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Episode 41: Himalaya Gohel
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Podcast transcript:
Kyra: Hi everyone, welcome back to the podcast. For this episode, we are in conversation with PhD researcher, Himalaya Gohel based at SOAS, University of London. In this episode, we discuss Himalaya's upbringing and Dalit identity, his journey through higher education and the shift from Performance Studies to Anthropology, and his PhD research which explores the myths and histories of Dalit Communities in India. Towards the end of the episode, we consider how we might begin to decolonise Anthropology as a discipline, taking into account its imperial roots and reflecting on Himalaya's own pedagogies and practice.

So, I usually like to start things off with our guests just telling us a little bit more about themselves, in their own words, so, where did you grow up and where are you currently?

Himalaya: So, I grew up in India, in a very small town in the western part of India. I spent there my first 17 years of life, and then I went to Delhi, and I was in Delhi for the next 10 years or so, and now I'm in London, in the final year of my PhD.

Kyra: And I guess how would you describe your upbringing in terms of how caste was seen and felt in your household?

Himalaya: So, since I grew up in a city and…so my experience of caste is, of course, different than the traditional societies and the traditional structures in the villages, and it's a developing city, like the entire country is developing, and I was…I grew up in a city that was a very industrial city, and it was mainly inhabited by migrant population, so most of us were coming from different places. I was fortunate enough to grow up in a…in a gated colony because it was government employees' quarters – my father got a government job. So, there was a lot of…a lot of safety in terms of social inequalities, but it does not really mean that you will never face any discrimination. So, growing up, we always knew that what caste we are in is one of the first things that you know about yourself, but, at the same time, you also were taught to deal with it, so we had a lot of strategies and we have ways to navigate the world outside of home with these strategies. One of the ways to do it is to not tell people, even if they ask, and they will ask, to try to hide it, to try to deflect the question. So, these are one of the many strategies that we learn as we grow up, and I did not think of them as

strategies – it's only later, when I knew what it means, that's when I realised that, oh, not everyone has to do this.

Kyra: Mm. And I guess…were those the kind of mechanisms that you had to use at all times or was it kind of specific spaces that you found yourself having to kind of…particularly be on guard, I guess?

Himalaya: Yeah. So, in the school – so once you're outside of your house, it's the neighbourhood that's the first encounter with caste. I mean, it's everywhere, it's so pervasive. So, it is something that you are carrying as you are breathing – it's your blood and bone. So, the moment you step outside of your house, you have your neighbours, which is… it could be different caste people, it could be your caste people, depending on where you are in the country. But then it's the school, in the urban settings – and let me just speak for the urban settings and of my own personal experiences. I was the only Dalit caste student in my classroom, and we were 70 students, and from kindergarten until the age of 15, I was the only person. And I knew this, but it was never obvious to others because no one even thought that any Dalit person could be in this school. So, I did not feel that in a way that I was not made to realise it in my primary school, early years, but later on, as we all became teenagers, that's when it became very apparent. So, things started changing during that time, and that's when – of course, I was also prepared for this – [you are] prepared for this at the same time. So, it's the school, the very first experience of caste that you encounter as a young person in India. That's when you will…in our times, in the urban settings at least.

Kyra: Yeah. What like shows and what books did you watch and read growing up? I'm interested in the kind of like media representations that you were exposed to.

Himalaya: So, I mean, it's…it's not really a…you wouldn't be surprised if I say that there was not much representation of Dalit people in the popular media in a very positive manner. There is representation. They are depicted as…sometimes victims or sometimes monsters. These are the two ways that they are depicted, and they are dehumanised on both the levels. So, what you see in films is a very glossy way of looking either as victims or as someone who is…a help, a house help, in the setting. So, usually, Dalits are looked at as some really poor fellows who need help or they are the ones who are creating a lot of problems, in terms of they are too [politically] assertive or something. So…but, again, this was not something that we were expecting. There is a whole subculture – and I'm sure you will understand as well – there is a subculture of Dalits and their world and their heroes and their [messionic] figures, the people that they respect and they want to be like. So, there is a whole other world, which I was fortunately part of as well because it was just there. So, we have a lot of mythological figures who are not part of the mainstream mythology, and I think

