

THE BRAWL AGAINST PREJUDICE

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ABSTRACT

Systematic discrimination takes place across the globe against numerous marginal groups. An article in the Caravan authored by Suraj Yengde seeks to introspect the seeming similarities and dissimilarities between the struggles of Blacks and Dalits. The Blacks and Dalit communities have from decades not only been deprived of education and job opportunities but also have been treated indifferently as lesser people. Their struggles were revitalized and given a great push by revolutionaries such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Dr. B.R Ambedkar, their work, struggles and opinions of the movements. The Dalit panthers, inspired by the Black panthers had a huge role in aiding, volunteering the lower castes and revolting against caste-based atrocities. This paper seeks to explore the origins of caste domination and how the movements of race and caste are similar and different, from a sociological and legal lens. The current pace at which India is tackling Caste barriers and the opportunities handed over to people of different castes is questioned with the help of several surveys conducted since 1990. . Is a system invented to cater to casteist and elitist regimes still relevant after several decades? The United Nations Charters and policies adopted by several countries and the groundwork execution of them, Is a system favoring people of one ethnicity over others still pertinent after globalization and togetherness? If we keep in mind the intersectional feminisms, LGBTQ activism and advocates against religious hostilities, we find how often they overlap and how there is a vast difference in public approach to them.

INTRODUCTION

The struggles faced by Blacks and the Dalits are on similar lines. The rise of the Black Lives Matter movement also gave rise to the Dalit Lives Matter movement in India. Although both the movements were similar, they were unique in their own ways and are very much active even today. The only time Indians acknowledge the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes of India is when they fight for the removal of Caste based reservations in educational and employment sectors.

Systematic oppression taking place against them depriving them of a peaceful life with basic human rights and opportunities such as equal pay. We also find intersectional feminism colliding with these movements because black women and Dalit women. Dalit Feminism mentions how dalit women have to tackle both external factors (Upper castes homogenizing Dalits and subjecting them to cruelty) and internal factors (patriarchal domination in the society).ⁱ There is stratification of these groups on the basis of race, caste and gender.

ORIGIN OF OPPRESSION

The oppression of both the blacks and Dalits rely on prejudice by majority masses. Black people accounted for a sixth of the population and white people for almost three-quarters.ⁱⁱ

The nation, founded by white men was never meant to be universally democratic and equal- the continuation of slavery was taken for granted. Even after the slaves were freed, the white elite found ways to strip black people of their rights, their intelligence and their character.ⁱⁱⁱ In India, the Hindu holy book enshrined the varna system and they have been preserved and propagated for millennia by the Brahmins, exercising their monopoly over priesthood and vast power over social thought.

By the rules of caste those not born into the varnas are 'subhuman' and their mere proximity or touch is a source of spiritual pollution. Even the Arya Samaj was aimed at converting the Dalits, Muslims and Christians through a movement called 'shuddi'. The believed it was necessary to purify them before including them as unequal co-religionists.^{iv} Although the Elite

upper caste in India accounted to only 17% according to the Mandal Commission 1980, the existence of several well doing sub classes between the Scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and Upper caste Brahmins increases the majority in the Hindu population as a whole. ^v

Some claimed that the upper castes were 'pure' because they descend from the Aryans who were from Central Asia and Russia. The Brahminical order thrives on a seemingly infinite fragmentation of castes and sub castes, the position of each dependent on its discrimination and violence against those it claims superiority over in the endless quest to defend and improve its rank.

The Kshatriyas were the warrior and administrative class linked with traits of boldness, courage and pleasure. The brahmins, deemed to be highly intelligent and wise were the scholarly teaching class. The Vaishyas were the common class citizens who were said to be hardworking farmers, merchants, artisans etc. Finally, the 'Avranas' who weren't even associated with the upper castes were the Shudras who were sweepers, gutter cleaners, scavengers, watchmen, farm laborers, and take carers of cows and pigs etc. they were loathed and were ill-treated and were untouchable. They were associated with violence and impurity and contempt hatred.

The idea of caste was kept alive by endogamous marriages; cultural rules coercing people to marry within their own group.

"Dalit" in Marathi derived from Sanskrit means 'suppressed' or 'crushed'. Pushyamitra Sunga a Brahmin and commander-in-chief of the last Mauryan King Brihadratha a Shudra by caste. Pushyamitra killed Bruhadatra and established Brahmin rule, which continued till 800 AD. He feared that the untouchables would attack him. So, he asked Manu, a Brahmin pandit to end their revolts and treat them with indignity. Manu codified all callous and unscrupulous laws against the Shudras in the name of religion. His work codified in a book Manu smriti.^{vi} It was the kings who implement the caste divisions. Brahmins then preached the importance of rituals and ceremonies in several lifetime activities such as naming ceremonies, house warming ceremonies, festivities etc to obtain gifts as a part of offerings.

