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### Caste and Race in India: Myths and Realities

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#### Abstract

*Caste socially constructs race and enforces inequality through powerful ideologies and unequal distribution of resources. Race, rather than being a material entity, is a practice with real and pernicious effects (Baber, 2010). It is the sociologists' views which are relevant in understanding caste and race. Some of the data and insights garnered by them are now brought before the public gaze. Racism, under the facade of caste is still commonly accepted in India. To many academics, social stratification in India is declared as a form of "hidden apartheid" and is a nationally shaped racism comparable to the treatment of blacks in South Africa (Svensson, 2014). Racism in South Africa and India are analogous as both include factors of binary opposition and mutual repulsion (Berreman, 1972). This paper parallels race and caste and tries to draw similarities between both. A historiographic analysis has been done for the study.*

#### Full Paper

The caste system in India has received attention of foreign travellers from early times. Megasthenes of the third century B.C. was probably the first to give an account on caste. Hieun Tsang of the seventh century A.D. was another to give a reasonably detailed picture. It was the Portuguese who gave the name "casta" to the system in place of the locally prevalent term of Jati. Later on the researches of Indologists on Sanskrit linguistics might have sparked a racial theory and equated it with caste. It was only towards the end of the nineteenth century and during the twentieth century that the subject received proper scientific study when sociologists entered the field. Sociological studies are still continuing at micro-field level. While the country refers to itself as secular, it is not referring to politics being entirely different from religion.

According to Ghurye, there were six major features of caste as it was practiced in Indian society, each exemplified through numerous instances from a wide regional base. Out of these six, while the first, the fifth and the sixth demonstrate aspects of material communal life, the other three pertain to caste as a whole. Firstly, there was a *segmental division of society* where the "citizens owed moral allegiance to their caste first, rather than to the community as a whole." This compartmentalization of society into groups was horizontal in nature, with the membership to each group being based on birth. The membership to a group allots status, roles and tasks to the member which has to be accepted as obligatory. Every caste is further divided in sub-castes

which practice endogamy, making castes small “worlds in themselves”. *Hierarchy*, the second characteristic of the caste system, is vertical in nature and is based on cultural principles like purity and pollution, societal preferences and so on, determining the norms and access of each caste to resources. However, he makes it clear that there is no “ungrudging acceptance of such rank” by all castes and that the status of groups in the hierarchy is often ambiguous. Fourthly, there are *restrictions on feeding and social intercourse*, whereby castes are classified by the restrictions placed upon their sharing Kachcha (cooked) and Pakka (raw) food. For example, there are castes from which twice born castes can accept Kachcha food, from which they can accept Pakka food and sometimes water but no food at all. *Civil and religious disabilities and privileges* differ among sections, reflecting the general nature of caste-based social life such as segregated residence in villages, access to wells, temples etc. In the caste system, there is, fifthly, *a lack of unrestricted choice of occupation*. Occupations are fixed hereditarily and the castes specialize in their own respective jobs and castes put restrictions on the entry of others into their occupation. In fact, many caste groups are named after their occupation or its specificities. Lastly, there are *restrictions on marriage*, with each sub-group preventing marriage outside the group.