I spent a lot of time – and it's all oral literature, all oral history. This is through memories. So, we listen to our elders and uncles and aunts, and they keep it alive, and this is how I know – I know more about my background through these oral literatures than the ones that are like anthropological studies, and I don't find I ever interest in real anthropological studies [laughing] which is ironic for what I'm doing now is exactly the same thing. But yes…

Kyra: That's amazing how almost, yeah, like you got to experience that kind of subculture within your community and that, yeah, like oral storytelling and hearing stories about your ancestors and, yeah, like the mythical creatures that you talk about as well – that's interesting. And I think it's nice to be able to kind of have that joy, in a sense, when you remember that.

Himalaya: Definitely.

Kyra: When did you start to look at your environment, I guess, through a critical lens? Obviously, you talk about your childhood as being one where you had to kind of really… navigate certain situations because of your kind of identity, but was that something that you were, I guess, conscious that you were doing?

Himalaya: Yes, that's very interesting, actually, and I was thinking about it the other day when I was writing my…this chapter [of my] thesis […] sometime anyway. I realised the ways of dealing with the world, for Dalits and the lower caste people, the way they deal with their immediate surrounding, there are mainly two ways: one is being very assertive, being extremely political, and being right in your face, that this is who I am, this is what we are, and this is what we want, and this is how we are going to do it; and the other way is to assimilate, to hide, to create deflections and all of those. But it's also a survival mechanism. Both of these ways are to survive, in whichever context it works, you will adapt that. So, I was given one because this is what I have grown up with, one of the ways, one of those two ways, but then later on, of course, in the college, it's my…when I got into undergrad and… actually, finishing undergrad, yeah, after I finished my undergrad, when I got into the Master's, that's when I came to terms with it, that this is…I have done one way of doing this, and now I'm going to actually come out as Dalit, and then I will deal with it this way. And this is, again, it's not a unique story to me – there are so many like me, there are so many. Even there is a big like famous book now, one of the…and she lives in America now, […]. Her book, the title of the book is coming out as…it is a similar trajectory of how you hide it for a long time but then there is a breaking point when you have to, you know, take a stand, which is what we do now. So, yeah, so I looked at my own self and my world around me through a critical lens during my Master's, during, yeah, during that time.

Kyra: And could you maybe give us like a breakdown of your academic background?

Himalaya: Yeah. Again, I was thinking about this, so let me preface this by saying that what I'm saying is, again, it's a story of many people. We're not given really…I don't think I was thinking about choosing a career when I was a young person in my…you know, in the small town. It wasn't ever a very conscious decision to…to design a career of a certain type, which would fit a certain type of person. For education, for most Dalit people in India, it's a way to get out of the immediate oppression, from the immediate poverty, to get out of the place that they live in, which is usually a marginalised place, even geographically. It's usually outside of the boundaries of a village or a town. So, education is one of the ones to get out of that. So, whatever you do, you just do the best you can, in whichever degree you're taking. So, I knew this, so I started with my undergrad degree, which is on…it was […] but I studied Korean language, as a foreign language, I studied Korean, that was my undergrad, and I did that because I was thinking of doing something that is so different from my peers [laughing] and it will give me a job, a very good job, in one of the big cities, because I'll be a translator or something. I was interested in languages and I thought that this was one of my strengths so maybe I can use that. At that time, I wanted to go to Delhi because Delhi is like…yeah, it was the biggest city and I wanted to live in a big city, more out of my place, and I wanted to go to the best university in Delhi, and I wanted to get the undergrad programme there, and they only had foreign languages, so I could choose only among the foreign languages, and one of the languages I found very interesting at that time, in 2008, was Korean because I think the [?] was becoming a thing at the time. After three years, I left it [laughing] – I couldn't continue there anymore. But I wanted to remain in Delhi, so I wanted to continue studying to get another degree, and I…and at that time, I think I was slowly moving towards the…the question of self and the curiosity that I have about the people around me and myself. I think, again, this is something that all Dalits go through, and I think all marginalised people. It's a burden that they carry, that they have to learn more about themselves to understand their place in the world, which is constantly, you know, they're constantly being like denied a space in the world, so it's a constant exploration, [set of explorations]. So, anyway, I had to go towards that direction, and I knew that, in a way, and my immediate surrounding, again, is filled with oral literature, and I've grown up with this culture, a milieu of sounds and…and words which mean something but they…it's all…it's all very…the oral landscape is quite rich. So, I wanted to study that. So, I went into [Arts & Aesthetics] because that would give me a way to learn about my surroundings, but from the perspective of arts. It would take it…yeah, it's the arts and aesthetics [of] philosophy and the aesthetics of certain cultural practices. So, that was my Master's. And I continued, M. Phil., as well, I did two more years into that, and then I was going to continue and so a PhD in that, but then I wanted something even more…strict as a subject, and something that is outside of India, and that's why I applied for a scholarship, which I got, and then I came to SOAS for a PhD in Anthropology.

