

GALLERY SPACE AT WAGNER



SPRING
2018



NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

LIVING UNTOUCHABLE

DALIT WOMEN IN SOUTH ASIA

Sara Hylton



in conjunction with the panel discussion

**LIVING UNTOUCHABLE:
IDENTITY, ACTIVISM & THE HUMAN
RIGHTS OF DALIT WOMEN**

**GALLERY
SPACE**
AT WAGNER | 10 YEARS

Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service | New York University | The Puck Building
295 Lafayette St., 2nd Fl., New York, NY 10012 | 212.998.7400 | wagner.gallery@nyu.edu

Curated by
Frankie Crescioni-Santoni

on view
through
08.01.18

COVER:

Rubymalik, Barmajhiya, Nepal, 2016

Rubymalik, 16, holds her baby, Rupesh, outside of her home in Barmajhiya, in the Eastern region of Nepal. Originally from Bihar, India, Rubymalik crossed the border into Nepal when she was married at 14. She misses her family and says she is no longer able to play. "Other communities say 'doom, doom, doom'...They don't allow us to enter any house, we are not allowed to sit together," she said. "We are the same, we are all human beings, we are the same blood, so when the upper caste dominates, it feels bad."

GALLERY COMMITTEE

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Shiva, Bokraha, Nepal, 2016

A picture of Shiva, one of Hinduism's primary gods, hangs on a tree near a temple where Mandal Janjati, an upper-caste Brahmin, gives blessings to worshippers near Bokraha, Nepal. "The real Brahmin knows about caste," proclaimed Janjati, as he lectured onlookers about the Hindu scriptures and the necessity of the caste system in maintaining purity. Dalits are not allowed to enter the temple.

PROGRAM

Welcome Remarks

Frankie Crescioni-Santoni, Curator, Gallery Space at Wagner,
NYU Wagner

Introductions

Sukti Dhital, Deputy Director, Robert L. Bernstein Institute
for Human Rights, NYU Law

Panel Discussion

Panelists:

Pabitra Dash, Organizer & Activist, Adhikaar

Sujatha Gidla, Author, *Ants Among Elephants*

Jayshree Satpute, Director & Cofounder, Nazdeek

Moderator:

Ritty Lukose, Associate Professor, NYU Gallatin

Q&A

Reception



The Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at New York University is home to the Gallery Space at Wagner. With an emphasis on projects promoting diversity, inclusion, and social activism, the mission of this collaborative initiative is to bring artwork into a public-accessible work space in an effort to engage NYU and external audiences in dialogues on contemporary art, culture, and public service.

Since its debut in November 2005, the Gallery Space has hosted a variety of dynamic and innovative exhibits featuring both established and emerging artists. Painting, drawing, photography, pottery, collage, textiles, printmaking, digital video, and mixed media are among the multifarious disciplines showcased in the space. The three annual exhibits held at the gallery are curated by NYU Wagner's communications and design manager Frankie Crescioni-Santoni.

Located on the second floor of the historic Puck Building, the Gallery Space is comprised of two main display areas measuring 10 feet wide by 6 feet tall and 29 feet wide by 6 feet tall, in addition to two auxiliary walls. These spaces are primarily reserved for NYU-affiliated artists with a focus on fostering partnership among the diverse University constituents. Additionally, we host special exhibits by guest artists, curators, and practitioners whose projects align thematically with the school's academic mission and curricula.

For more information about the Gallery Space, including exhibition schedules and proposal submissions, please call us at 212.998.7400 or e-mail wagner.gallery@nyu.edu. □



Rice fields, Odisha, India, 2016

Dalit women work in the rice fields near Harirajpur, Odisha. "We are involved in daily labor for only a few days a month and then we sit and wait. We have no work to support our families...Give me the work and I will do it," one woman said. These women were each paid 180 rupees for eight hours of labor, roughly \$2.65 USD.

The Gallery Space at Wagner is proud to commemorate Asian Heritage Month at New York University with the opening of *Living Untouchable*, selections from Sara Hylton's photographic project documenting the lives of Dalit women and girls in South Asia. The exhibition serves as a backdrop to an interdisciplinary panel discussion highlighting the role of activism, allyship, and community organizing in empowering Dalit women and combating caste-based discrimination in South Asia and the diaspora.

