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Cataracts of Silence

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Cataracts of Silence: Race on the Edge of Indian Thought

Vijay Prashad

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In the warm summer of 1992, Ram Pyari sat with me on a grassy patch outside Indira Gandhi International Airport in New Delhi. A sanitation worker in the airport, Ram Pyari spoke to me of her predicament in tones familiar to working class people the world over. "Poor people make rich people. Without poor people how would rich people become rich? Who makes them rich? We make them rich, and as they get rich and powerful, they suck our blood."¹ Those who sat with us murmured their assent, and one spoke of how their supervisor was now building a new house with monies earned from bossing the workers around.

But Ram Pyari is not just any worker. She is a Dalit, a member of a community oppressed for social, political and economic reasons by communities that claim to be of a higher caste. One sixth of India's population are Dalits. These 160 million people are divided into numerous communities with distinct customs and histories, but they are bound together by a common history of grinding oppression.

Dalit literally translates to "broken people," with "broken" often glossed as oppressed. Since the 1970s, radical Dalits have claimed the word for their communities and their liberation. Dominant castes used to call them "untouchables" (*achhut*), Gandhian liberals call them Harijans ("children of god") and the Indian Republic calls them Scheduled Castes (because they are on a government schedule that entitles them to certain protections and affirmative actions). Most Dalits are like Ram Pyari: poor folk who work in the fields, factories, streets, shops, and public buildings -- wherever labor is in demand.

Unlike people of color in the U.S. or blacks in South Africa, Dalits are not physically distinguishable from other Indians. In some regions, occupation, surname, or dress can sometimes identify them, but Dalits are usually hard to pick out. The experience of Dalits shows that apartheid-like conditions can be imposed upon people who are marked by history, not appearance.

India's powerful independence movement (1885-1947) produced perhaps the world's most extensive system of affirmative action for oppressed peoples like the Dalits. And, since the 1970s, Dalits like Ram Pyari have organized to use these assets to overturn the caste system, organize for power, and fight for their rights. Yet Dalits still face an uphill struggle against starkly unequal conditions. The election slogan of the Bahujan Samaj Party (a Dalit-dominated, but largely opportunistic political group) in 1994 is still apt: "*Vote hamara, raj tumhara. Nahin chalega, nahin chalega*" ("We vote, you govern. This won't go on, this won't go on").

When national level discussions for the WCAR began in India last year, the problem of caste immediately stirred controversy. The Hindi-Right dominated government was chary to raise the issue of caste on the world stage, particularly at this juncture when it revels in the US-sponsored praises for being the world's largest democracy (and to secure India a much-coveted seat as a permanent member of the UN Security Council). The government seeks to avoid anything that makes India "look bad" on

the world stage. Apart from these international political reasons, the Hindu-Right government has a commitment to the perpetuation of caste discrimination. Not only are its ranks filled with representatives of the dominant castes, but its public policy platforms frequently privilege the rights of those dominant castes who hold wealth over the rest of society (of oppressed castes and religious minorities). Furthermore, allied organizations of the Hindu-Right have even convened religious conclaves given to the topic of a formal “revival” of strict Brahmanical social organizations, such as *varnashramadharma* or the four-fold division of *varnas* (the four social orders, Brahman, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras). On 7 February 2001, the External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh noted that “we must ensure that the Conference does not lose sight of its focus on racism.” In other words, the Hindu-Right would then be able to preserve itself not only as an anti-racist nationalist force, but that it could occlude the several discriminations and prejudices that structure the Indian polity.

Dalit rights activists have, naturally, been eager to raise the question of caste discrimination on the international stage, particularly since this government (in power since 1998) has been the first to block discussion of caste in international forums. Martin Macwan, national head of the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights, reminds us that “in earlier international forums, notably the Committee on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, the Government of India had successfully taken up the issue of caste-based discrimination. Why is it insisting that caste is an ‘internal’ matter?”² The idea that caste is an “internal” matter is specious, mainly because “caste” as we know it today is decidedly fostered by a combination of Indian social relations, European-driven colonialism, and global capitalism. These three factors produce what we know as caste today, since the practice cannot claim to be an ahistorical reflection of what one reads in Sanskrit texts. Caste, then, is not “internal,” but a form of social discrimination that is in conversation with similar forms elsewhere. It is in this spirit that most Dalit rights activists want to hold the international discussion.