Kyra: Why the almost…it seems as though you were kind of like…[building] a kind of part of yourself within kind of like the Performance Studies realm, but what was the kind of shift to Anthropology? Were you always kind of like interested in it, while you were studying, like during your Masters's and things like that? Were you always kind of like aware of the theories…?

Himalaya: Yeah. So, while I was doing Performance Studies, then I was looking at performance practice of bards – so they are genealogist bards, where they…it's a caste of people, so [?], and they are of the Dalit caste, they are part of the lower castes. What they do, their ancestral profession is to write your genealogy, of a person, of a family, so they write family histories, and they collect and they compile it, and they write manuscripts and then they prepare it, and then sometimes they sing it. So, this is their…this is the profession, this is the cultural practice of singing, performing bards. This is what I wanted to study, and this is what I was studying as Performance Studies. But then look at…Performance Studies is anyway part of Anthropology as a…it's a child of Anthropology, [theatre, another body], but they look very particularly at the performance itself and they…they have more interest in looking at the aspects of a performative practice itself, just performance, like when it happens, when you…when you say it, when you sing it. So, they will focus on that part. But I wanted to really go into the people part, which is how do they actually…level of what is… what goes in their mind, why is it important for them, and what does it do to the larger social context in which they live. And to understand that, I think I needed to go a bit more traditional in my thinking, which is Anthropology actually, which is ironic that I took a step like…it's a bit more of a traditional subject and a bit more of a traditional discipline, Anthropology. It's kind of…it's not really a popular thing anymore. But, anyway, it's changing as well, Anthropology, and [we will talk about that]. So, that's my shift: I wanted to study people more, and I wanted to study a group of people, more than just the performance practice of these people.

Kyra: And is there anything that you wish you knew as a student that you know now?

Himalaya: Oh, a lot of things, of course, a lot of things [laughing]. But I think I would have liked to have gained some confidence in…in what I was planning to do at that stage, and I wouldn't have probably spent a few months and years here and there to gain that confidence. But this is, like I say, inevitable. If you're the first person to go to a university in your family generations, the first person ever to get a PhD, you don't really have a reference point or to…or to emulate to someone. You don't have an uncle or aunt or a cousin living in the US or Australia. You don't have it, so you're not really sure what PhD means or what research means. It takes time. That's what it is: it just takes time. So, I would have liked to have gained some confidence, I would have – but it's fine, I can't really complain, no.

Kyra: No, I'm the same: I'm also a first generation student, and I completely relate to kind of not having like…a kind of path to follow, and I think it can be quite difficult, especially you obviously talk about your experience, how, when you first came into education, you kind of came in with the idea of like…I just need to kind of do what I can to get out of here and change my circumstances. So, I think that, in itself, obviously adds to kind of the difficulty of like navigating what Master's should I do, what do I do after my PhD, and things like that, and yeah, I think it's definitely a difficult position to be in. But, like you said, you made it here [laughing]…

Himalaya: Yeah, no, it is difficult. But, again, I will tell you the same thing: it just takes more time for some people than others, but, eventually, you will get there, and I will get there [laughing], and that's all that matters in the end.

Kyra: Absolutely. So, focusing on the PhD, what actually kind of motivated you to even kind of go into doing a PhD, kind of like taking it the extra step?

