and we talked about it in that talk, but I always thought about how ironic it was that other people go out, and they look at the stars, and they're like, "Who am I? And where do I belong?" That ability to pursue and be a seeker is stolen from us; and, in fact, we are told that we don't even have a place in front of the divine. And of course that's a lie.

It's just a lie, and no one has a right to determine anyone's position towards the mysteries of the universe, and so to claim our dignity, to the claim our divine right is like a first and important place of survivor power. But there's other realms of survivorship that I also claim. I have also been a survivor of gender-based violence, and also of police violence. And so, in thinking about those things one of the things I really learned both as a MeToo board member, and in the work that we've done in MeToo, has a whole platform called the Survivor's Agendas that many times, people think that me, too, is about attacking and bringing to justice the person that caused you harm. But what people forget is that there is not a single societal institution that doesn't have a survivor of gender-based violence in it. Survivors are lawyers, their doctors. They are bus drivers. They are cooks. They are social workers; they are in every profession, every domain, every city, every country, and every body of government.

But we do not assemble ourselves in a way where we are a political force that actually can topple tyrants, rapists, and fascists, and that's really what I was talking about with survivor power is that what I've learned in being in community with other survivor organizations and leaders within the MeToo movement is that there is this profound place where we can take our vision for accountability and transformation and healing, and go beyond the person that causes injury, and actually look at the systems that are empowering people that are creating the conditions for our injury, and that we can actually put forth visionary candidates that center safety and power for all.

And that's what survivor power is, is us being able to turn pain into power into possibility, into hope, and ultimately into wisdom. And that's a very different parameter than people are used to thinking about when they're thinking about Dalit women who have been the targets of caste-based sexual violence. Imagine if someone were to become the next Prime minister of a South Asian country, and they said very proudly, I'm a survivor, and I want to make sure this never happens again. So it's about claiming our political stake in the world. It's about claiming our ability to govern the many institutions that we're a part of, and also saying that when we are in the seat of power; it's not just a diversity mark of us just joining it. We transform everything when we're at the table. The table itself is completely, radically changed.

Lalit du Perron

Yes. Thank you. Let's talk about a larger politics a little bit more because you write about environmental racism and climate casteism, and I would like you to explain a little bit more what you mean with those terms.

Thenmozhi Soundararajan

Well, I think that this is going to be something that's really new for folks who are thinking about climate change, who aren't used to hearing from voices that are looking at climate change from the context of the global majority. But, in reality, South Asia is one of the most deeply hit regions related to climate change. And not only is there no comprehensive plan, we actually have democracies that are in crisis that are run by very, very dangerous people whose interests are very short-term in terms of their outcomes for millions, hundreds of millions of people.

And in the United States we talk a lot about the just transition, where the idea is that as we work to transition out of fossil fuels; we must also center, repair, and remedy the harm that has happened to communities that have faced environmental racism.

And this is a movement that was really fought for by Black and Indigenous and Latinx communities that live in these environmental border lines where there's just so much discrimination and that also allow for so much violence.

So, too, in South Asia. Many of the communities that are facing the brunt of climate change. Policies are caste oppressed, religious, and indigenous minorities, they're not centered at these tables or their conversations. But if we actually center those communities, these are the communities that are closest to the fields that need to transform in terms of us, moving away from fossil fuels and into more sustainable models of production, and because what we're talking about it's not like the fuels that we consume are separate from the economies that we conduct ourselves in. And so what does it mean to have an all green economy, but still have vast amounts of worker exploitation and desecration.

That's why the just transition in our context has to look at the way that casteism is part of the problem and also center just labor practices and just lands, land stewardship practices, and work to transform the very ethos of how we engage with each other. And there's many wonderful thinkers who have really led the way on this, M. Sharma's book that really cites many caste oppressed thinkers, whether it's Betyaar or Iodi Das, or Professor Konta Ilia. This idea of the kind of mindset that's required to center caste oppressed people and environmental concerns is so urgent right now, because the path that we're on is not only just widespread environmental degradation, but also the misery of hundreds of millions of people. You have countries like Bangladesh that are to lose the majority of their arable land and refugees, and create a refugee crisis that is one of the largest in the world's history.