Caste-based human rights violations impact more than 260 million people globally, the majority of whom are Dalits living across South Asia. The images resulting from Hylton's lengthy research and field work in India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka capture in equal measure the devastating reality of life as an "untouchable" and the strength and resilience of the women who endure the relentless marginalization instigated by caste systems. The portraits, landscapes, and local life details on display are all components of Hylton's important and timely photoactivism initiative. They poignantly remind us of the power of imagery and storytelling as vehicles for advocacy and catalysts in social justice efforts.

In bringing this exhibition and panel discussion to fruition, we owe much gratitude to Sara Hylton for sharing her inspiring artwork with us. The project would not have been possible without the generous support of our partners at the Robert L. Bernstein Institute for Human Rights at NYU Law, in particular Deputy Director Sukti Dihtal. Our deepest thanks to Pabitra Dash, Sujatha Gidla, Ritty Lukose, and Jayshree Satpute for lending their expertise for the panel discussion. We would also like to acknowledge the Gallatin Human Rights Initiative for their kind sponsorship, as well as Asian Heritage Month at NYU and the International Public Service Association (IPSA) for their promotional assistance. Their individual and collective contributions were paramount to making *Living Untouchable* a reality. □

— Frankie Crescioni-Santoni
Curator, Gallery Space at Wagner



Pampha Parkoti, Dandathok, Nepal, 2016

Pampha Parkoti, 23, (left) is pictured at the waterspout a few miles from her village of Dandathok, Nepal. Dalits of the village are not able to use the same waterspout as upper-caste communities and are forced to walk long distances each day to collect water. Since the earthquake of 2015, villagers describe the discrimination from upper-caste members as increasingly severe. Pampha is a trained journalist, and active in Dalit and women's rights. "My being from a community where you can't get into a house and drink [water] from a spout, I always wondered what it would be like to be born into a Brahmin community and how things would have been different for me," Pampha said. "Because of this, I always dreamed about getting into social work and bringing about change." Pampha migrated to Kathmandu to study. There she fought against all odds, including discrimination from a spinal cord injury and being kicked out of her apartment due to her caste.

CO-PRESENTER

Robert L. Bernstein
Institute for
Human Rights
at NYU School of Law



Honoring and extending the legacy of Robert L. Bernstein, the Bernstein Institute for Human Rights at NYU School of Law promotes cutting-edge research, education, and advocacy on human rights issues around the world, with a focus on defending dissent and advancing legal empowerment. The Institute embraces a holistic approach to human rights, deepening engagement with key stakeholders in the pursuit of justice: law students, human rights defenders, scholars, judges, interdisciplinary allies, and affected communities.

Human rights has long been a core focus of the Law School and with this major initiative NYU Law is further demonstrating its dedication to training the next generation of human rights leaders. The Institute, with Professor of Clinical Law Margaret Satterthwaite '99 as faculty director, also supports other human rights initiatives at the Law School and University and acts as the coordinating hub for existing human rights work at NYU, including the Center for Human Rights & Global Justice, the US-Asia Law Institute, and NYU Stern's Center for Business and Human Rights. □ law.nyu.edu/bernstein-institute



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Gallatin Human
Rights Initiative

The **Gallatin Human Rights Initiative** studies the discourses, practices, and institutions of human rights by engaging with the politics of human rights as a local/global movement for social change, a contested family of legal rules and norms, and a repertoire of globalized vocabularies and policy prescriptions enhancing and delimiting justice. The Initiative convenes events, hosts a fellowship program, and provides guidance on the human rights curriculum at Gallatin. □ gallatin.nyu.edu



Asian Heritage Month at NYU is a celebration of the experiences and histories of various Asian and Pacific American cultures. We connect the diverse Asian and Asian American groups on campus and in the surrounding communities by spreading awareness of various social issues and highlighting each group's contributions. □ nyuahm.blogspot.com



