

# Caste and Technology: Interpretations and Explorations in CSCW and Beyond

DIVYANSHU KUMAR SINGH, University of Colorado Boulder, USA

PALASHI VAGHELA, Simon Fraser University, Canada

DIPTO DAS, University of Toronto, Canada

SRRAVYA CHANDHIRAMOWULI, University of Edinburgh, Scotland

MEENAKSHI YADAV, University of Texas at Austin, USA

RIDA QADRI, Google Research, USA

ASHWIN RAJADESINGAN, University of Texas at Austin, USA

KOUSTUV SAHA, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, USA

BRYAN SEMAAN, University of Colorado Boulder, USA

HCI/CSCW scholarship has actively investigated harms that are perpetuated when historical, political, and social realities are sidelined within techno-scientific development and research. One such emerging site of investigation is caste, where scholars have shown how narratives of castelessness are portrayed through lack of engagement with realities of caste in the world of computing. There is emerging work examining the relationship between caste and technology, such as social media and generative AI, but there is little effort to conceptualize caste within HCI/CSCW. While scholars have informally described this site of investigation as ‘Caste Computing’, yet there exists no manifesto as to what it means or what its goals/values are? Therefore, in order to understand and define Caste Computing as a field within HCI/CSCW research, we plan to gather diverse scholars, practitioners, and activists to initiate conversation around four themes: a) what is caste?, b) what is/is not caste computing?, c) what does caste as lens/framework/analytical category look like to investigate various technologies?, and d) what is the future agenda of caste computing? This workshop provides a platform to complicate and critique the relationship between caste and techno-scientific assemblages to build anti-caste futures.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **Collaborative and social computing**; **Human computer interaction (HCI)**; • **Social and professional topics** → *Cultural characteristics*; *Religious orientation*; *Gender*.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Caste, Caste Computing, Global South, Critical Caste Studies, South Asia, HCI, CSCW, STS, Identity, Culture, Critical Caste Theory, Anti-Caste

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Authors' Contact Information: Divyanshu Kumar Singh, University of Colorado Boulder, Boulder, Colorado, USA, [divyanshu.singh@colorado.edu](mailto:divyanshu.singh@colorado.edu); Palashi Vaghela, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada, [palashi\\_vaghela@sfu.ca](mailto:palashi_vaghela@sfu.ca); Dipto Das, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, [dipto.das@utoronto.ca](mailto:dipto.das@utoronto.ca); Srravya Chandhiramowuli, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, , Scotland, [srravya.c@ed.ac.uk](mailto:srravya.c@ed.ac.uk); Meenakshi Yadav, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas, USA, [meenakshi.yadav@utexas.edu](mailto:meenakshi.yadav@utexas.edu); Rida Qadri, Google Research, USA, [ridaqadri@google.com](mailto:ridaqadri@google.com); Ashwin Rajadesingan, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas, USA, [arajades@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:arajades@austin.utexas.edu); Koustuv Saha, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, USA, ; Bryan Semaan, University of Colorado Boulder, Boulder, Colorado, USA, [bryan.semaan@colorado.edu](mailto:bryan.semaan@colorado.edu).



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## 1 MOTIVATION

Humanity, and thus how people experience everyday life, is shaped by various socio-political realities, such as power & knowledge [16, 43], culture [19], and identity [8, 21], amongst others. These realities, in turn, also shape the design and development of technology and science [34], and are reflected within everyday interactions with socio-technical systems [9, 12, 36, 45]. Emerging work within HCI/CSCW has examined these relationships across various domains, for example, gender [29], language [30, 36], race [31], colonialism [1, 12], data practices [9], amongst others. Broadly, this line of research interrogates the politics of technology design and development – asking who designs? [22, 36] and who benefits? [41]. Such work challenges the basic assumptions and norms embedded within socio-technical systems, which have often been shown to reproduce harms towards the members of historically marginalized communities [12, 22, 24, 31, 32, 45].

While these conversations have expanded significantly examining various axes of marginality such as gender [7, 29], race [11, 31, 39], and disability [20, 32, 42], caste-marginalized communities and experiences are only beginning to receive attention within HCI/CSCW [25, 30, 35, 37, 38, 44, 45]. Caste is a system of graded hierarchies between labor and laborers emerging from hindu religious scriptures, such as the Brahmanical varnas [3, 28]. The brahmanical varna system governed the access and worth of humans by, first, positioning them in a rigid hierarchical identity (e.g. Brahmin, Shudra, etc), and second, by prohibiting any social intermingling amongst castes (e.g. dining and marriage). There were communities left out of this graded hierarchical system, including Dalits and Adivasi – also known as out-caste/lower-caste/untouchables. Lower-caste communities continue to face Brahmanical violence and marginalization in every sphere of life, such as education [10]. While caste as an identity is determined through the family one is born into, caste is a relational phenomenon that structures bodies and spaces through brahmanical norms and rituals (e.g. purity/pollution [18]). For example, the preference for eating meat in a North Indian context may signal a person’s lower-caste status, while the same association does not necessarily hold in East Indian contexts. Hence, in the contemporary world, caste operates through a relational ordering governed by Brahmanical norms and imaginaries that shape individuals’ subjective realities [37, 45]. In this vein, caste is a socio-technical system – a technology – leveraging brahminical techniques to structure and mediate knowledge and power.