It should be said, however, that there are some that want to reduce caste to a form of race, and therefore make a strong connection between the anti-racist work and the anti-caste work. Afrocentrics and Dalitocentrics are particularly notable here, especially with the claim that Dalits are “negritos” and that they suffer oppression at the hands of their “Aryan” oppressors, just as black folk around the world are held down by white folk. That the evidence for race as biology has been discredited does not seem to bother the indigenistas, many of whom deploy old racist texts to make their claims. One reason many indigenistas use the language of race in an unreconstructed manner is because they get ideological sustenance from a simple-minded US race politics, where the black-white dyad drives the political landscape. Indeed, in an interview with me, a leading US-based Afrocentric scholar who was instrumental in the creation of the Afro-Dalit thesis conceded that “I feel bad about it. I think I oversimplified the situation of Dalits to make it palatable to a [US] Black constituency. I gave the impression that Dalits are Black people.” Nevertheless, he argued that “I think large sections of Dalits would be seen as Black people if they lived anywhere else.”³ One of the dangers of US imperialist hegemony is that the global anti-imperialist agenda may also end up being set in US anti-imperialist terms. That is, the anti-racist program for organizations and activists from across the global might replicate the terms of the US movement. Race, then, as a central category for the struggle may be self-evident in the US context, but it may not be as useful in other settings. The enthusiasm for epidermal determinism occurs despite the Dalitcentric editor V. T. Rajshekar’s early warning that “in India, it is no longer easy to distinguish a touchable from an Untouchable, especially for foreigners (unlike in the US where the difference between skin colors is more pronounced).”⁴ Whether it was ever possible to tell caste by skin color is a question for debate, but certainly to make such judgements now is rather impossible.

In this paper, I will offer a brief overview of the history of the caste concept, allied as it has been since the modern period with its kin term of race. No discussion on caste can be conducted

without a discussion of the fight against discrimination in South Asia. Then, I offer an analysis of the fight against caste in contemporary India, as well as a few suggestions for the international engagement in this struggle. The problem of the Dalit struggle is posed front and center in this paper not to ignore other problems of caste, but to stress, with the Dalit leader B. R. Ambedkar, that “the problem of Untouchability [and caste] is a problem of the class struggle.”⁵

Apartheid by Any Name.

When the Portuguese first landed in the southwestern coast of India in 1498, they came upon a form of social organization to which they gave the name caste (from *castus*). What they referred to was not one system, but a series of social formations to which they gave one name. But there was never just one simple caste hierarchy in India. Even today there are some 4,635 ethnic communities, many with distinct land bases and systems of hierarchy. What the Portuguese called caste was probably a social form called *jati* (community). The Europeans saw *jati* as rigid and oppressive, perhaps forgetting their own rigid feudal social order. *Jati* hierarchies emerged from the ancient world in various forms: occupations, marriage bonds, dietary habits, and religious customs. Indeed, no one principle explains “the caste system.” Different *jatis* attained dominance in different parts of southern Asia, but all commanded the fealty and labor of others based on their monopoly over land and force. Over time, these others would come to be branded as “Untouchables.” Historian Suvira Jaiswal, who is an expert in ancient South Asian history, has written a wonderful account of the complex genesis of caste and of the myriad genealogies that can be drawn for each and every caste.⁶ There is no subcontinental-wide caste system, since each locality produced various forms of local oppression – where those who came to dominance, in and around the fight against Buddhism (and other *Sramanic* orders), adopted ideas of superiority. Many of these xenophobic and elitist ideas articulated with and drew from the Brahmanic texts of an earlier era, notably with the *varnashramadharma* of the *Puranas* (the ancient system of differentiation known as *varna*, where society is divided into four categories, Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras). Endogamy, ritual ranking and class power are three of the most important forces that constitute, in varying degrees, the complex of social differentiation and power in South Asian pre-modernity. There was nothing polite about the way the dominant *jatis* made their demands. Dalits fought off routine violence from dominant *jatis*, who, in turn, tried to erect vicious mechanisms to control the will of Dalits. Like the US South and South Africa, the Dalits could touch all manner of dominant *jati* things, if it was a way for them to provide labor. But, when the Dalits worked for themselves, then their touch was seen by the dominant *jatis* as a form of social pollution. Dalit women worked in the homes of the dominant *jatis*, and they fell prey to the sexual violence of elite men. However, these men disdained from any other interactions with the women.

