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Suraj Milind Yengde: Risking everything I had is the reason why I am here today

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Suraj Milind Yengde is a Harvard University scholar, Dalit rights activist, and the author of 'Caste Matters.' He was named as one of the '25 Most Influential Young Indian' by GQ magazine and the 'Most Influential Young Dalit' by Zee. **Anushka Nepal** from ApEx caught up with Yengde during his recent Nepal visit. **This is your second visit to Nepal, and you're here for work. Could you tell us a little about what you've been working on?** We are actually in the process of starting a 'Bahujan Library.' It's an online digital library, which will be a resource guide for anybody who is interested to study or do research on caste. For instance, let's say someone has written a piece about caste. Now for curative purposes if you don't have institutional support that will just not be available. So you want to make sure some of these works that are known and unknown remain accessible. That's one aim.

Our second aim is to invite authors that write or want to write about caste. We want to create a space where everything they write will be archived. And we want to archive these writings even if they are from different languages. So, if you think about it, it's also a translation that we're working on. So this is a long term project. Of course, we have been facing some copyright issues but we are trying to make sure that everything gets documented. And there is no particular country we are focusing on. The writings can be from any part of the world.


From your perspective as an activist, what impression do you have of Nepal and its communities in terms of caste and ethnicity? Actually, I still need to visit the Terai region of Nepal where the maximum concentration of Dalit community is. Right now, all I have seen in Kathmandu and its nearby areas. So I think I'm not in the position to make a proper assessment since there are still a lot of places I haven't been to. But from what I have seen so far, it has made a remarkable impression on me. It has really humbled me because I was not aware of the great history of an anti-caste resistance that dates back to the 19th century. During my visit in 2019, I had come to see what was happening in Nepal. The kind of affection, respect and love that Nepali Dalits gave me was truly heart touching. I kept that in my heart for so long and I couldn't resist the urge to visit Nepal when I was in India. In fact, I make sure to at least make a brief stop over to Nepal whenever I am back in India. In my second trip, I can now see that there is a certain kind of resistance within the Dalit community to not be tokenized. They are not compromising with just some charity and donations by some organizations. They are proud people and they don't want to compromise on anything. Yet at the same time, they are beautiful at heart. That's what's interesting about the Nepali Dalit community. **You have achieved a lot in life. You are a Harvard scholar and also a Dalit rights activist. What pushed you to achieve that?** As a Dalit, if you're aware of your caste, then you have a certain form of resistance. It doesn't matter where you

grow up. You want to resist in your own way. You don't have to march down the street and fight. Resistance can happen in your own personal and private ways. I had the same resistance. And you also grow up with a lot of responsibilities. Some of us at least. We take on the responsibilities of carrying the struggle of our ancestors. We have a goal that is beyond us, which is thinking about the community, people, and we are not tribal in nature. You as a child are brought up with the pure innocence of treating everyone equally, but for the people from the dominant caste, their parents don't teach them equality. They teach them about inequality since their childhood. They mentor them on what caste is and what so and so caste means. So as a Dalit, you are undergoing the repeated trauma of being subjugated to unwarranted sightings, dissings, people mocking you, and you don't know why. And at last, you come to a realization that it's your caste. For me, it was the realization of how I can use my place and position and whatever limited power I had to make a change. That's how the movement towards making a difference came to me. And education became a key vehicle. With education, there was awareness. With awareness, there was a purpose. And when education, awareness and purpose are met with energy, you can make great changes. That's how it began. **A lot of people, especially from the minor communities, look up to you and to reach where you are. What's your advice to them?** You never set out to be something great. You're not the child of King Mahendra who will be the next in the line of becoming the king. You are a normal person. So your stories are also normal. They're ordinary. But in that ordinary story, you are an extraordinary person. I never sought out to become what I have become now. There was nothing when it came to institutional support that would give me an extra opportunity. But if you're a person from a marginalized community, you have to be the pioneer. You have to go into the dark caves to find the meaning and purpose. There's nobody who's going to light the path for you. If there is somebody, that's good. You should appreciate them. But the struggle is such that when you do something, people might laugh at you, mock you, they might call you a mad person. How can you think of going to Harvard University when you have been living and selling newspapers on the street, and staying in one room next to a gutter lane? These were the things that I grew up with. But I decided to go into that dark chamber. Because I didn't know what was there. So, for the youngsters, from my stories at least, and the things I did, I was never prepared to do it. But I did it. I know this might not be the success I intended to have, but I was willing to risk it all. I was willing to risk my ego and the disrespect people would give me. For instance, the first time I gave a public speech was when I was in university. My professor had given a hint that I wasn't up for the task, and told me I should stick with something I'm good at. And yet, what I did was, just for the sake of doing it, I asked my university to nominate me in a national debate competition. I don't know how that worked out, but I got nominated. And you see, I was probably the most embarrassing participant the national debate competition had ever seen. But I did it anyway. I participated in the second year too, and at that time I had a team and friends I made during the last competition. I was a little better, but still not good enough. The third time I participated, I became the national debate champion. What I am trying to say is, you need to risk it all to do things that seem unreachable. You have to risk your ego, possibility of making mistakes, being disrespected and judged, but at the end of the day, you learn something and that's going to remain with you. **What do you want the readers to perceive from your book 'Caste Matters'?** The book's first launch was in Nepal. So Nepal, in that sense, has a unique relation with 'Caste Matters.' The book was written as a scholarly project. But then my publisher told me that if I want to reach scholars as well as the general readers, I need to make arrangements for my text. So I did it. I did it at the cost of risking my career because in academia, if you don't write in a certain way they don't give you jobs. And I am someone who is still trying to get a faculty job. But the purpose was different for me. I wanted to make an impact, and be someone who could be a spokesperson of those people whose issues and narrative was absent. That's how the books were out. The book has multiple chapters. Each chapter tries to build on the previous one, but can also be read independently. And this is a book about caste and not just about Dalits. And that's why the perspective can be taken holistically. It's not a one dimensional perspective that you'll get. That's why I have looked at every aspect of caste critically. There's a lot of philosophical reflection. This book, if it is read with the attention of philosophical details that it has offered, then the reader will enjoy what I'm trying to say.

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