Caste is not merely a South Asian phenomenon; rather it is a transnational phenomenon [45, 48]. Caste logics and values exist and manifest in varied ways across space, time, and politics, that shape people’s everyday experiences globally. The caste system intersects with other systems of power and oppression (e.g. colonialism) and structures experiences across geographic boundaries and cultures. Yet, caste has not received adequate attention as a scholarly topic, especially through structured discourse and research in communities like CSCW. There is a small but growing body of literature exploring how caste is embedded in and represented within technological systems (e.g. social media [25] and AI models [17, 30, 37]), as well as how caste itself is being shaped by technology (e.g., platform and labor [47]). Vaghela and colleagues [45] rightly argued that much of current understanding and praxis within HCI is shaped through the myth that humans are “casteless”. This assumption of “casteless” humans is deeply problematic on two fronts. First, it enables uncritical adoption of brahmanical agency, technologies, methods, and design as a one-size-fits all norm. Second, it renders caste as an invisible site of analysis – a thing of the past – thereby absolving HCI/CSCW research and researchers of accountability for complicitly reproducing and participating in brahmanisation of science and technology [5]. Taken together, we believe a critical opportunity exists to bring together scholars to help better define and animate this emergent discourse space.

Though, one must ask: what is the relevance of workshop on caste in computing? While the one response is to situate it within broader liberation movement within HCI, such as crippling HCI [20, 32] and decolonizing HCI [1, 13]. We argue that it is the complexity of the caste system rather than novelty alone that warrants sustained attention in HCI/CSCW. Below, we outline emerging themes that motivate our workshop and serve as provocations for participants:

- **What do we talk about when we talk about caste?** Caste is a relational phenomenon that has been understood through unique dimensions such as identity [17] (e.g. upper-caste/lower-caste), practices [3, 18] (e.g. untouchability, purity), or anti-caste subjectivity [4] (e.g. politics of being Dalit). What does each of these understandings offer or limit? How can we inform our own praxis to grapple with this, and thereby communicate it across to our diverse audience? How do we problematize caste as a category altogether?
- **What does caste computing mean for HCI/CSCW?** Caste is not a unique phenomenon for HCI/CSCW as such, scholars across different fields are grappling or have grappled with caste for years [5, 18, 33, 48]. In terms of HCI/CSCW, a critical interrogation of marginality and technology has emerged through discourse of identity (e.g., Queer HCI [23, 40], Intersectional HCI [15], Disability Justice in HCI [42], Decolonial Computing [1, 13]). But does identity adequately capture caste as a relational socio-technical phenomenon [37, 46]? Echoing Vaghela and Solanki's [46] framing of caste as 'technoscience' – we ask what does caste computing mean? How might we examine the relationship between caste and technology? What are the benefits and limitations of naming it "Caste Computing"? Why name it as such, and what are the limits or alternatives (e.g., Anti-Caste Computing)?
- **How can we think of caste as an analytical category, framework(s), or conceptual lens?** Caste as an analytical category helps us dismantle the perception of "casteless" South Asian [38], but caste is also a practice that is not bounded through geographical markers [45, 48]. Hence, the question remains what does caste as an analytical category offer for HCI/CSCW? Particularly, how or in what ways it could inform various existing frameworks, such as decolonial computing [1] or social-justice oriented HCI [14]? What are the similarities or differences? Can we design an anti-caste lens to inform HCI's praxis or methods? While HCI/CSCW has engaged with social justice and design, anti-caste thinkers have advocated to shift focus beyond justice towards social transformation thinking [26]. In this context, caste not just offers an analytics towards inclusion, but also towards transformative practices.
- **Who does caste computing and how?** Engaging with unique dimensions of marginality and technology, such as caste, often leads towards the practice of liberation, reclamation and justice. But, who is being reclaimed? What is being reclaimed? And how? Are we reclaiming or emancipating the 'untouchable'( lower-caste)? If yes, why? Gopal Guru [18] argued that upper-caste/savarnas are also untouchable (an "ideal" untouchable), since they avoid any intermingling with the lower-caste (a "despicable" untouchable). So why shouldn't we also focus on "ideal" untouchable or the "touchable" hindu (upper or savarna caste) [2]? Thus, who does caste computing – and how – is a critical question that interrogates assumptions within research practice. We should bring attention towards the practices and cultures of caste privileged individuals [25, 44] – also called "studying up" [27, 44]. Therefore, we must actively attend to the politics of caste [37] and anti-caste subjectivity [4], for example, how do we build community values on engaging with caste where savarna allies have space to engage, learn, and study-within without reclaiming anti-caste subjectivities [4]?