Himalaya: Yeah, again, that's a very good question actually, but, this time, I was thinking and I was properly [laughing]…it was planned. Yeah. Not my Master's maybe. But my PhD, I was really sure that, okay, this is the…this is one thing that I want to do myself, and it's not something that everyone was just doing around me and you ought to get into it. It's…it's a pursuit of knowledge that has been denied for people like me, for a long period of time, and I…I…it's probably…different now. I mean, if I think about it now, [what is it, that pursuit], of course, it's different and it's going to change in the next five years as well. But when I was planning to apply for a PhD, and I asked myself that this is something that is…it's an opportunity that is not afforded for everyone. This is not something that everyone will be able to do, so if I get...if there is even 10% chance of actually doing it, I should go for it. Again, this is a story of a lot of people like me. It's all, you know, always strive and prosper, you know, the […] [laughing], always strive and prosper – this is the motto. So, you have to do the best you can, in whatever circumstances, and PhD was…there was a time when I was given the choice that, okay, would you, if you were given a scholarship, would you do it, so then that's when I decided that, yeah, I think I could give four years of my life for this.

Kyra: And what is the title of your PhD, and I guess how does it relate to some of the kind of work you've been doing previously and that kind of thinking that you'd been really doing…?

Himalaya: So, the title of my PhD, which probably will change by the end of this year, is like 'Caste Genealogists -- Myths & Histories of Dalit Castes from [Gujarat] India. It's very descriptive and it's not fancy at all, but it will be all fancy later hopefully. But, yeah, it's the myths and the genealogies of Dalit caste in [Gujarat], and that is my…that is my work. And previously, as I was saying, I was working with the bardic community before, as the performers, but now I am – I am still working with them. It's the same people. I am working with the same genealogists and same bards, and I work with them and now I have an even more deeper connection and engagement with their work.

Kyra: And, I guess, in what ways has your positionality, by being Dalit, aided your kind of research process?

Himalaya: Yeah. So, the bards that I work with, my main interlocutors, my principal interlocutors, they are from the same caste group, but it's a different caste. They are bards and we are weavers. But they are…they maintain the family histories, the genealogies, of my caste, so there is an interdependent relationship we have, and this was already there before I entered the field and the fieldwork. So, it was easy to access, for me, to access that sort of relationship. But it does not really translate into a great privilege because the work of anthropological work and the knowledge it produces is the same…same work, and one will have to, you know, go through a lot of self-reflexivity. The effort is the same, but I do get access to a certain type of relationship that many people might not. So, that's my positionality. That's where I…because it's the same Dalit world. We share the same cultural milieu, we have the same values, and we have the same sort of looking at resistance and protest, and the way we understand the world around us, it's similar. So, that gives me a lot of faith in myself to do this work, and, at the same time, it give me a lot of responsibility, that if I don't do it, then who will? And I have to do it better because of that.

Kyra: And I guess I'm interested in the kind of methodologies that you use as well within that. Is there a lot of thinking behind kind of how you practise those methodologies and I guess how you are able to remain kind of ethical? Obviously, you do kind of share…you have been given kind of access to this group, and that has kind of been an advantage on your part. Are there any other kind of challenges that you face because of your positionality, in a sense, as well? Is there any…? I could be just kind of…just putting words in your mouth [laughing], but are there any?

Himalaya: Yes, yes, there are, because this is…it becomes very responsible work, and now… If it's someone who is an outsider, there is an expectation of not being able to understand everything – you don't expect an outsider, in whatever terms, whether it's outside of your gender or outside of your language or outside of your class, whatever type of outsider, there

is…some amount of…leniency they are given. I don't have that. I cannot afford it. So, I cannot make a mistake. That is…that is the problem. And I will make a mistake – everyone will make a mistake. That's impossible, not to make a mistake. So, there is a lot of pressure of that sort where you have to represent…and I'm not sure if I am ever the right person, or anyone is, for that matter, to represent it. This is a very tricky situation. And all those who come from a marginal world, working on the marginal issues, are inevitably representing, and so that's a burden. That's a burden. But I'm…I have faith to carry this, but that is…that is what I worry about, that will I be able to do justice to the topic that I have taken.