Racial theories surfaced in the nineteenth century when scholars of linguistic studies discovered the affinity between Sanskrit and the European languages and noted that the Sanskrit description of the system was varna dharma. Varna in common parlance means colour and by extension the colour of the skin. So the theory enunciated was that the fair-skinned Sanskrit-speaking Aryan invaders introduced this hierarchical system after encountering the brown-skinned Dravidians and the dark pre- Dravidians and appropriated the top echelon for themselves. This theory supports the relation between caste and race. It does not even satisfactorily explain the system's colour scheme of white, red, yellow and dark for the four castes. The Brahmin's duty is to lead a pure life of austerity and spirituality and be an example to others in that direction and so white, standing for purity, is his symbol. The Kshatriya won many wars and hence red the colour of blood. The Vaisya collects wealth and gold and so yellow, the colour of gold, is his symbol. The Sudra who was denied access to knowledge was given the dark colour, the opposite of the light of knowledge. The British historian, Thomas Babington Macaulay stated that “a single shelf of good European library is worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia” (Bose, 9). Indian culture was seen as inferior from the onset and the British “viewed the Indians with hatred, contempt, dislike and distrust” (Bose 1981: xv). Shortly after British colonization, the Aryan Invasion Theory gained its fair share of followers. Reginald Horsman highlights the theory: “philological studies had shown that the Caucasians had two separate origins... ,one of them was the “Indo-Germanic” or “Arian” race that had originated in the Hindu Kush of central Asia, had spread outward into India and Persia” (Horsman, 295). Once in India, the Aryan race “had deteriorated... by mixing with dark skinned aborigines” (Horsman, 37).

Max Muller and study of the Vedas in the latter part of the 19th century and his reconstruction of the early Indian past put the stamp of authority on the theory of an Aryan race.

Although well aware of not confusing race and language, he nevertheless proceeded to do just that, as did other scholars of the time. He argued that the word varna used for caste in the Vedic texts meaning color referred to the fair-skinned Aryans and the dark-skinned dasas. Caste was much emphasized as the distinction between the upper caste Aryans and the lower caste Dravidians. One of the epithets used for dasas was *a-nas*, which he read as without a nose, and this was at a time when the measuring of nasal indices was regarded as firm evidence, although the alternative reading is *an-as*, without a mouth i.e., not speaking a comprehensible language. Situations of conflicts between the two are mentioned and this was taken as proof that the Aryans invaded north western India and established themselves as conquerors in the mid-second millennium BC. This idea has now been discarded and the preference is for a graduated migration and much mixing with existing inhabitants—except among those few who continue to insist that the Aryans were indigenous. Differences in language and rituals were obvious. The structure of Dravidian languages was not the same as that of Indo-Aryan and therefore the racial distinction was also underlined.

Crawford, a Scottish governor argued that the Aryan race was diverse:

Some are black... some brown... and some very fair... Some are of weakly frame, as the numerous people who speak the language of Bengal; while others are, in comparison, robust, like the people of Europe... Some... have advanced from the savage state to the highest civilization; whilst others, like all the Hindus... continue afterwards nearly stationary, making less advance in one thousand years time than the people of Europe in one hundred (Crawford, 270).

To substantiate this idea we can examine Ghurye's views in *Caste and Race in India* (1932). The Indo-Aryans belonged to the larger Indo-European stock that dispersed from its homeland after 5000 B.C. The branch that entered India about 2500 B.C. carried with it the early Vedic religion, and the 'Brahmanic variety' of the Indo-Aryan civilisation developed later in the Gangetic plain, along with the caste system. Ghurye also reiterates the racial interpretation of varna as colour and the idea that the 'dasas' described by the Aryans were the 'dark' and 'snub-nosed' natives they encountered when they entered India (Ghurye, 165). Caste derives from the varna classification of the early Vedic age, which referred to skin colour and differentiated the 'Arya' and the 'Dasa'. The caste system originated as an endogamous institution as the Indo-Aryan Brahmins attempted to maintain their purity by keeping themselves apart from the local population (Ghurye, 125). It may be taken to be a historical fact that people calling themselves 'Arya' poured into India through the north-west somewhere about 2000 B.C. It is equally clear ... that an institution closely akin to caste has been very often described in Sanskrit books, which are the work of either the Aryans or the Aryan-inspired aborigines ... We have seen that the Brahmins, who were the moral guides and legislators of the immigrant Aryans, tried to keep their blood free from any inter-mixture with the lower classes ... [Ghurye, 117-18].