The **International Public Service Association (IPSA)** is a student organization dedicated to fostering constructive and innovative debates on international public service issues. We provide a forum for exchange and action by engaging members of the NYU community interested in international policy, finance, health, and urban planning. □ ipsawagner.com



Sori Devi, Jharkhand, India, 2016

Sori Devi, 50, of Kolodohar, Jharkhand, is adorned in a Godna, a term used across tribes in central and eastern India to refer to traditional tattoos. Of the low-caste Chamar group, this tattoo is inscribed among many women in the village and was traditionally used among low-caste women as a form of “uglification” to protect against the wandering eye of upper-caste men. “I’m feeling very vulnerable at this time,” she said. Her husband has migrated, like many men in her village, for brick-making work in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. She added, “We are having a very horrible time because of the conditions we are facing.”



Parvaliya, Jaharkhand, India, 2016

Parvaliya Devi, 27, works at a brick factory near the village of Kusmahi, Jaharkhand. Employees at the factory, all Dalits, are paid depending on production rates and are meant to receive 500 rupees per 1,000 bricks. (The average daily production was reported between 600 and 800 per day.) However, employees have reported receiving only 500 rupees per week, approximately \$7.32 USD, and they were often not paid on time. This wage does not even meet the government mandated minimum of 167 rupees per day. “I at least feel lucky because I have my own house and cattle,” she said. Parvaliya was a rare exception, as many in the village reported being landless and having to migrate for work.

To be a Dalit, or an untouchable person, means being the lowest of the low in some caste-based societies. These communities in South Asia face segregation and extreme marginalization in everything, from access to education to economic rights. They are even denied the opportunity to step into a place of worship.

In India alone, there are about 170 million Dalits, about 17% of the population, according to the National Coalition of Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR). These caste-based social structures also extend to other places such as Sri Lanka and Nepal.

Photographer Sara Hylton traveled to all three of these countries hoping to capture a slice of Dalit women's lives—the inequality they face and how they survive, as well as their hopes and dreams.

Hylton did a lot of research about the system and on specific castes in the region to prepare herself, even though she has worked in the South Asia region for almost seven years. The project was commissioned by Refinery29, with the support of the NCDHR, the Sri Lanka-based Human Development Organization, and Adam Smith International in Nepal.

Her portraits are as beautiful as they are heartbreaking—an intimate look at the challenges these women face.

"Regardless of the country, the state, or the caste, they all spoke of physical or emotional abuse either by upper caste members or government authorities. The 'theme' in the way they talked about their lives was often around the issues that maintain their repression: Landlessness, segregation, being denied access to water, education, and employment," she said. "The majority of them wished to feel safe, have a home, and create a better future for their children, but most were unable to articulate how this might happen."

But Hylton cautioned against approaching these stories from a privileged point of view and believing that we may have the solution to the



problems that affect these communities.

"I am very conscious about the 'white savior' concept and believe wholeheartedly in the power of storytelling alone as a tool for education and awareness," Hylton said. "I don't profess to have any answers to these issues or to be any more advanced than these women. In fact I think in many ways the women I met are far more advanced than many of my female counterparts who are educated professionals."

These women are strong daughters, sisters, mothers, and grandmothers that champion their communities and want to provide a better world for the generations that will come after them.

"Despite the harshness of their reality, the image of the lotus often comes to me when I think of these women. The lotus, arguably one of the most beautiful flowers, emerges from deep, dirty, and murky waters—[it flourishes] despite harsh surroundings," Hylton said. "These women are like lotuses: They endure with grace, resilience, and dignity." □

— Andrea González-Ramírez
Refinery29.com



PREVIOUS PAGE:

Two Girls, Jharkhand, India, 2016 (DETAIL)

Two girls stand outside their home in Harijan Mahala, the Dalit colony of Satbarwa, in Jharkhand, eastern India. Dalits here experience discrimination and abuse at the hands of the authorities and upper-caste villagers.

NEXT PAGE:

A Girl, Odisha, India, 2016 (DETAIL)

A girl from the Dalit village of Harirajpur, in Odisha, chases a kite on the dried-up Mahanadi riverbed, which is the primary source of water for many villagers. They live in one of India's poorest states and bear the brunt of the dry season by walking long distances to retrieve drinking water.