So, we are in a moment where everything is on the precipice, and I think, particularly as we deal with the crisis of climate change, and we are dealing with the crisis of the pandemic. And now the crisis of ethno-nationalism. We have a choice as a people. One, we can lean into our fear and our darkest impulses, and give in to division, or we can choose life. And we can choose to

heal, and to slow down and think about what is another path other than genocide and climate collapse.

Lalita du Perron

But is there space for that? I mean, I love what you say, and of course I'm with you. But I feel that the issue of oil and what it does to the economy as well as the planet hasn't, really become a topic since the war in Ukraine. And now white people are actually suffering, so people in England can't afford their energy bills, and people in parts of Europe, have to keep their thermostat low because they're such a high price on energy. And so now we're talking about it. But the people that make these decisions I feel that if they could see what you talk about, we wouldn't need to talk about it, to begin with.

Thenmozhi Soundararajan

Well, I think the thing is that things are always urgent, and there's never enough time, and if we continue in a cycle of urgency, we will make ourselves extinct, and I think that capitalism and Brahmanism and white supremacy create false circles of urgency.

And I think the only reason I had the time to do this book was because my mom fell ill, and I was quarantined because of the pandemic. But normally I would be fighting one fight after the other after the other with my fellow leaders in Equality Labs, but that in and of itself is a dehumanizing cycle, because it presumes that there's scarcity when actually there's deep abundance in this planet. But it's a lack of imagination and a lack of compassion that allows people to not see the greatest gift we have, which is each other. And so I think that you're right that sometimes, especially with venture capitalists, they only see what's important to them and what's in front of them until the injury comes in there.

But I think that we have to stop treating the Earth like a lifeboat. And that's part of one of the things I think that's right. That's also happening right now is a battle of futurism. There is a futurism that is coming out of Silicon Valley that believes the only future for the species is getting the species off Earth, and we just need to think of it as a disposable stage kind of like rockets have a disposable stage that gets it out of the atmosphere, like the Earth is just a shell. We need to break apart and get out of here, and that's it. And that might work for the 5 white people and the billionaires that are connected to them, and everyone else is abandoned to the darkness. But that's not the only model of futurism that exists, and that's why I wrote about Dalit feminist futures. Because there is another future where we are interconnected, where we view the Earth and other species as a partner, to address this catastrophe of climate, and we work to heal ourselves and work to come back into balance. Yes, it is an incredibly hard thing to heal the things that we're dealing with. But if we spent as much money as we would in trying to go to Mars as we do, even a tenth of that budget into climate, restoration into transformative justice practices in terms of education and investing in our capacity as humans, it would actually be a radical, different choice. But we're just being winnowed into one vision of the future by really reckless people who have not done enough work on examining their own humanity.

Lalita du Perron

But I think you're...sorry go ahead.

Thenmozhi Soundararajan

And I just. I just think it's an invitation for everyone to sit down and say we have a right to change the future, and the agency is in our hands right now. We don't have to give everything away, because in order for them to build rockets and to build concentration camps and to work these mining companies, they need actual labor. They're not actually doing the dirty work, we are. So if we refuse to contribute to our own extinction. What could we use our labor for instead?

Lalita du Perron

Yeah, I I love the, I guess, optimism, but also the realization like there's an alternative but to work towards that kind of futurity rather than signing up for what we're being, as you say, winnowed into. You mentioned Silicon Valley, and of course that is where we spend our time living here, in in the Bay area. So, I'm very aware of Stanford's relationship to Silicon Valley, and so I found the section in your book on caste in it particularly disturbing. Can you explain a little bit for our listeners how caste operates in Silicon Valley, and therefore, and I hadn't really thought about this, therefore, in search engines in algorithms and all sorts of insidious ways that most of us are utterly unaware of?

Thenmozhi Soundararajan

Well, I think one of the things that people need to understand is that caste is as significant a system of exclusion as race. It impacts over 1.9 billion people and a significant portion of the global workforce that builds tech for the world comes from this region that has this deep system of bias.