The Aryans invaders entered India with three exclusive classes and absorbed the indigenous inhabitants who "accepted the over lordship of the Indo-Aryans" at the lowest level

as Sudras (Ghurye,172). They practiced some amount of ritual exclusivity but also displayed 'tolerance' by assimilating diverse peoples. The mechanism for this assimilation was caste: The Indian Aryans as later Hindus not only tolerated both beliefs and practices not harmonizing with their central doctrines but also assimilated a number in their own complex. Partially at least, on the social organizational side caste system was the modus operandi accommodating diversity of faiths and practices [Ghurye,165-66]. Because caste was maintained by endogamy and hypergamy, there is a correspondence between caste and physical type, or race (Ghurye, 173).

In India, the caste system relies on the dualistic notions of "purity" and "pollution". The Dalits are regarded as an inferior minority, enabling racialisation to occur in the form of domination (Javaid, Majid and FaruqZahid, 2014). Racism in this sense arises through not only a lack of political democracy, yet also social democracy. The caste system is a matter of elevating some individuals, whilst degrading others. Therefore, although 'untouchability' is no longer a legal act, the nature of the caste system is inherently racist as it discriminates on the basis of difference (George, 2013). The semantic difference between race and caste has been used to justify the racist nature of India. Although, race and caste cannot be declared as one entity, they are overlapping concepts. "It is not that caste is race, but that racism and casteism have comparable effects; they are both processes of oppression that depend on naturalization..." (Natrajan and Greenough, 2009). It is by no coincidence that the Dalit Panthers refer to themselves as such, after inspiration from the Black Panthers (Banerjee-Dube, 2014). Moreover, Dalit political leader, Ambedkar's revolution for the emancipation was heavily influenced by American ideals of equality. In America and India, the same anti-racism jargon resonates in the pursuit for democracy "meritocracy, equality, liberalism" (Narula,2008). The racial theory of Indian society was promoted most notably by Risley, the first Director of Ethnography for India, who took the nasal index as an indicator of the proportion of Aryan blood, which supposedly varies along the caste gradient (Trautmann, 183). Risley's racial theory of caste simply elaborated the earlier two-race theory of Indian history, in which the dark, 'snub-nosed' and primitive Dravidians were conquered by, and partially mixed with, the 'tall, fair, leptorhine' invading Aryans (Trautmann, 202), producing the caste system. This theory was encapsulated in Risley's famous formula: "The social position of a caste varies inversely as its nasal index" (Trautmann, 203). *Caste and Race in India* effectively combines anthropology and sociology, analyzing caste system both through textual evidence as well as structural, cultural and empirical data. As far as the origin of caste is concerned, it had come to India with the Aryans in the Vedic period, therefore terming it a product of race, similar to the ideas of Risley. The Aryans distinguished themselves from non-Aryan groups in terms of colour initially, and with time ethnic loyalties and alliances solidified. To him, Aryans never called themselves superior Brahmins. Rather, his explanation is that caste was not a hierarchical exploitative system but a system that promoted disciplined life, occupation and division of labour, making the system itself one that people aspired to. In *Caste and Race* Ghurye examines Risley's theory in great detail through a reanalysis of the anthropometrical data. He finds that outside the core area of Aryan settlement, 'Hindustan',

physical type does not conform to caste rank, and that there is greater similarity between brahmins and other castes within a region than among brahmins across regions. His conclusion is that the "Brahmanic practice of endogamy must have been developed in Hindustan and thence conveyed as a cultural trait to the other areas without a large influx of the physical type of the Hindustan Brahmins" ( Ghurye, 125). While Ghurye criticises specific features of Risley's theory and methodology he accepts the overall framework of racial categorization and in fact proposes new categories for the Indian population based on the nasal and cephalic indices (Ghurye, 125). He bases his argument on the same assumptions employed by the Aryan race theory: that the 'Aryan type' is long-headed and fine-nosed, represented by the people of Punjab and Rajputana, while the 'aboriginal type', represented by the 'jungle-tribes', is broad-nosed (Ghurye, 118). In his argument Ghurye does not distinguish clearly among race, language and culture, although he does add a diffusionist element to his argument by suggesting that Brahmanism and caste spread throughout India as cultural traits rather than through large-scale physical migration of Aryan Brahmins. He also suggests that the relation between the Greeks and the Egyptians was similar to that between the 'Aryas' and the 'Dasas', except that the Vedic people had more reason to show their 'pride and exclusivity' because the Dasas were non-Aryan and of dark colour.