Kyra: Mm, I mean, it's a lot to carry, I think, that kind of weight, in a sense, feeling like you kind of have to represent, you know, a whole group of people – like it's a lot to carry, and I think especially when you yourself are still kind of learning, in a way, like you're still…you're researching [laughing], you know…

Yeah.

Kyra: And, yeah, I can definitely…maybe not relate but I can definitely kind of see that…see the difficulty in that.

Himalaya: Yeah. Well, on that, I would say that I'm not the only one. People before me have done it. People after it are doing it. People with me are doing. And we all face the same sort of questions and same sort of concerns, and I learn from them, and they learn from me – we all learn. So, there is a community now, in 2023, there is one. It wasn't like this before. But I would say, yeah, I'm not alone, and my questions are not unique to me, [which is] I'm very happy to [help, you know, share questions].

Kyra: Yeah. And I guess what advice would you give to prospective PhD students? Obviously, you're kind of approaching the end of your PhD, so I feel like you have a lot of advice to give!

Himalaya: Ooh, yeah. It depends really where you do it and who is this person. I know that the situation in the UK is very different than other places, especially in India where I spent the last 10 years, and I was fortunate enough to do my higher education in a university which was a public, as in free, university. They were not charging us millions of pounds. So, I have had that experience of being in a university where it could be a utopic sort of a place where, ideally utopic, it can have that illusion of that at least. We don't even have that illusion in the UK, so it's a very different situation here. I would say, those who can…can get scholarships, they should do it, and they should apply for that, and they should like…but I

understand that it's a big investment, and, if you are so certain about that pursuit of knowledge, then you should go for it, but as a career choice, if you're looking for like a great career to make…I don't know if this is the right thing, because you can pursue knowledge outside of it as well, of course. But the PhD is definitely…is one thing that now, in our times, what it offers is this, this sort of sense of community with other people who are pursuing the same thing. So, if you are…if anyone is planning to do a PhD, these are the things that they should look at, not just the supervisor or the topic or… And, sure, one has to look at those things as well, but these are…I mean, this goes without saying anyway, yeah.

Kyra: Do you think your opinion or, I guess, perception of the university has changed now that you've kind of come into SOAS and now as a researcher…?

Himalaya: Yes. Yes, definitely. I think I'm taking it way more seriously than I was before. Probably it's because I'm at the end of the PhD as well, but the university setting, it is really different here. In other places, like in the developing countries, where there is some welfare system still part of their administration – like India, for example, there are universities that are free. So, it's free education and you are really just there for that. Here, it really is about making a career or, you know, you have put in this much effort, so it becomes all the more – the stakes are really high. So, in a way, it's a good thing as well because university is not really a bubble of its own, it is really part of the world – all the workers are part of the same…you know, the workers unions, it's all the same, they are all facing the same thing, which I hadn't seen before. In India, the universities that I have seen, they are actually bubbles, however bad or good they are, but they are bubbles so they kind of isolate you. But it's not the case here, and that's something that I have…yeah, positively learned.

Kyra: Like you said, your PhD is Anthropology so I wanted to take this opportunity to really hear your take on how we might begin to decolonise or I guess think about decolonising the discipline. In what ways is Anthropology still imperial, in your opinion?

Himalaya: Well, Anthropology is very imperial, and I think it will remain imperial for a long period of time, but I would say that, yes, there is a lot of work being done now, and Decolonising Anthropology itself is a discipline – it's a new discipline itself, the Decolonising Anthropology, and it's taking its own time. I think there's a lot to do, and one of the few people, even in my teaching […], I was teaching last term, and I was talking to students and… I think they are ready. The point is that they are actually ready for the new ways of knowing things, new ways of looking at the world. The issues of othering someone, or issues of giving race prominence in terms of like hierarchy, is all going. The students of undergrad and Master's level, they are actually all very prepared, so there is a very fertile ground to do this work, and I think I'm – so, I'm very hopeful anyways. I'm very hopeful that there will be a lot