When the Europeans began to conquer and administer the landmass of South Asia in the 18th Century, they began to pay careful attention to the social order that lay before them. The anthropologist Bernard Cohn has shown us that the British impact on South Asian social life was decisive, mainly through the classification regime set in place by the colonial rulers.⁷ Certainly, work on two oppressed castes (Dalits) shows us that the British intervention transformed their relations to production and power: the Balmikis, as Chuhras, and the Jatavs, as Chamars, lived with control over land, as well as shares of the commons, until the British land officials decided, mainly in the late 19th Century, that these Dalits should work only as drudge labor and not toil on land that was their own.⁸ What was the reason for this British response and how was it put into place? The reason was the Haitian Revolution of 1791-92 (in the aftermath of the French Revolution) and of the birth of raciology as a means to justify the brutal control over labor with dark skin. In 1793, Jeremy Bentham,

otherwise quite clear about the importance of the “rights of man,” asked “Would the declaration of rights translate into *Sanscrit*? Would *Bramin*, *Chetree*, *Bice*, *Sooder*, and *Hallochore* meet on equal ground?” Being culturally relativist *avant la lettre*, and justifying the rule of joint-stock multinational corporations like the English East India Company, Bentham noted that “if it is to be determined that they must have masters, you will then look out for the least bad ones that could take them: and after all that we have heard I question whether you would find any less bad than our English company.” Hegel, after the Thermidor in Paris and in Port au Prince, checked his enthusiasm for freedom, with the caveat that “universal freedom can produce no positive work or deed, only *negative action* remains to it; it is the *fury of destruction*.” In 1822-23, Hegel, as Bentham had earlier, said that “the English, or rather the East India Company, are the lords of the land [India]; for it is the necessary fate of Asiatic Empires to be subjected to Europeans,” and to be ruled without even a qualified kind of freedom for the darker skins.

The East India Company disregarded, indeed squelched, the dynamic for freedom within South Asia, as they produced knowledge about India that was, in many ways, the template for their land revenue and other public policies. The Europeans liked the stereotypical order of the “caste system” and they did all they could to bolster the Brahmanical order (in cahoots with their monarchical allies, many of whom retained their nominal rank, but lost their real power).⁹ An early text was *Hindu Manner, Customs and Ceremonies* (1816) by the Abbé Dubois, who had fled the French Revolution with the Missions Étrangères in 1792. “I believe caste division to be in many respects the *chef-d’oeuvre*, the happiest effort of Hindu legislation,” he wrote in this book that was very influential for the East India Company officialdom (the manuscript was purchased from Dubois by Major Wilkins, the Resident of Mysore, published by the EIC and distributed to its officials). “I am persuaded that it is simply and solely due to the distribution of the people into castes that India did not lapse into a state of barbarism, and that she preserved and perfected the arts and sciences of civilization whilst most other nations of the earth remained in a state of barbarism.” The point is taken further in his discussion of the Pariahs, the Parayars of the Tamil speaking regions. “I am persuaded that a nation of Pariahs left to themselves would speedily become worse than the hordes of cannibals who wander in the vast waste of Africa and would soon take to devouring each other.” If Africans can be ordered by the brutality of chattel slavery (in the Americas) and by a reconstructed tribalism (in the continent of Africa itself), then the dark skins of South Asia can be ordered and managed by the reconstruction of caste along imperial lines. The discourses of race and caste (as well as tribe), then, emerged simultaneously, as both terms enabled the Europeans to justify the expropriation of values from certain parts of the world to what was to become the center of the world economy: Europe. In the aftermath of the French Revolution, European conservatives justified their ill-gotten gains on the basis of race/caste, now rendered in terms of biology, and they continued their reliance upon military force on the basis of their imputed racial superiority. Caste-Tribe became the words used to index the lesser forms of social organization in India-Africa, social forms used by racial inferiors. This had labor effects: just as the labor power of the European (white) worker was commodified, the labor power of the darker skins was animalized, treated as something that required physical coercions to extract the maximum effort. The notion of race, then, was at the foundation of the reconstruction of caste in modern times.