In the above mentioned context caste can be equated with race and caste-based discrimination and racial bias the two sides of the same coin. The controversy involving the government and groups fighting for Dalit rights over the 2001 World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Tolerance (WCAR), was organised by the United Nations in Durban, has brought these larger, long-debated questions to the fore again. The immediate question is whether the issue of caste discrimination can be taken to an international forum like the WCAR. So far, India has managed to evade the caste-race equation by arguing that caste distinctions are based on social, occupational and economic considerations and not on genetic racial differences. This view however can be challenged by research done by the National Institute of Biomedical Genomics (NIBMG), an institution headed by bio geneticist ParthoMazumdar.

According to recent findings of the NIBMG, based on the analysis of DNA samples collected from Indians belonging to 20 population groups, including different caste groups and tribals, we are descended primarily from four ancestral origins: North Indian, South Indian, Austro-Asian and Tibeto-Burman. There is a fifth niche grouping of the Andaman and Nicobar islanders who are descendants of Pacific Ocean migrants. Barring the Andaman and Nicobar tribals, the other four population groups mingled and intermarried till about the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD. Then, sometime during the Gupta period of about 1600 years ago, laws based on scriptural and social proscriptions created exclusivist divisions which prohibited intermarriage between these different genetic, or ethnic, groups. Scientists of the NIBMG – whose conclusions have been corroborated and endorsed by Harvard Medical School's David Reich – claim that the present-day caste distinctions trace their roots back to 70 generations of social differentiation based on genetic lines. Seen in this light, caste has a genetic – rather than just a social or occupational – basis, and as such is fundamentally racist in origin.

Another important forum, the Bellagio consultation, has likewise recognized caste as a form of racial discrimination and intolerance. Similarly, the Asian Legal Resource Center pointed out in its statement to the Regional Seminar of Experts, Central and Eastern European States, held recently in Warsaw, Poland, as another preparatory meeting for the Durban conference, that "elitist claims that Dalit concerns are merely historical matters of backwardness and society's functional bases are equally fabrications that aim to perpetuate their subjugation of lower castes". India does not want the caste issue raised at the international level for several reasons. First, it argues that caste discrimination is different from racial discrimination. Second, the Indian diplomatic mission in Geneva has taken the position of denying any violation of human rights in India based on caste discrimination. Third, the caste issue can be entertained at any international forum only in the context where it is proved that the domestic mechanisms of redress have failed. India argues that such mechanisms are still active, even in regard to the question of Dalits. The government has also raised the bogey of nationalism against the "internationalization" of the caste issue. Dalits say caste discrimination should be included on the agenda based on two grounds. First, caste and race, by implication, are the same because both lead to discrimination. Second, the caste issue, prevalent not only in India but also in other countries, including Senegal, should be given visibility at the international level.

If this is so, no amount of social engineering through reservations and quotas in jobs and educational institutions is likely by itself to eliminate casteism and caste conflict, instances of which are daily reported. Indeed, treating caste discrimination as a purely social and economic evil only entrenches such prejudices and provokes inter-caste confrontation, often with tragic results. It's time caste is identified as what it has always been: racism in disguise. As recurrent attacks on people from the north-eastern states, and the antipathy shown to Africans in the country, have repeatedly shown, we Indians are among the most racist people in the world. And – as the recent revelations about the origins of our caste system suggest – we are even racist among ourselves.