Now, South Asians would be unique to all of human history if they were to grow up under the system of bias, and not have some level of it incorporated into their implicit and explicit biases. It doesn't mean that every South Asian is casteist but it is something that shapes our worldview and how we interact with other communities. And my book is one of the first books that kind of sketches out caste in the United States diaspora, and also how it works in workforces, particularly like that of tech. And so the things that we've seen in our research is that surprise, surprise, there are casteist alumni networks that create casteist hiring practices. There's the regularity of the open usage of caste bias in the workplace. People are facing discriminatory managerial reviews, harassment, and bullying, even like sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence. So you don't need to know and be an expert on caste to know these are unlawful illegal practices related to American civil rights obligations and human rights law. So it shouldn't be happening, you know, and it doesn't you don't even need massive data sets although we do have data about this at Equality Labs, where 2 out of 3 Dalits have experienced and have reported experiencing workplace discrimination. But you don't need data sets in terms of being in violation of your civil rights obligation. You just need one case, and there's plenty of

those cases that are coming out right now. You know whether it's the BAPS case in New Jersey, where hundreds of workers were trafficked and worked for a dollar an hour, as alleged by those workers and conditions that were extremely casteist, to Laki Bali Reddy in Santa Clara, who trafficked hundreds of workers, including young Dalit women, to be his sex slaves to the State of California suing the Cisco Corporation for casteism. So, there is a tremendous moment where delicate people are speaking out about discrimination in the industry, and I think what's really interesting is that caste isn't just about healthy workforces. Again, caste is a workers right because of the high rates of caste discrimination we are seeing in the workforce, but biased companies create biased products. And so, it really becomes an even larger question about how some of these casteist employees might be contributing to other discriminatory functions or tools, whether it's discriminatory AI or surveillance, tech, and policing and carceralized tech towards other immigrants and BIPOC communities. It is important to realize that these companies don't exist in a bubble. They're actually part and parcel of the system's exclusion that we're working to take on. And so it's really an important thing for us to be thoughtful about it, and to work with workers to transform their institutions, because fundamentally, most workers don't want to work in biased and discriminatory places.

And that's the remarkable thing that I've seen is that I've seen many workers from across all of the corporations that you have in Silicon Valley. People coming out and saying, "Not on my watch. I don't want to see caste bigotry. Add caste as a protected category. Let's get Dalit History Month celebrated. Let us move away from this pathway of discrimination and to a place of healing and reconciliation." And I've been really, you know, hardened by that, because again I grew up in the United States. So I've seen the trajectory to where, from where I was, one of the few openly out Dalits to now seeing thousands of Dalits all around the world who are advocating for civil rights through their organizations or different movements. And so we are in such a global moment of recognition of this problem, and I think most importantly that we want to not just, you know, talk about the problem. We want to heal, and we want to make sure that the rule of law is implemented wherever we might be, so we don't experience this level of discrimination and dehumanization ever again.

Lalita du Perron

You speak of caste as a protected category, and you also refer to yourself as openly out. So, I just want to ask you about that, because, unlike race, there are, as far as I understand it, as a white person there's no optic markers of caste, and so people have to out themselves or identify themselves as being caste oppressed, and they may not feel safe to do so because there are no clearly defined legal protections around caste in the United States. Am I setting the scene correctly there? Correct me if not.

Thenmozhi Soundararajan

No, that's definitely correct. I mean caste is unusual, especially for American HR managers to understand, because basically on the outside it looks like brown people discriminating against other brown people. And that's why I always use the term like Dalitsthat are essentially minorities within minorities who have protected classification both under UN covenants around,

like the convention against discrimination and Article 29, where caste isn't explicitly laid out there, but also in the understanding is that caste is part of existing embedded categories of race and ancestry and country of origin, and the thing that's important with that is that the reason why Dalits are asking for to be explicit is not only because of how pernicious the violence is, but also because when it's not listed, there is not caste competency at the HR and managerial level. Yes, complaints that are occurring about this often go unrecognized or huge violations are being continued because the managers themselves are conducting this level of violence. So it's just important, and there's other protected categories like that of sexual orientation and gender identification that have gone through similar explicit journeys, because, again, the existing categories were not sufficient enough to address what was going on. And I think, in going back to your question, the one thing that is very unusual, I think, for people to understand about Dalits is that many of us are in the closet, and it's very akin to the special category of sexual orientation is that because of the heavy repercussions people face. When it comes to being out, it doesn't just impact you in your job. It will impact you in all of your other future jobs, because of how tightly linked networks are for a particular profession. Oftentimes people choose to stay in the closet because of their fear and in our work, in the survey that we conducted around caste discrimination in the US, one in four Dalits had experienced physical or verbal assault, one in three educational discrimination, and two out of three workplace discrimination. So we have some of the highest rates of discrimination of the Asian American community as a whole, and I think that's why it's not a surprise that over half of the people that took our survey that were Dalit said they prefer to be in the closet because of their fears of being outed as a result. So, I think my job, as well as many other Dalit American activists, has been to make the conditions safer in society, so that people have a choice to come out if they want to.