## 2 WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES

- To build a network of diverse scholars by creating a safe space to share and collect stories about subjective and epistemic realities of caste and “caste-less-ness” within computing and beyond.
- To collectively define and scope “caste computing” (including anti-caste computing? Or DeCaste computing? etc), and clearly articulate the goals and values for this emerging research area.
- To critically examine epistemological and theoretical foundations that shape how caste is understood and studied within HCI/CSCW, and identify more situated approaches.
- To build solidarities with related critical traditions within HCI/CSCW, such as coloniality, indigeneity, race, transnational feminism, labor studies, disability, and more.
- To envision a future direction and manifesto for a Critical Theory of Caste, describing key questions, methods, and implications for the field and emerging technologies such as AI.
- To collaboratively develop a manifesto or article outlining key challenges, characteristics, opportunities, and future directions for Caste Computing research in HCI/CSCW.

## 3 ORGANIZERS

The organizers of this workshop come from diverse research backgrounds. Our organizers actively studies caste through the questions of labor, migration, decoloniality, social media, artificial intelligence, and resilience.

**Rida Qadri** is a Senior Research Scientist at Google Research. Her research centers on imagining novel AI interaction paradigms for cultural experiences—from storytelling and cultural heritage to media generation—empowering users with agency, control, and steerability.

**Palashvi Vaghela** is Assistant Professor and Canada Research Chair for Technological Inclusion in the School of Interactive Arts and Technology at Simon Fraser University. She focuses on studying socio-technical and cultural practices of communities and institutions/organizations with a focus on relationships of power and inequity in computing.

**Srravya Chandhramowuli** is a Post Doctoral Research Fellow in the Planetary AI project at University of Edinburgh. She examines the role accorded to human judgement and labour in data work and AI value chains. Her current research traces the labours involved in training and evaluating AI systems, paying particular attention to systemic challenges and frictions, to envision and inform equitable futures in computing.

**Koustuv Saha** is an Assistant Professor of Computer Science at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. His research examines how online and AI technologies shape and reveal human behaviors and wellbeing, and raises critical questions about the assumptions underlying AI- and data-driven inferences and consequences

**Meenakshi Yadav** is a PhD Candidate in Communication Studies at University of Texas Austin. Her research examines the communicative, affective, and organizational dimensions of social movements (e.g. Caste) in transnational context. She particularly focuses on caste as a self-organizing, occupation-based, and global system of dehumanization that travels and adapts across contexts of domination.

**Divyanshu Kumar Singh** His research examines how socio-technical systems operate through processes of identification, shaping techno-scientific decision-making and practices. He studies caste as a system that shapes how these processes work in digital technologies.

**Dipto Das** is a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Computer Science at the University of Toronto. His mixed-methods, interdisciplinary, community-engaged research approach examines how AI systems and digital platforms shape social relations, discourse, and inequality across various domains and diverse sociopolitical and cultural contexts.

**Ashwin Rajadesingan** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at University of Texas Austin. His work focuses on how online spaces can foster spirited, engaging political discussions and contribute to building a vibrant deliberative democracy.

**Bryan Semaan** is an Associate Professor at the University of Colorado Boulder. His research examines the role of ICT in enabling resilience amongst people immersed in challenging contexts (e.g., people's experiences with racism). His work draws on critical perspectives (e.g. decolonial and critical race) to understand, critique, and create ethical, moral, just, and equitable sociotechnical systems

## 4 WORKSHOP ORGANIZATION AND ACTIVITIES

### 4.1 Website

We have created a simple and accessible website (<https://castetech-cscw26.github.io>) to present our call for submission, workshop themes/provocations, organizers backgrounds, instruction of making material accessible, submission links. We will eventually publish a list and abstract of accepted submission (with permission) on the website.

### 4.2 Pre-Workshop Plan

We aim to bring scholars, activists, thinkers from diverse socio-cultural contexts and experiences who either are actively working or interested in the question caste and technology. To achieve this, we will recruit participants through social media (e.g. LinkedIn, Facebook), international and local tech activism list-servs, social communities like HCI Across Borders, and our personal and professional networks. Furthermore, we would also invite scholars from diverse scholarly units apart from Information Science/HCI such as Ethnic Studies, Geography, Philosophy, and more.