This is one of the photographer's favorite images. "I walked over to the river to breathe in some space, and I immediately saw this little girl jumping up to the sky attempting to catch her kite. It was a perfect metaphor," Hylton said. "The image to me evokes a sense of hope, dignity, and innocence—something I found in all of the women I met."



SARA HYLTON



Sara Hylton (Canada, 1983) is a documentary photographer based in Brooklyn and Mumbai. Her practice focuses on portrait photography, where women, conflict, and migration emerge as recurrent themes. She believes that through this type of documentation she can achieve a connection with her subjects and capture them in their most natural state of being. Resilience, humanity, and the quiet beauty in everyday life guide her artwork and the stories she covers.

Hylton completed a post-graduate certificate in photojournalism and documentary photography at the International Center of Photography and also holds a master of arts in international conflict studies from Kings College London.

She has worked for the *New York Times*, the *LA Times*, *Bloomberg News*, the *Financial Times*, *Smithsonian Magazine*, *The Guardian*, *American Photo* and Reuters, among others. She has also worked for the United Nations and several nonprofit organizations, including the Gates Foundation, the Danish Refugee Council, Rainforest Alliance, Doctors Without Borders, and the International Rescue Committee.

Sara Hylton was awarded a Magnum Foundation fellowship (2015), a Pulitzer Center grant (2016), and a fellowship from the International Women's Media Foundation (2016). □ sarahylton.com



Darshani, Haryana, India, 2017

Darshani, 41, prays in her home in Bhapur, in India's Haryana state. "I bought the gold I wear for myself ...and I own this house," she says. After two years of physical abuse by her alcoholic husband, Darshani left for her mother's village, took out a loan, and did agricultural work to build her own life and raise her two children. Thirteen years ago, her husband pleaded for forgiveness, sobered up, and now supports their children as they strive for a better future.



Nanapatiya Kumar, Jharkhand, India, 2016

Nanapatiya Kumar, 41, plays with Jyoti, her neighbor's baby, in the village of Kolodohar, Jharkhand. Nanapatiya lost her husband three years ago due to breathing problems since they could not afford a doctor. "If my husband would have been here, I wouldn't worry so much. Now I worry about the kids all the time. How will I get them married?" she asked. Despite Nanapatiya's challenges, the women of Kolodohar have found comfort in one another as many of the men have migrated for work.



Megha Kumari, Jharkhand, India, 2016

Megha Kumari, 9, is massaged by her mother and other villagers after she lost feeling in her legs following a seizure. Households in the village of Harijan Mahala in Jharkhand do not receive full rations of rice due to discrimination, villagers say. Most households in the village have at least one female family member who suffers from anemia, which leads to a range of medical complications.



Girls, Bardaha, Nepal, 2016

Girls of the Dom caste graze pigs in Bardaha village in Eastern Nepal. Pig farming is still considered a dirty job and is mostly delegated to Dalits. Villagers have reported having their pigs killed if they walk near the homes of upper-caste villagers.



Koshi River, Nepal/India border, 2016

Dalit women of the Dom caste fish in the Koshi river near the border of India and Nepal.

PABITRA DASH (PANELIST)



Pabitra Dash is an activist and organizer at Adhikaar, a New York City-based nonprofit serving the Nepali-speaking community and promoting human rights and social justice initiatives. Dash works most closely with nail salon workers on labor and health rights issues, and previously served as a member of Adhikaar's 2015 nail salon campaign. She has been working as a nail salon worker in New York since 2010. Before coming to the United States, Dash organized brick workers in Nepal and engaged in women's empowerment issues across the country. As a proud Dalit woman, Pabitra has committed her life to social justice both in Nepal and here in the United States. □ adhikaar.org

SUJATHA GIDLA (PANELIST)