The Government of India reiterates its position that 'caste' cannot be equated with 'race' or covered under 'descent' under Article 1 of the Convention - India's 15th-19th Periodic Report to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD). Discrimination based on 'descent' includes discrimination against members of communities based on forms of social stratification such as caste and analogous systems of inherited status which nullify or impair their equal enjoyment of human rights. Therefore, the Committee reaffirms that discrimination based on the ground of caste is fully covered by Article 1 of the Convention. - CERD, concluding observations on India's Periodic Report. These contradictory statements show where India stands as far as caste-based discrimination is concerned. In 2002, the United Nations' (UN) Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, in its general recommendation no.29, expanded the meaning of the term 'descent' in Article 1 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), to include discrimination based on caste. The convention, which came into force in 1969, has been ratified by 173 countries, including India. Despite this, and despite the United Nations Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection

of Human Rights reiterating that discrimination based on work and descent is a form of racial discrimination, the Indian government's stand on this issue has remained the same: caste is not race.

The CERD, an independent panel of experts established under the international convention on racial discrimination, monitors how well signatories are implementing the convention, through periodic reports submitted by State parties. The CERD provides "concluding observations" on these State reports. India's reluctance to consider the issue seriously is clear from the way it has treated its responsibilities as a signatory to the international convention. Though periodic reports are due to the CERD every two years, all of the reports from 1998 to 2006 were submitted to the committee only in 2006 as a joint 15th-19th periodic report. When this report came up for review at the CERD's 70th session meeting at Geneva in February-March 2007, many activists were hoping that there would be a change in the Indian government's position.

However, it soon became clear that neither the heated debates on descent-based discrimination at the Durban World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in 2001, nor the criticism that the government has faced from various quarters including the CERD, and international civil society and Dalit groups in India, have made any impact. Despite the arguments advanced in favour of treating caste-based discrimination as racial discrimination, the Indian government has refused to budge from its stand. India's joint periodic report detailed the legislative and policy measures in place currently to address racial discrimination, but did not offer an impact assessment of these measures. On caste-based discrimination, the government reiterated its stand that as the Indian Constitution did not consider caste and race to be the same (Article 15 of the Constitution prohibits discrimination on grounds of race and caste and lists them as separate categories), they could not be conflated.

Non-government organisations, individuals and civil society coalitions, which had submitted alternate reports - known as shadow reports - to the CERD, rejected the government's stand. These reports mentioned several instances of caste-based discrimination faced by Dalits. A joint report by the United States-based Human Rights Watch and Centre for Human Rights and Global Justice, titled Hidden Apartheid: Caste Discrimination against India's 'Untouchables', pointed out that more than 165 million persons in India faced discrimination while accessing education, health, housing, property, employment and equality before the law simply because of their caste. The report, dated February 2007, documented India's "systematic failure to respect, protect, and ensure Dalits' fundamental human rights". Discussions and dialogues on India's periodic report at the CERD's 70th session were focused on the issue of caste-based discrimination and the plight of India's Dalit population. The Indian delegation, which was led by India's permanent Ambassador to the UN Swashpawan Singh, Solicitor General Goolam E Vahanvati and academic Dipankar Gupta, among others, tried to establish on sociological grounds that caste was different from race and could not be equated under any circumstances. Gupta denied that caste fell under the term 'descent' as described in the convention. The Indian delegation's stand digressed from the discussion at hand, which was whether caste-based

discrimination was similar in nature to descent-based discrimination, and whether the convention covered such discrimination.

