



# How Caste Works: Forging New Identities in a Punjabi Ex-Untouchable Community in Catalonia, Spain

*Kathryn Lum*

*Ph.D. Thesis defence on 10 October, 2011*

**Abstract:** This thesis is an ethnographic study of an ex-untouchable group from the Punjab region of India known as the Ravidassias. Its aim is twofold: on the one hand to elucidate the mechanisms of caste in social life and in particular, to analyse how ex-untouchables negotiate caste stigma, and on the other, to explore the caste, gender, and youth dimensions of the Ravidassia community in Catalonia, Spain. This study is comparative in nature, discussing caste, the management of caste stigma, and the Ravidassia sociocultural/religious movement in the Punjab, India and Catalonia, Spain. The Ravidassia community is an interesting case study for the study of caste, because the Ravidassias are the most important former untouchable group demographically in both the Punjab and in the diaspora. They have also become in the postwar period one of India's most economically and socially assertive 'Scheduled Caste' or SC caste groups, an assertion which is articulated symbolically in the field of religion. The Ravidassias are thus an excellent example of a transnational group whose diaspora status is playing a key role in changing the caste status quo in their native Punjab. In focusing on the individual experience of caste stigma, this thesis seeks to highlight an aspect of caste discrimination that is frequently overlooked in debates on 'casteism', and to reveal how Dalits who are now educated and middle-class still struggle with the legacy of untouchability. During the course of my research, a significant portion of the global Ravidassia community, including the Spanish Ravidassia community, chose to break with Sikhism and form a completely autonomous religious identity. I thus had the privilege to witness a profound identity shift on the part of my interviewees which has seen new forms of caste pride emerge that would have been unthinkable only a generation ago. This ethnographic study reveals that while caste prejudice/stigma has not diminished with migration, caste as institution and social organisation has assumed new forms that can be strategically used by those who were once completely crushed by the caste system.



**Steven Smith (EUI, Department of History and Civilization), Eleanor Nesbitt (Univ. Warwick), Staffan Lindberg (Univ. Lund), Kathryn Lum (Ph.D. Candidate), Jaap Dronkers (formerly EUI/Univ. Maastricht) (Supervisor)**

**Kathryn Lum** is an anthropologist who completed her undergraduate studies at McGill University in Montreal (with one year at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London), followed by an interdisciplinary MA in South Asian Studies at Lund University, Sweden. She has carried out extensive fieldwork in both the Punjab, India and in Catalonia, Spain. She is currently working as Research Fellow at the Carim Migration Center of the Robert Schuman Center for Advanced Studies on a an EU-funded research project focused on Indian migration to the EU.