Purity pollution was strongly enforced via restrictions in territory, occupation, matrimony and social events and activities. The exclusion of Dalit communities by other groups in society and

the inherent structural inequality in these social relationships lead to highest levels of poverty among everyone.^{vii}

STEREOTYPES, COLOURISM & CONDITIONING

The hatred and dissent for Dark skin, popularly called Colourism is evident in both the movements. The post-colonial hangover in India results in a fetish for fair lighter skin contrary to the natural Indian complexions. A casteist belief associated dark skin with lower castes and brahmins being fair skinned overlap in Indian slurs.^{viii} The West loves indigenous mixed people with tanned skin but we barely see representation in media, advertisements, cultural industries casting dark skinned individuals. The skin complexion for Blacks was the integral factor in their racist attacks and all forms of discrimination.

A large majority of Indians came out in support of the Black Lives Movement in 2020 by means of various social media campaigns and petitions. But these Savarna Hindus turn blind eye to the Dalit problems in India because it doesn't fit in their 'aesthetic'.

Black men are more likely to be awarded a harsher punishment than Caucasian men even for crimes like drug smuggling. In 2016, Blacks were incarcerated for drug crimes at five times the rate of Caucasians. In 2000, it was 15 times the rate.^{ix} This is also because of the presence of downgraded defence attorneys and very less incentives present for Black folk to defend themselves.

In India, every day we witness various atrocities taking place against Scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Dalits being killed for owning 'upper caste' animals like horses and cattle, pregnant Dalit women killed for taking water from a handpump, women being stripped around naked around villages and being raped and exploited.

Throughout the twentieth century, the upper caste leaders have tried to create a Hindu consistency, through assimilation and appropriation of lower caste people. They have tried to create a homogeneity of religious beliefs, through the promotion of gods worshipped by the dominant castes and the obliteration of the traditions the lower castes. The construction of a

false Hindu majority which suppressed the fact that lower caste people were the real majority with rising political aspirations.

BIRTH OF REVOLUTIONARIES

All great movements owe their origins to a few leaders who decided to fight injustices and prejudices for their communities, races, religions and sects. Martin Luther King Jr and Dr. B. R Ambedkar were such people. Martin Luther king was an African American Baptist minister who led the American Black Civil rights movement by nonviolent ways. In 1963 and 1964 he brought hundreds of black people to the courthouse in Selma, Alabama to register for voting. When they weren't allowed to vote, he organized and led protests that sought an answer for a very important question "why were black men not allowed to vote?". In 1965 the Voting Rights Act directed the Attorney General to enforce the right to vote for African American. It also prohibited the states from using literacy tests and other methods of excluding them from voting.^x

Born in a small village in Indore, Madhya Pradesh, Bhim Rao Ambedkar faced massive discrimination as a Dalit in his town and wasn't even allowed to sit with the Upper Caste students. This didn't stop him from completing his education at Colombia University in New York City. He became a Dalit rights activist and later the chief architect if the Indian Constitution.^{xi} He also exchanged letters with WEB Du Bois, an emerging Black intellectual civil rights leader. He wrote in admiration of his methods and the similarities between the position of the untouchables in India and the Negroes in America. He also asked him to share a copy of petition submitted to the United Nations representing black Americans since the Untouchables of India were also thinking of doing the same. They shared letters and the Dalits drew inspiration from the black movement.^{xii}

Ambedkar thrived and fought hard for the establishment of segregated settlements for Dalits where they would be free from the oppression from the dominant caste and own the lands. When Ambedkar resigned as the law minister in Nehru's cabinet in 1951.^{xiii} He complained that he was frozen out of key committees including one on foreign policy. He advocated for

separate electorates for the oppressed castes to ensure their political delineation and self-sufficiency in a system dominated by upper castes.

BLACK PANTHERS AND DALIT PANTHERS

In 1972 a radical anti-caste organization emerged in Bombay. They called themselves the Dalit Panthers inspired by Black Panther Party in the United States. Black Panthers organized in 1966 out of the frustration of the Civil Rights Movement. It advocated for non-violent activism but was powerless in the face of the unrelenting economic inequality and racial violence fueling the riots.

They were determined to work towards caste-based violence and in strengthening oppressed caste solidarity, organization and pride. In their manifesto they defined the term Dalit inclusive of not just the oppressed castes but also the Scheduled Tribes, the working people, the ones stripped off their lands and poor peasants, women and those being politically exploited politically, economically by religious extremists. They were led by affluent Dalit leaders like Raja Dhale, Namdeo Dhasal and JV Pawar.

Unlike the Black Panthers, the Dalit Panthers was not a political party. The Black Panthers sided with Marxism-Leninism ideologies while the Dalit Panthers were concerned with only Ambedhkarism. They raised demands for Dalitstan where settlements would be guaranteed as Ambedkar had hoped for emancipation of economic and social development for the pursuit of a casteless society. Black Panthers were socially active as they provided free breakfasts for children and works for black education.

The Dalit Panthers never gained such financial support or had resources.^{xiv} While the Black Panthers were a fully uniformed organization with military equipment and backing with gun-carrying squads to fight back police resistance, Dalit Panthers were loosely organized and were barely armed to fight back the upper castes. The Dalit panthers disbanded in 1977 because of several reasons such as mixture of representation, jealousy among party members and ideological differences among its founding members.

