

The logo for 'JUST 3' features the word 'JUST' in a yellow, sans-serif font, stacked vertically above a large, bold yellow number '3'. Below the text is a horizontal bar composed of three segments in shades of blue and grey. The entire logo is set against a dark blue background.

JUST 3

JUST THREE Podcast: A Conversation with Deepthi Sukumara

Episode 4

November 2, 2020

Host: Catherine LaSota

Total Length: 26:19

[*Music*]

[00:06] **Catherine LaSota:** Welcome to the JUST THREE podcast, a project of the [Center for the Study of Social Difference](#) at Columbia University. I'm your host, Catherine LaSota. On the JUST THREE podcast, we talk with artists, activists, and other scholars who are deeply engaged with issues of social justice.

On each episode of our podcast, we have one guest, someone who's connected to one of the many working groups here at the center. And on each episode, I ask the same three questions: one, how does your work engage with issues of social justice? Two, what do you see as the biggest social justice challenge of our current time? And three, how can we foster ethical and progressive social change? I hope you enjoy this episode of the JUST THREE podcast.

[*Music*]

[01:00] **Deepthi Sukumara:** The oppressed and the suppressed people need to be educated and need to be made aware of their rights.

[1:08] **Catherine LaSota:** In this episode of the JUST THREE podcast, I have the honor of talking with Deepthi Sukumara. Deepthi Sukumara is a Dalit woman and an activist. She has been working for the liberation and rehabilitation of women engaged in manual scavenging. For more than two decades. Her parents migrated to the city of Chennai, from a remote area in Andhra Pradesh for education and employment. She travels widely to villages and small towns to meet Dalit women living in difficult circumstances, and who have become victims of human rights violations.

Deepthi contributed a personal narrative to the *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, which was developed by our [Menstrual Health and Gender Justice working group](#) here

at the Center for the Study of Social Difference. Deepthi's narrative, called [Caste is My Period](#) uses her personal experiences of menstruation as a Dalit woman to bring out the intersectionality of caste and gender and menstrual taboos. There's also a powerful story of manual scavenging in this narrative.

And that is an issue we also talk about in our conversation, which was recorded on December 21, 2020.

[*Music*]

[2:28] **Catherine:** Welcome to the JUST THREE podcast. I am here today with Deepthi Sukumara. Deepthi, I'm so excited to hear more about your work and how you're doing, and where you are. Can you briefly introduce yourself for our podcast listeners?

[2:43] **Deepthi:** Thank you, Catherine. And it's really nice to be here on your podcast, JUST THREE. And it's actually very exciting because it's something that's very rare that comes our way.

Well, I am Deepthi Sukumara and known as Deepthi to everybody close to me. And I'm a Dalit woman and, being a Dalit woman, I am an activist, and I work for a movement, we are part of a movement. It's called [Safai Karmachari Andolan](#). That's a difficult name to pronounce, I know. Safai Karmachari Andolan means it's a movement of manual scavengers. And I work with a woman Safai Karamcharis in India, and Safai Karmachari Andolan, the movement is across about 25 states in the country. And we work on the liberation and rehabilitation of women who are engaged in manual scavenging in India. And manual scavenging is caste-based discrimination. It's a work by descent occupation, mainly. Of course, both men and women do it. There are different forms of manual scavenging, and it's one of the worst atrocities that we can ever imagine in this world. This is actually human beings, cleaning up the excreta of another human being using bare hands with just the bare minimum implements that is at hand. So that's the work I do a bit which is engaging with women in mobilizing and organizing to fight and struggle for the rights to live for respect and dignity. And this is what I do.

I live in Chennai, it's a city in South India. It's the capital of Tamil Nadu, a state that speaks Tamil. And I initially said that I'm a Dalit woman. And Dalit means, you know, we have the caste system in India. And I think everybody knows that by now. And caste is something like race and it's something like gender. It's based on discrimination. It's based on an unequal hierarchical social order that is based on hierarchy. So this is who I am. And this is where I live. And I'm sure I'll be able to say more as we go into the session.

[5:13] **Catherine:** Thank you so much, Deepthi. It's such important work that you're doing. It touches on so many issues. And as we get into the three questions of the JUST THREE podcast, please feel free to answer however broadly you see fit. They are broad questions. And I'll just go ahead and start with the first one, which is: how does your work engage with issues of social justice?