Potential participants will be requested to submit either 1-2 page interest statement, 2-6 page position paper, 300 word abstract, blog post, pictorial, or a short-video that describes their interest, curiosity, and future work related to caste and computing/techno-science. We will provide accessibility guidelines on our website to make submission accessible. Each submission will be reviewed to assess the relevance and contribution to the larger themes/provocations of the workshop. We plan to accept 20-30 participants for our workshop. We will closely work with accessibility chairs to tailor our workshop to ensure we offer an inclusive space for everyone. Prior to the workshop, we will invite accepted participants to a slack channel or a discord server to communicate announcements, coordinate activities, and enable an asynchronous discussions.

### 4.3 Workshop Structure

The full-day workshop will consist of panel, group, and collective activities, including discussions, feedback rounds, and a speculative design session. We will begin with an overview of the workshop's motivation and agenda, followed by an introductions session for participants to share their research and expectations. We will then host a panel on how caste and technology are understood through different onto-epistemological standpoints, followed by small group discussions. After a lunch break, participants will share their work through posters, mini-presentations, or breakout sessions organized around HCI/CSCW themes (e.g., design, method, or theory). Finally, we will conduct a speculative

<b>Workshop Structure</b>	
<b>Time (MDT)</b>	<b>Activity and Description</b>
9:00 - 10:10 am	Welcome and Introductions
10:10 - 10:30 am	Coffee Break
10:30 - 11:30 am	Panel: Caste and Computing - History, Struggles, and Influences Dr. Palashi Vaghela (SFU) Dr. Rida Qadri (Google Research) Dr. Meenakshi Yadav (UT Austin) Dr. Dipto Das (Univ. of Toronto) Dr. Koustuv Saha (UIUC)
11:30 am - 12:00 pm	Activity #1 : Post-Panel Discussion
12:00 - 1:30 pm	Lunch Break
1:30 - 3:00 pm	Lightning talks/Posters/Discussion on Participant Contributions
3:00 - 3:15 pm	Coffee Break
3:15 pm - 4:10 pm	Activity #2 : Speculating the Future of Caste Computing
4:10 - 4:30 pm	Closing remarks and discussion

Table 1. **Workshop structure with timeline and activities.**

design activity to develop a manifesto and future directions for Caste Computing, followed by closing remarks and discussion of future collaborations.

#### 4.4 Post-Workshop Plan

We plan to publish and communicate our contributions to a diverse audience. First, we will document our materials and learnings using notes or other creative materials (e.g. zines) that will be shared with participants, and then further hosted on our website. This will serve as a great resource for the broader HCI community to engage with caste. Second, we will work with our participants to help them publish their contributions through venues such as ACM XRDS, ACM Interactions, Logic(s), TechOtherwise, and more. Lastly, in line with one of our objectives we plan to publish a collaborative article/manifesto charting the field of Caste Computing for HCI/CSCW.

## 5 CALL FOR PARTICIPATION

Caste is emerging as a critical site of investigation within HCI and CSCW that is challenging the underexplored perspectives of “casteless-ness” within technological development and design. In addition these explorations are also challenging the idea of inclusion and technology mediated harms, and thereby, informing novel and complimentary understanding of social justice oriented design. Scholars, informally have dubbed these investigations of critical caste and technology studies through an umbrella term – Caste Computing. However, there is little known about what caste computing means? Or what are the goals and values of caste computing? How can Caste Computing inform existing studies and theoretical lens/traditions HCI or CSCW (e.g. Feminist HCI [6])? And, lastly, what theoretical or conceptual lenses would look like that examine castes and its relation with other marginalities? Therefore, we invite submission to approach the following questions:

- (1) How does caste manifests through unique techno-scientific artifacts across the world, such as organizations, social media, artificial intelligence, religion, work practices, labor, migration, and more?

- (2) How does caste intersect or differ with overlapping systems of oppression (e.g. racism, sexism, colonialism, ableism, anti-fatness, etc)? And how does it inform the technologies we design?
- (3) What would a critical theory of caste look like (if possible?) and how can it inform, expand, or complicate HCI/CSCW research?
- (4) How can we think about caste beyond the markers of identities and geographies (e.g. South Asia(n))?

We are interested in and welcome a variety of submissions that engage with guiding questions (above) and workshop motivation. Through this workshop we will provide our participants a forum to exchange discussion, ideas, and critiques of techno-scientific assemblage to build anti-caste futures. Submissions could be informed through design, reflections, research, and even auto-ethnographic or personal experiences related to caste and technology. Participants can submit their contribution in following formats: 1-2 page interest statement, 3-6 page position papers, blog post, pictorial, abstracts, short video. Accepted submission will be featured on the workshop's website as per SIGCHI requirement and guidelines.

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