Sujatha Gidla was born an untouchable in Andhra Pradesh, India. She studied physics at the Regional Engineering College, Warangal, and moved to the United States at age twenty-six. She is the author of *Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family & the Making of Modern India* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux/Macmillan, 2017). The critically-acclaimed memoir explores the struggles and accomplishments of her mother, uncles, and other family members within India's modern political landscape and oppressive caste system. Her writing has also appeared in *The Oxford India Anthology of Telugu Dalit Writing*. Gidla currently works as a conductor on the New York City subway. □ twitter.com/gidla_sujatha

RITTY LUKOSE (MODERATOR)



Ritty Lukose's teaching interests explore the relations between culture, politics, and economy as they manifest themselves in discourses of gender across the varied terrain of globalization, particularly as they impact South Asia. With a background in anthropology, she has published several book chapters and articles on this research in journals such as *Cultural Anthropology*, *Social History*, *Social Analysis*, and *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*. Her book, *Liberalization's Children: Gender, Youth and Consumer Citizenship in Globalizing India*, was published by Duke University Press in 2009 and co-published in India by Orient Blackswan in 2010. A co-edited book, *South Asian Feminisms* was published by Duke University Press (2012) and Zubaan, a leading feminist press in India. She teaches courses on globalization, India/South Asia, sex/gender and feminisms within global contexts, and ethnography. □ gallatin.nyu.edu

JAYSHREE SATPUTE (PANELIST)



Recognized by UK's *The Guardian* as one of the "World's Top 100 Inspiring Women," Jayshree Satpute is a human rights lawyer and cofounder of Nazdeek. Satpute has extensive experience advocating at the Supreme Court of India and various High Courts. Her groundbreaking work focuses on the realization of the rights of most marginalized groups in India through innovative approaches, such as grassroots legal education and strategic litigation. She has worked extensively on various issues, including maternal health, housing rights, and other socio-economic rights of urban slum dwellers, plantation workers, and refugees with a special focus on women and children. She has worked with local organizations, activists, and legal scholars from across the world, and has been appointed as *amicus* in several cases in India. She received her L.L.B. from Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar University College of Law, Nagpur and her L.L.M. from City University London. □ nazdeek.org



Panpati, Jharkhand, India, 2016

Panpati, approximately 60, is pictured in Sapbarwa village, Jharkhand. Panpati and her husband are sick and unable to work, yet they do not receive old age benefits despite submitting their application to the village chief. "We are facing discrimination. We are getting only nine kilograms of rice per month in spite of a 30-kilogram ration. Other [castes] are getting 30 kilograms. The poor people will die. The government wants to kill us off by starving us," she asserts.



Pavitra Udaya Kumar, Janatha, Sri Lanka, 2016

Pavitra Udaya Kumar, 11, is pictured in her home on Janatha estate, a private tea estate, where her family has lived for 60 years. She was born with a birth defect and does not receive any help from the government. Her sister, Sonaja, is one of the few educated women on the plantation and is working as a teacher. Pavitra's family is one among many families currently living in a kind of bonded labor in Sri Lanka's tea and rubber industry. Originally Dalits from India, they are not recognized as a scheduled caste and receive few benefits from the government. Families living on the plantation reported attempting to build small gardens or cow sheds where they could cultivate, but the estate management immediately destroyed their attempts to prosper.



Ashamalik, Bhokraha, Nepal, 2016

Ashamalik, 21, of the Doom caste, is pictured with her pigs in Bhokraha, Nepal. "This is our life...My caste is for rearing pigs, I don't mind this. I used to clean toilets," she said. "We don't have any other business, what can I say about hope... My only dream is to make my own home and have my children do good work."



Taramalik, Surajmalik, and their children, Bhokraha, Nepal, 2016

Taramalik, 22, her husband Surajmalik, 25, and their children Sunitamalik and Nisamalik live in Bhokraha, Nepal. Taramalik and Surajmalik were both born into a pig farming sub-caste of Dalits named "Dom" and were married when they were just four and seven, respectively. Taramalik is originally from Bihar, India, and like many others of her caste, she crossed the border into Nepal because of her arranged marriage. Though the caste system originated in India, it has spread across South Asia affecting the lives of millions who remain "untouchable."



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All artwork courtesy of the artist.
For information on Sara Hylton's work, please email:
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