of change and that is…it's happening. And I try to bring that in my class as well. There was a nice book written by an indigenous scholar from…Australia or New Zealand, I forget which one, but it's Linda Tuhiwai Smith, and the book is 'Decolonising Methodologies'. It's for anthropologists. And it's a brilliant book, it's a brilliant book, and I think the very first…like the introduction, I always start the classes with the introduction of that book, and then we set the stage, like this is the world we live in now. Forget all the other things – this is the world we live in now, and this is the world that you're going to now build upon, so let's just get into that. And, yeah, so I think it is still imperial, it's still imperial, but I think, at the root, at the very core of Anthropology, there's this question of who is the other…or this curiosity for the other. When we start dismantling that, that's when I think we will have, yeah, progressed. That's the real progress, and I think it's happening – we are actually questioning that.

Kyra: And I guess how can we take into consideration like the multiple forms of racialisation and social oppression that exist like beyond the Global North?

Himalaya: Yes. So, I think anthropologists, I mean, at least in the UK, they are very well aware of the racial [interest that is operation/interests in oppression], but caste is a new category. In America, I think, yeah, in the US, there's a lot of work on the operation of castes, but not in the UK as such. A lot of people are now actually dealing with race and castes in one way. It's a form of oppression, is a form of social injustice. If we can theorise that, if we can theorise in terms of like a global issue, then I think we will make progress again. And people are doing it, actually. So, caste is not just a problem of India or South Asia, or a problem of some archaic religious system; it's actually a problem of equality. It's egalitarianism that we need to bring in. It's not just the dismantling of the caste system; it's the egalitarian values that need to go in, instead of that – so it has to be replaced with something, which is what I think, now, we are doing, all of us.

Kyra: What can lecturers do to kind of begin to decolonise their pedagogy and practice? And I guess is there anything that you've kind of practised yourself?

Himalaya: So, the lecturers, and they are…some of them are doing it, but it's to update their curriculums. The first thing is to be [so] updated with what is happening now, but not in terms of just the social media knowledge – that is as important as the other - but it's to theorise. They need to actually take a step in now. They need to apply for big grants and big projects that actually looks at the decolonising project. All the scholars, those who are in some position in power, they need to now theorise it. They need to actually take it very seriously, as they have taken race very seriously at some point. So, decolonising is part of that, and so… So, that's one of the things, as lecturers, they could do. But since I am a

Teaching Assistant and I'm in the liminal space where I get the freedom to talk about a lot of things without having to actually…the responsibility of a lecturer, so I find this a very… It's only the pay that is a problem [laughing], but it's a very good space […] [laughing]. So, in my class, I really let students enjoy this. There is a lot of… At King's College, one of my colleagues, they wrote a book together about the new ways of learning and teaching and the methodologies. So, these kinds of things are actually happening, and I would like to, you know, be part of that more and more.

Kyra: Thank you so much. And, finally, just as a question that I like to end on, what is something you'd like to see happen or see develop within higher education in the next 10 years?

Himalaya: Oh, well, I mean, since I am just at the very beginning of a possible career in this, [I'm really just a PhD], so I imagine, in the next 10 years, there'll be…it will be a bit more colourful, you know, the campuses in the UK, a bit more. They are getting there, but it'll be great. And I think this current situation of only a certain type of people can access education, and also only a certain type of people can have a career in higher education, that should change. If it can become a bit more, you know, egalitarian, it would be great. And I'm hopeful. So, I think it will – I'm a very hopeful person. So, I think that's what I'm going to see: I am going to see more and more…like there will be no more of what is decolonising academia because it's a question we won't have anymore. We will have different questions in 10 years.

Kyra: Well, I might be out of a job if that happens [laughing]!

Himalaya: Not at all, I don't think so [laughing]. They'll probably be hiring people then.

Kyra: Himalaya, I just want to thank you so much for giving us your time and your knowledge, and, yeah, just thank you so much for being on the podcast. It's been really nice to kind of hear more about your research, and also your background, and also your opinion on kind of, yeah, how we can begin to decolonise Anthropology. Thank you so much.

Himalaya: Thank you. Thank you so much.

Kyra: To find out more information, access our tools, or get in touch, visit us at blog.westminster.ac.uk/psj.