The CERD, in its observations on India's report presented at the session, rejected India's stand on caste-based discrimination. The committee criticised the government for failing to provide information on steps taken to implement anti-discrimination and affirmative action laws and policies. The panel also insisted that the government present such details in its next periodic report. The CERD also expressed concern that India did not recognise the country's tribal population as "distinct groups entitled to special protection under the Convention". It recommended that India "strengthen its efforts to eradicate the social acceptance of caste-based discrimination and racial and ethnic prejudice, eg by intensifying public education and awareness raising campaigns, incorporating educational objectives of inter-caste tolerance and respect for other ethnicities, as well as instruction on the culture of scheduled castes and scheduled and other tribes, adequate media representation of issues concerning scheduled castes, tribes and ethnic minorities, with a view to achieving true social cohesion among all ethnic groups, castes and tribes of India". While India's defiance of monitoring mechanisms like the CERD points to a complete lack of political will to adopt international standards and implement domestic laws to overcome discrimination, it also points to another failure. The country's non-cooperation with international mechanisms, at some level, also points to the failure of the United Nations' human rights mechanisms to ensure enforcement of international human rights norms. Many academics have declared racial discrimination is the public secret of Indian secular modernity (Svensson, 2014). The caste system conceals and hides systemic injustices, whilst enforcing them through subtle norms, customs and traditions (IDSN, 2010). The aetiology of the racialisation lies within the nature of the caste system, the ascendancy and racialisation of difference. The World Conference Against Racism examined caste discrimination as a form of racism amongst other types of xenophobia and intolerance. Although, not identical, it was concluded that racial discrimination occurs through casteism on the basis of descent, nullifying their equal enjoyment of human rights and diminishing 'democracy' (Muigai, 2011). Regardless of how the abuse is defined, it is clear that "its noxious and pervasive character is sufficient enough to invite international attention and condemnation" (Narula, 2015; Page 260).

It is true that theories of race had disastrous consequences in Germany. Three centuries prior to that it had already provided the ideological justification for slavery, indentureship, and colonisation. The application of race as a category to understand social reality within the Indian sub-continent, came much after its use in colonisation. Already by this time, race was no longer the Boasian biological category, even in anthropology. It combined, as Beteille recalls, physical features with social customs, and was largely inconclusive. It was inconclusive, not because race did not exist in India, but because race is centrally about ideologies of domination, so that any effort to construct equivalent/equal biological types - [Aryan, Dravidian, Aryo-Dravidian and Mongolo-Dravidian] in an otherwise "homogenous" non-white culture is bound to fail. If instead, one looked at the use of the word *casta*, and its semantic field in comparison with the semantic field of race historically, the similarities between caste and race would be more than obvious.

As Flores suggests, democracy is impeded because of power vested significations positioning certain groups above others (Das, 2014). Although, India has persistently tried to distinguish caste from the evils of racial discrimination, both involve distinctions based on arbitrary characteristics that are used to dominate (Hanchinamani, 2001). For this reason, caste and race are equally destructive, caste is comparable, if not paramount to race (Reddy, 2005). Racialisation in India is a process of exclusion, caste draws boundaries to delineate who is and is not part of a group. Caste is “inflicted by birth, sanctified by religion and glorified by tradition” (Waldrop, 2004; Page 275). It is institutional and durable, to the extent that it has been referred to as “race plus” (Berg, 2007).

No social group is completely homogenous across region and time. The Scheduled Castes are no exception. However, it is perfectly legitimate to assert the commonality of experience across cultural, linguistic, regional, national and ethnic diversity. Ambedkar's coining of the word Dalit was part of this exercise in unifying the oppressed and forging a common cause. The current move to bring caste within the ambit of the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination is not a move by the United Nations alone. It is far more importantly an assertion by Dalit groups across the country, part of an effort to realise the visions of anti caste movements in the earlier part of this century. Is it a fact that Blacks and Dalits share a history of subjugation, slavery and social exclusion, that has changed only in form and continues untrammelled even today and that both must have recourse to common instruments of redress which is just as racist. Most people, in India and globally, are surprised today to hear of the presence of a racial problem in India. While most are aware of the caste discriminations so widely and shamelessly practiced in the country, it is seen as a problem completely independent of racial problems such as that in the United States between blacks and whites or those of the Apartheid. But in fact the caste system in India was transformed into a racist ideology within itself.

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