[5:37] **Deepthi:** I'd like to start with how I started my work as such. Being a Dalit woman, right from the beginning, I think I've always known that there was something different because I lived in an urban society where people are generally anonymous, where their identities are anonymous, and you do not know their background, their social backgrounds. So it was basically that I knew that there was something different between me and my peers, whether it was in school, or in college, or anywhere else. But it became even more pronounced as I started a career and I started working because I started working as a social worker. And so my work took me into areas, into locations, into communities, with whom I had many similarities.

So I was actually working as a social worker, I went into communities that were considered to be untouchable or polluting. And they were all segregated communities, which were kept outside the main village or the main city. So they were kept in one place, they were all together in one place. And it was so obvious that there was something different. And they were segregated there for a purpose to make sure that, you know, they are there in one place, and everybody knows who they are and what they are. So my work took me there and I could see that there were a lot of similarities because as I kind of reflected back to my own childhood, when I went to my village in India when I went home for the vacations or for holidays, I knew that this was very similar to my ancestral villages where I had visited when I was a child or even today.

So when I started going there, I realized that this whole system there was, you know, it was a sick system, because the problem was that people did not look at another person as an equal. And not only as an equal, because the person was...the society looked on certain people as to be polluting, unclean, and dirty, and which is why they should be kept away out of touch and out of sight. And that's how untouchability happens. And as I went deeper and deeper into my work, and I started analyzing what exactly the problem was, I went into an area that was, you know, that was at the bottom-most pit of this entire social hierarchy called the caste system. And that is a scavenging issue. So that's how I started working in Safai Karmachari Andolan for the liberation and rehabilitation of women who are engaged in manual scavenging in India.

So to say that, how my work engages with issues of social justice, I think the entire issue that we are working on, the entire issue that we're addressing is nothing but an issue of social justice. So it's all about discrimination, it's all about inequality. And that's what the Safai Karmachari Andolan, as a movement is engaging with.

[08:44] **Catherine:** Thank you so much, Deepthi. How long have you been doing this work now?

[08:48] **Deepthi:** I started doing this work in 1993. Before that, I started working in rural development. And that's when I came across untouchability. And that's when I came face to face with untouchability. And I came face to face with caste discrimination and gender discrimination. And that's when I started, you know, looking for a space where I wanted to really be with people who were similar to me. So who spoke the same language and who I could relate with who I saw my own people in them. So that's how I went into this thing. So in 1993, I

started engaging with Safai Karmachari Andolan. It was in a very founding stage, this Andolan, the movement. And so when I started, it was, we were actually based only in the state of Tamil Nadu and in the state of Andhra Pradesh, which is two states. In India, there are more than 30 states and we were only working in two states at the beginning. But today, we are a national movement, and we are working in 25 states.

[09:52] **Catherine:** Wow, thank you, that's incredible growth of the work that you've been doing, and I'm really interested to hear your response to the next question of the JUST THREE podcast, which is: what is the biggest social justice challenge of our current time?

[10:08] **Deepthi:** I think we look at social justice challenges, there are so many, and every time something new keeps coming up almost every other day. But I think the root of all the social justice challenges is inequality, it is discrimination of some sort of the other. It could be gender, it could be caste, it is race, ethnicity, linguistic, whatever it is, it is a system of inequality and discrimination, that is at the root of all the social justice challenges that exists in this world. And the more the state actually sanctions it, or religion sanctions it, the more extreme it becomes.

So if I look at what I'm working on, the caste discrimination, and this entire issue of manual scavenging, the social injustice of manual scavenging, which is based on the discrimination on caste and gender, I think I can say that it is only because it's being supported by the sanction of religion, because the religion sanctions it to, that this inequality can exist. That human beings can be graded into an unequal hierarchy. So, you know, that is what—that's the worst thing about this entire system and the entire society, that all this kind of discrimination inequality is actually sanctioned either by a religious institution, or it's sanctioned by state institutions. And in India, if you see even though we do have our laws, we have our policies that is against caste discrimination that has abolished that prohibits and that makes caste discrimination, and even manual scavenging as a crime.