Right now, that choice is being taken away from us, because there's unlawful discrimination occurring in American institutions broadly across the country. And so we need to change that. And I think some of that happens with a change in laws, with litigation that is addressing the kinds of harms that we're seeing. And also, I think, an embodiment of caste equity, where people finally acknowledge how how horrible the system is, and that as a soul wound, it has impacts on both the caste oppressed and the caste privileged, and it's time for us to let go of it, you know, and the only way that a wound goes away is, you have to expose it and let it heal. And right now there's so much gas lighting, so much just open denial about how bad this is that we're really at the stages of the caste equity civil rights movement to where the racial civil rights movement was like in the sixties and seventies.

So it's a moment where we really have as a South Asian community, a deep reckoning to really consider, and we can choose to be on the side of the conversation. That is the bigoted side or we can be part of the solution in healing.

Lalita du Perron

You talk a lot about healing in the book, and so, yes, it's about trauma, of course it's also about healing, and I want to ask you a little bit about your personal journey. But before we go there, and we will wrap up with that, I've heard you speak, and in the book also you talk so viscerally about the wound that also exists in the body of the privileged.

Can you describe that a little bit for our listeners? Because to me, as a person with multiple privileges, I suppose I'd never really thought about that, and when I heard you describe that it hit very hard, and I think it's important that we hear that.

Thenmozhi Soundararajan

Well, I think one of the reasons why I am really trying to embrace Buddhism and the thinking around embodiment and mindfulness was, I have over 20 years of working on this issue of caste equity. And I have seen people who are dominant caste absolutely become utterly unhinged at the prospect of caste being added as a protected category. And I always remember this one woman who gave testimony at the Santa Clara Human Rights Commission, where she just started yelling at the commissioners and saying, "Are you ready for Santa Clara to be ground zero in Hindu genocide? Do you want the blood of Hindus on your hands? Do you want us to wear our caste like the star of David? That's what's going to happen if you conduct yourself like this." And again, we have to be reminded, what was the policy discussion? It was about adding caste to the list of protected categories for the County. And adding that doesn't impinge on any other categories. But for her the prospect of Dalits getting equity went directly to that survival place, even though that's not an actual truth. And I really thought about seeing these people over and over and over again. You see them trapped in their own trauma worlds. These are hells of their own creation but have no rooting in facts or even law, but just their own stories that have been told to them about what happens when everyone is equal, and that's a place that cannot be addressed with seminars and workshops and books. That's a place where only they can de-escalate themselves with self-awareness and mindfulness. And that's what really brought me to the conversation of the caste soul wound and thinking about embodiment as a pathway for a really crucial terrain for caste abolition. Because in my own experience, while we're seeing, the pace of civil rights being dictated by the fragility of caste privileged people, at the same time caste oppressed people never get the space for embodiment around the tremendousness of what we experience related to caste. Outside of the daily headlines and dehumanization where we see our fellow brothers and sisters raped and murdered and lynched and mass atrocity and on top of the structural exclusion where we face some of the highest rates of illiteracy and poverty and poor health outcomes. We're not allowed to talk about it, nor are we allowed to even hold the pain. We're expected to just show up to our works and jobs, and not even present, as if we're grieving from the tremendous caste stress that we endure from our day to day.

And certainly as someone who has been a very public advocate around caste equity, there's another layer to this indignity, which is that if you speak openly and try to break the silence of it, you are subjected to tremendous violence, tremendous dehumanization and attack, and that certainly happened to me where I've been the recipient of disinformation, libelous slander, defamation, and people wanting to target my parents and myself and I think that, obviously, we're all very strong in terms of us standing as a movement and resisting that. But late at night, when you're by yourself, it's a place of deep grief, and I think I, like many other Dalit leaders, struggle with depression, struggle with that internalized dehumanization, and even had suicidal ideation. And to say that is not an admission of weakness. It's actually an acknowledgment of the actual harm that is occurring because of caste stress. And as a Dalit leader, I felt it was so

important to name the psychosocial, because when we're not, we're actually losing so many people to the epidemic of suicide in our community. I mean, it's so large that our people came up with a term "institutional murder" to try to put the blame of it, not on ourselves, but on this defiling, disgusting system that would take our very lives away.