In an act of bad faith, the European powers blamed the oppressed for their own oppression and they exculpated themselves from the manufacture of biological ideas of inferiority. Take Dubois again. “The idea that the [Dalit] was born to be in subjection to the other castes is so ingrained in his mind that it never occurs to the Pariah to think that his fate is anything but irrevocable. Nothing will ever persuade him that men are all made of the same clay, or that he has the right to insist on better treatment than that which is meted out to him.” But if Dubois and the early EIC officials asked the Parayars what they thought of their subjection, they would have got a different answer: when the colonial ethnographer, Thurston, did just this in 1909, the Parayars of the Tamil-speaking region told

him that they suffered the social indignity because of an ancient betrayal due to a linguistic error. Two poor brothers went to pray to the divinity, but they found a dead cow on the road. God instructed them to remove it. The elder brother said, *een thambi pappaan*, or “my younger brother will do it.” The divinity misheard him: *een thambi paappaan*, or “my younger brother is a Brahmin.” The elder became a Parayar, the younger a Brahmin. But Dubois did not care for this self-awareness. While the Balmikis tell a similar story, they end with one of the young men declaring, “I wish to make a nation of my own.” But the political economy does not allow this resolution to their oppression.

In the transition to capitalism, Marx argued, labor is freed in a “double sense, free from the relations of clientage, bondage and servitude, and secondly free of all belongings and possessions, and of every objective, material form of being, *free of all property*, dependent on the sale of its labor capacity or on begging, vagabondage and robbery as its only source of income.”¹⁰ The means of production are wrenched from the workers at the same time as they are free to sell their labor-power as a commodity on the market. At the periphery of capital, labor is made free only to be damned to unfreedom through the Brahmano-colonial mythology of an ancient division of labor known as the caste system. Caste, as a form of social relations, certainly predates colonial rule. However, caste as we know it today was radically transformed during the colonial period. Colonial sociology and policy worked together to expropriate Dalits from the soil (many then turn to cities to be hired into specific occupations, Balmikis as sweepers and Chamars as leather-workers, when both worked as agricultural workers before). In Punjab, for instance, the land laws in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries specifically noted that Dalits, as drudge labor, should not be allowed to own land, a marked departure from the facts of land holding at that time: these Dalits lost control over their resources and fell prey to the direct, and brutal exploitation of newly landed classes, as well as of the wiles of capitalism’s economic cycles. Modern employment was segregated along a stereotyped version of “native tradition” despite the fact that these “traditional” modes had not previously existed (except perhaps in ancient Brahmanical texts). This process demonstrates how labor is freed in the Indian colonies -- freed, that is, into caste.