But it still exists, because every human being every person in India belongs to some caste or the other and so, everybody subscribes to the caste system, including me, including the Dalits. We all subscribe to the caste system just as in you know, in in the issues of gender in patriarchy, where every human being in some way or the other subscribes to the patriarchal system, just so even in the caste system in India, every person in India subscribes to the caste system in one way or the other. And it's all about, you know, maintaining a status quo of power. So it's...it's about unequal power relations, unequal power equations. So when a person has the power, whether it's by patriarchy, or whether it is by caste, they hang onto it. And so they have to keep it, so they devise ways and means of maintaining the status quo of that kind of a social hierarchy. So I think the biggest social challenge for us is inequality, is unequal power equations, it's discrimination. And all of this and how it manifests itself in different forms across the world. Especially for—when I look through the lens of a Dalit woman, through the lens of a Safai Karmachari woman engaged in manual scavenging, I can see that for me it is the worst system that I can live in. So how am I going to come out of it, how to overcome it is what we are working on is what the Andolan is working on.

[13:39] **Catherine:** Thank you. Thank you. What I'm hearing is discrimination enforced by powerful systems that are in place is this major challenge. Does that sound correct?

[13:52] **Deepthi:** Yes, yes.

[13:54] **Catherine:** So with that in mind, I'm going to bring us to the third question of the JUST THREE podcast, which is: how can we foster ethical and progressive social change?

[14:06] **Deepthi:** Yeah, I think what's important when you're talking about discrimination, when talking about ... if you look at this caste system, there is a practice of untouchability, which is that if a person is born in the particular caste or outside the caste, there are five—four castes and the fifth group is outside the caste system. So if a person is born into that particular group, that person is polluting and that person by birth, he or she is a polluting person. So she becomes an untouchable. So how do we change that attitude and that mindset?

I think what needs to be done is changing and transforming minds and transforming behaviors and attitudes, is what needs to be done. And in our country, we are a democracy. And we make our own laws we make our own policies, we make our own systems. So how is it that in spite of we have made our laws for rights in spite of making our laws where we say that there is a law for equality, there is a law against inequality. We have a law against untouchability, we have a law against caste discrimination, we have a law against manual scavenging, but it still persists. And it still persists very strongly. It's only because the people who are responsible and are accountable for implementing these laws and these rights are also the perpetrators of inequality and perpetrators of discrimination. So there is a conflict of interest in the whole system itself, when you're talking about bringing about a change or bringing about social justice.

So I think the only way that it can be done is that we need to change people's mindsets and attitudes and behavior. And one way to do that is that the oppressed and the suppressed people need to be educated and need to be made aware of their rights. So it's such a difficult thing that when we are working with disaffected majorities, and there is this whole practice of making a human being go down a sewer hole, naked, to clean out the sewer blockage. And we have many deaths happening in those holes. And when those deaths happen, that's a crime. So when those deaths happen, and we are filing complaints with the police and with the judiciary, we come across situations where even the police and the judiciary seem to be unaware and do not have any knowledge of these laws and these policies. So what are we talking about, I mean, we are talking about a system where the people who are supposed to be implementing a law to protect—and for the safety and the wellbeing of persons, are themselves not aware of these laws and these policies. And even the victim is not aware of the laws and the policies.

So what happens is that I think we need, first thing we need is that there should be an education and awareness of the laws that are there. Because this is a democracy and we do have the spaces. And we do have the provisions. And we do have the measures that and the mechanisms are there, the missionary is there, the government missionary is there. But it's just that it is not working. So to make it work, we need people who are aware people who have the

knowledge and people or the information about these rights, and laws. So when everybody has that information and awareness, then I think both the implementers and the persons who are the victims of the violation of that particular law, become more aware and become more careful, and they are able to access and demand for their rights and the implementation of these laws. That is what is happening.

And I just want to kind of give you an instance of how transformation happens, how we do it in the moment that I am engaging in. So it's very difficult when we start when you go into a community. And we see that yes, there are many women who are engaged in manual scavenging in that particular community. And we start talking to the women and we start having these group discussions with the women there. In the beginning, it's a huge challenge. There's so much of resistance, not only from outside that community, within the community, within the women's household within her family itself, we have so much of resistance. Because in this patriarchal system, women should not talk for themselves, only the men should talk for them. So that still exists in these communities. So when that happens, then women do not talk. So women are never able to tell what their issues are. And so the men do not talk about women's issues. Men talk about what is their issues, and in that by default, how women are involved in their issues, only that comes up.