STRATIFICATION AND EXCLUSION OF DALITS

The Hindu religious books uphold the caste system for a very rigid division of labor that prohibits mobility. Social stratification is a social arrangement patterned socially and historically, which is rooted in an ideological framework that legitimizes and justifies the subordination of particular groups of people. This could also take place against a particular race, sect, caste, religion. The reign of the fervid Hindu Gupta rulers, known as the age of Vedic Brahminism, was marked by strictures mentioned in Dharma shastra—the ancient compilation of moral laws and principles for religious duty and righteous conduct to be followed by a Hindu—and enforced through the mighty hierarchal state apparatus of a developing political economy. Emerged during the reign of Gupta dynasty, the Vedas staunchly believed that the society would run smoothly if this division continued from one generation to another^{xv}.

Unlike racism, Caste is inherently discriminated upon after learning which caste a person belongs to. What is being overlooked is that prejudice against Dalits through caste system is pre-determined by the caste a person inherits from his father. The varna system restricts for caste mobility. A person is meant to die in the same social rank they were born in, no matter what they achieve in life, akin to the Black experience in United States that allows a person to grow in and choose their respective professions. The scarce opportunities and incentives being available to the Schedules communities and also promoted by the Vedas advocate for Intergenerational Mobility (movement that occurs from generation to generation). This leaves little place for Positional mobility that occurs due to individual hard work and effort.

SCs face caste-based discrimination in hiring, they also have a greater unemployment rate. SCs have had the highest unemployment rate in India since the 1990s. The 2011-12 NSSO (National Sample Survey Office) survey shows that SCs are employed for lesser number of days compared with upper castes. Thorat and Attewell in 2010 conducted a study where out of equally qualified 4800 students, Scheduled Castes had 67% less chance of receiving a call back for an interview. If this is the situation of SC STs in Urban advanced towns then one can only fathom the crisis Dalits would be facing in orthodox villages. Many of them are forced to continue working in the same professions as their fathers doing menial jobs like well cleaning, sweeping etc earning the bare minimum.

DENIAL OF DISCRIMINATION

In 1996 when UN finally acknowledged the disheartening situation of Dalits and CERD Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination accepted that the SC, ST conditions were similar to those of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia etc. the Indian Government continued to protest this and hushed it to be an internal matter. Foreign minister Jaswant Singh an upper caste Hindu and Omar Abdullah, minister of state, a Kashmiri Muslim of Brahmin ancestry and Sorabjee a Parsi-Muslim the plan of action made no reference to caste.

In 2009 the UN met up with the countries to check on the advancements made towards the goals at Durban. Dalit activists and groups and CERD's (Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination) affirmation confirming caste-based discrimination wanted it to account for something at the conference. India disagreed and all considerations for caste were rejected even at the 2011 conference.^{xvi}

In 2001 at Durban, Shiv Visvanathan, a sociologist from Delhi had made a series of provocative affirmations. A 'sociology of atrocities' according to him paved way for the Dalit activism. This discourse, which viewed atrocity as a social fact, made academic sociology's statements about mobility and pollution with regard to caste seem irrelevant and 'antiseptic'.

The sociology of hate, despair, oppression and humiliation valorised the victims of caste and provoked them to fight back. He had urged Dalits at Durban to look beyond quota and reservation and strive for freedom from the chains of oppression. 'A theory of freedom' must be paid attention to according to him.^{xvii}

In 1999 the Annual Report the special rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance found untouchability very much prevalent in rural societies of India across 565 villages in 11 Indian states. It was documented that untouchability was present in more than 80 percent of Indian villages.^{xviii}

CONCLUSION

The impact the Black Lives movements have had to inspire the Dalits in India cannot be undermined and unacknowledged. They have shared together tales of violence, discrimination, prejudice and hierarchy which isolated them.

In 1998 Short and Berwa commemorated Ambedkar's birthday by organizing an event in Howard. A poster calling him India's Martin Luther King Jr. and stood in unity with Dalits. Organizations such as VISION- Volunteers in Service to India's Oppressed and Neglected was a multi-religious organization formed by Dalit activists and professionals. The main mission of the group was to promote the ideals of Ambedkar in North America. Caste has been internalized not just in our minds and Indian terrain boundaries but also foreign nations after the California Department of Fair employment and Housing had filed a law suit against Cisco WebEx after a Dalit employee had faced discrimination by his Upper caste supervisors.^{xix}

Everyday there are multiple cases of Dalits getting murdered for doing mundane day to day activities such as eating in front of the Upper castes^{xx}, drawing water from the borewell, owning 'upper caste' animals such as horses and cows^{xxi}. Dalit women being subjected to the violent and inhuman atrocities by upper caste men and being stripped down and paraded down the street^{xxii}

Although the Indian Constitution provides for reservations at examination and Job appearance level. The root cause where Caste is heavily affecting Dalits because of the purity pollution mindset needs to be changed. People need to acknowledge their caste privilege and the fight for basic human rights needs to end.

Yengde's article captures the crux of the situation faced in India even together and the sort of othering that takes place against Black folk across nations and territories even today.

ENDNOTES

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