In 1999, Human Rights Watch (New York) published a report entitled *Broken People: Caste Violence Against India’s “Untouchables.”* HRW found that the situation of Dalits was deplorable and called their condition “hidden apartheid.” There is nothing *hidden* about the violence against Dalits, one that moved M. K. Gandhi (1869-1948) in the 1930s to bring their struggles to the center of the Indian national movement. His was a liberal gesture, far from the radicalism of some sections of the politically active Dalit movement led by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1956). Ambedkar, a Dalit from western India, felt that ‘it is wrong to say that the problem of Untouchables is a social problem,’ a reference here to Gandhi’s attempt to create social reform. Rather, he argued, “the problem of the Untouchables is fundamentally a political problem (of minority versus majority groups).” It is also, as we’ve seen above, an economic problem, one of land rights and control over capital. Rather than become the “mere recipients of charity,” Ambedkar called upon the Dalits to “educate, organize and agitate” for a struggle which he called “the reclamation of human respectability.”

Ambedkar tapped into a long history of resilience among Dalits, and one can get an intimation of these vibrant Dalit struggles from the songs of Dalit poets. Raidas (1414-1540), for instance, sang that “don’t ask of jati, we are all equal in the eyes of divinity.” Or Kabirdas (1440-1518) who asked his fellows to seek truth in themselves and in their acts. By the 18th Century, the region of Punjab was treated to the anti-clerical songs of Bulleh Shah who sang that “God permeates each and every house, and he permeates every human soul.” These songs against hierarchy based on a claim to religion remind us that few among the oppressed took their condition for granted. The tradition of protest does not exist only amongst the most oppressed castes, but the history of the Lingayats, Jains, and others, shows us that middle-castes too found the entire ensemble inhuman. (Incidentally, there is not even

agreement among ancient Brahmins on the question of caste. The *Upanishads*, in the 8th Century BCE, took a strong position against Brahmanic supremacy, in contrast to the *Rigveda*: the story of King Jansruti Pautrayana who went to the carter Raikva for education is instructive).

Over the past two hundred years, more self-conscious acts of anti-jati campaigns resulted in a further awareness of the outrageous of untouchability and anti-Dalit violence. Just as Frederick Douglass reminded the world that “power concedes nothing without a demand,” Jyotibai Phule (1826-1890) declared that “we know perfectly well that the Brahmin will not descend from his self-raised pedestal and meet his low caste brethren on an equal footing without a struggle.” Jyotibai and Savitribai Phule founded the Satya Shodhak Samaj (Truth Seeking Society) in September 1873 to educate the oppressed jatis as well as to conduct cross-jati marriages, radical acts against hierarchy. Alongside the Phules, Dalit peasants rose in hundreds of revolts against the yoke of British colonialism, local landlords and moneylenders. These are the precursors to the vast struggles of the next century, movements such as Sri Narayan Guru’s SNDP Yogam, E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker’s Self-Respect Movement and the work of Ambedkar.

2. Dalits as Citizens.

In 1947, the Indian national movement ejected British colonialism and inaugurated a period of national construction. These were heady days, as anti-colonial movements from Indonesia to Ghana took power of States to make freedom something tangible for the masses. India was no exception. The first Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964) was impatient to rework the oppressive present, so the State in the 1950s took a few bold steps toward the emancipation of the Dalits. Ambedkar is known, in many Dalit circles, as the architect of the Indian Constitution. Recruited by Nehru, and well-known for his outspoken views on the need for a wide sense of democracy, Ambedkar pushed through many enlightened articles into the Constitution, and, as India’s first Law Minister, he was instrumental in creating a very progressive legal regime to ensure protections for Dalits as well as mechanisms for their emancipation. If there was no political movement of Dalits to back-up Ambedkar, the judiciary provided that cover. When the government’s protections of freedom for Dalits was challenged in the Courts, a Supreme Court justice argued that “advantages secured due to historical reasons cannot be considered a fundamental right guaranteed by the Constitution.” When Martin Luther King, Jr., traveled to India in 1959 he was stunned by the State’s monetary and legal commitment to Dalit emancipation. When Nehru was asked if this discriminated against other jatis, he replied that “well it may be, but this is our way of atoning for the centuries of injustices we have inflicted upon these people.”

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