So when we start mobilizing the women, and then the women come together and they start speaking and then they start talking about the issues, a whole lot of issues come out, a whole lot of issues that are pertaining only to women and their discrimination, both within the community and outside the community are spoken out. And then when we start mobilizing them automatically, you know, when they start speaking, they start realizing that there are rights that they can avail of, that there are rights—that they have rights. When they start speaking, they're aware that their rights are being violated. And these are rights that they must have and they are integral for them. And so when that happens, they also slowly the process starts where they become leaders of the women around them. And when that leadership happens, and then they take up and then they start speaking for the other Women in their community and not only in their community in other communities also. And when they start speaking for other women, they also understand that just speaking within the community will not, it's not going to be enough. They need to go out of the community and speak to those who are responsible, and those who are accountable for protecting those rights. So they start going out and speaking to those to the state and to the government missionary.

Just to give you a small example, then, about eight years ago, we had this woman leader, a woman's group leader, and she started speaking for her group. And then so she started going to the local government office, to ask for her liberation to ask for the rehabilitation schemes that the government needs to implement.

So the first time she went there, she was intimidated, she was made to stand. And the officer was very short with her, almost rude to her. And there are a number of problems they face, they are called by their caste names, they are abused verbally. There are so many problems that they face when they are trying to, you know, to engage with the law, they're trying to engage


with getting the law implemented. So after a few visits, the three or four of them went. And for the first time, this person, she just said, "You know you have to ask me to sit down. You are a government servant, but you still have to ask me to sit, you may be a government officer, but I've come to see you, have come to see you and you work for me, you know, you have to ask me to sit down, you have to give me a chair and sit down." And she said that to the government officer. From somewhere within her, she knew that that government officer was trying to intimidate her by not allowing her to sit in front of him. So she asked that she be seated in front of him. So, you know, that was a transformation that came and then when that happened, then the officer said, "Okay." When somebody says I have to sit down and it's in a— it's in a government office, it's a secular place, it's a place where you know, it's an equal, it's supposed to be an equal place. So he had to ask her to sit down. So this was where the transformation happened. I mean, this was where a woman could actually stand up for herself and for those with her and say, it was all about asking for a chair to sit on.

And that is what is happening now across the community now that just sitting on a chair in front of an officer in front, and in the middle of other men, is so important. It's so important, and that is what respect and that is what dignity is all about. And today, and last week, I think, we had another group, a new group, that came in and there was this leader. And now the thing is that now they have their own group, and now they form a collective, and then they have their own official letterheads and official kind of, you know, a system, they have a system.

And so now when they go to an office, they take this letterhead in which they have their names printed on it saying that, so-and-so is president, and so-and-so is secretary and so-and-so the treasurer of the small group. And so when they hand it over to them, and they're also associated with Safai Karmachari Andolan, which is the movement and now the movement is well known across the country. So when they take a letterhead, which has the movement's name on it, and their own names printed on it, whoever it is, they are meeting automatically, you know, stands up and gives them that respect.

So that's where things, you know, that's how this whole thing has, because I think these are all instruments of our democracy. And living in a democracy, it is so much more easier for us to demand a space for equality, demand a space that is non-discriminatory and demand a space that is non-judgmental. And I think that's what we are trying to do now. So when you look at social change, it's more like a social transformation where both the person who is in a status of power and a person who is oppressed, come together and then there is a kind of a transfer of power over there. It may be an informal power but the transfer happens at some point of time. And that's where I think social change comes in. So I think this is what we are working on and we're trying to, you know, go into it deeper so that we are able to kind of institutionalize it and kind of bring it about in a more systematic manner.

[24:33] **Catherine:** Deepthi, that is—it's so powerful as it sounds like this...just this idea of speaking in using words and even writing words and a name on a paper and being present and saying things out loud. And the opportunity that a democracy presents for that I feel like is such a lesson for so many people. Thank you for sharing that story.



[24:53] **Deepthi:** Yeah.

[24:53] **Catherine:** This has been just really fantastic, really wonderful. It's so terrific to hear the work that you're doing and to hear these stories and to hear this important work. I really appreciate you spending some time with us today on the JUST THREE podcast. Thank you so, so much.

[25:11] **Deepthi:** Thank you, Catherine. Thank you so much for having me and I think through me, you've been having, I mean, I was able to represent the movement Safai Karmachari Andolan and the women who are a part of the movement. Thank you for that.

[25:34] **Catherine:** Thanks for listening to the JUST THREE podcast. To find out more about our guests, please visit the show notes. To find out more about the Center for the Study of Social Difference, go to www.socialdifferencecolumbia.edu.

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I'm your host, Catherine LaSota. Thank you and catch you next time on the JUST THREE podcast.