And I think that's why it was important for me to embody Dalit people in my text, and to say, "We have a right first before anything else," to say, "Caste exists. It has caused this deep pain and deprivation, and we demand the right to heal." Those 3 things, if they are fully allowed to be exhibited in society, transform the very nature of casteist societies, because casteist societies, if they allow Dalits to be embodied, they all of a sudden cannot allow the tremendous amount of theft that is occurring in the name of religion and cultural practices.

Lalita du Perron

When you are alone, and feel the the pain of the work that you do, and the just awful repercussions, and I've witnessed those on social media and your security concerns when you're out in public, and that's just a glimpse of it that I have seen, and so I can't even begin to imagine what that is like for you. How do you cope? How do you take care of yourself?

Thenmozhi Soundararajan

Well, I think one of the things that I really write a lot about is how there is hope in human connection and empathetic witness that just as caste and white supremacy and patriarchy dehumanizes us, we actually get tremendous healing in rehumanizing each other through love and through joy and care for each other, and that's a big part of why I really focused on healing myself as part of my own journey as a leader, and that involved both meditation practice and working with people who really had been thinking about this in the context of race and using some of those tools to basically...when you can't remove yourself from violence, you can attenuate it, signal. So practicing that on my own self, and learning to be calm in the face of constant degradation, and practicing non-attachment, so separating myself from those messages, and then, being very confident and strong about my purpose, my divinity, my right to be in relationship and in right relationship with other humans and other species and the Earth.

But additionally, I also think it was really important to create a space where other South Asians who wanted to be caste abolitionists could find a political home. And so the work that we do in Equality Labs has been incredibly healing, because I've seen a political space for Dalit feminists of all genders who are able to finally say openly that they believe in an intersectional vision for our freedom, and to be supported by caste allies who are doing the work to unlearn their caste supremacy and not making it the work of the oppressed. So when we've done this work with the Unlearning Caste Supremacy workshop, it's tremendous to see the many leaders who come out of this process start to transform their institutions around the world. And so, even in this dark time, I'm deeply hopeful about what can come next. And I'm deeply hopeful about our potential to heal because we are in this very powerful choice point as a species. We can choose extinction, or we can choose life. And I want to encourage everyone who's listening to choose life because we still have a pathway forward. All the choices haven't been taken from us.

But it is in the interest of the people in power to make us think that they are. And that's why I want to empower people to say, "No." This is a moment where we still have so much future ahead of us. Let us choose life together. Let us choose healing.

Lalita du Perron

Thenmozhi Soundararajan, thank you just so much. I don't have words, because I know how busy your days are and how we had to schedule this talk. But I'm just so grateful to you for spending time with me on the SASSpod and with all our listeners out there. Thank you.

Thenmozhi Soundararajan

Oh, thank you, and I really appreciate the space that I've had at the Center to be able to write this book because again, it was such a difficult journey. But I really encourage everyone who's listening to pick up the book. You can buy it anywhere from your best and favorite bookseller. It's called the Trauma of Caste, and it drops November 15th. But, we'd love you to pre-order it, because all of that support really sends a message of love to caste oppressed people at a time when we're under attack as a movement. But I know that there are more people here who believe in the freedom of all peoples than who believe in the bigotry of a few. So, thank you for standing with us and buy the book, and looking forward to be in more community and conversation and empathetic witness with you all. So, thank you and Jai Bhim and Jai Savitri.

Lalita du Perron

Jai Bhim. Jai Savitri. We will, of course, link to the book in the show notes of the podcast. And also we're going to have some more events with Thenmozhi in the new calendar year around International Women's Day and Dalit History month in April. So, if you want to stay up to date, you can sign up for our mailing list at southasia.stanford.edu.

Of course, please follow the podcast, if you enjoy these conversations. You can rate and review us, because, as you know, we don't love the algorithm but we do have to work with it, at least for now. And I also want to thank Soham Shiva for creating the intro and outro to the podcast and Simrath Matharu for post-production.

[Outro Music]

Lalita du Perron

Thank you for listening to the SASSpod, the South Asian Studies at Stanford Podcast. Find out all about the Stanford Center for South Asia at southasia.stanford.edu, and find us on social media. We are on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Thank you for joining us, and I hope you can tune in again soon!

[Outro Music]