

Caste and Race: Discrimination by any Name

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The union government's present position vis-a-vis the upcoming UN conference on racial and related discrimination worldwide seems to be the following: discuss race please, not caste; caste is our very own and not at all as bad as you think. The gross hypocrisy of that position has been lucidly underscored by Kancha Ilaiah (*The Hindu*, June 11). Explicitly the world community is to be cheated out of considering the matter on the technicality that caste does not as a concept tantamount to a racial category. Internally, however, allowing the issue to be put on agenda at the said conference would, we are patriotically admonished, damage the country's image. Somehow, consistently under the current BJP-ruled dispensation India's virtual beliefs elbow out concrete actualities. Inverted representations, as we know, have often been deployed in human histories as balm for the forsaken – religion being the most persistent of such inversions. Yet, we would humbly submit that if globalising our markets is thought good for the 'national' pocket, globalising our social inequities may not be so bad for the mass of our people. After all, racism was as uniquely institutionalised in South Africa as caste discrimination has been within our Hindu social order; why then can't we permit the world community to express itself on the latter with a fraction of the zeal with which, through the years, we pronounced on the former?

As to the technicality about whether or not caste is admissible into an agenda about race (that the conference is also about 'related discriminations' tends to be forgotten). A reputed sociologist has recently argued that where race is a 'biological' category caste is a 'social' one. Having earlier fiercely opposed implementation of the Mandal Commis-

sion Report, the said sociologist is at least to be complemented for now at least admitting, however tangentially, that caste discrimination is a reality, although, in his view, incompatible with racial discrimination. One would like quickly to offer the hypothesis that biology, in important ways that affect the lives of many millions, is in itself perhaps a social construction. But let us look at the matter in another way.

If it is agreed – as per the position today at which anthropological and allied scientific determinations rest – that the entire race of homo sapiens derived from an originary black African female (called 'Eve') then one is hard put to understand how, on some subsequent ground, ontological distinctions are to be drawn either between races or castes. Let us also underline the distinction between the supposition that we are all god's children and the rather more substantiated argument about our descent from 'Eve', lest both positions are thought to be equally diversionary. It then stands to reason that all subsequent distinctions are, in modern parlance, 'constructed' ones, and, like all ideological constructions, attributable to changing equations between knowledge and power among human communities through contested histories here, there, and elsewhere.

This line of thought receives, thankfully, extremely consequential buttress from the findings of the Human Genome project. Contrary to earlier (chiefly 19th century colonial) persuasions on the subject of race, as well as, one might add, the somewhat infamous Jensen offerings in the 20th century from America, those findings deny genetic difference between 'races'. If anything, they suggest that environmental factors impinge on gene-function, as a dialectic seems to unfold between nature and culture. It would thus seem that 'biology' as the constitution of

pigmentation enters the picture first only as a part of that dialectic. Taken together, the originary mother stipulation and the Genome findings ought indeed to furnish ground for human equality across the board, as well as yield policy initiatives towards equitable material dispensations aimed at building a global order where, in Hegel's stirring formulation, only the rational constitutes the right. Such, sadly, is not the case as everyday fresh arbitrary grounds for discrimination are constructed in the interests of sectional dominance.

We know that beginning in the late 18th century most colonial scholars of India constructed a sociology which sought to explain Indian caste society as having originated in racial segregation. In her celebrated work *Interpreting Early India* Romila Thapar offers a wide-ranging account of that historical construction across the 19th century. The basis for that construction was located by such people as Max Muller, August Pictet, Christian Lassen and others in comparative philology – in an 'equation of language and race'. As relations were drawn between Sanskrit and Greek, Latin and other European languages, a common Indo-European root was argued. Thus the upper castes in India were seen as descendants of Aryans as an Aryan-Dravidian divide was stipulated, parallel to the Aryan-Semitic divide in Europe. Furthermore, the Aryans were now supposed to be superior to the non-Aryans since the former were seen as 'the initial conquerors who had founded civilisations in Europe and Asia'. Such a construction 'also became acceptable to the new middle class elite in India as it could call itself Aryan, differentiate itself from lower castes believed to be non-Aryan and even seek a connection with the British rulers who represented British 'Aryandom.'

However interestingly ideological these representations may have been, they were to remain persuasive. And the reason is not far to seek. The *Rig Veda* which has continued to be seen as a founding document on the Hindu social order furnishes references to an initial division of society into the 'arya-varna' and the 'dasa-varna', the latter described as short-statured and dark-complexioned (RV, 1.130.8; 5.29.10; 9.41.1, Thapar, *Interpreting Early India*, p 30). Further, of the two terms most frequently used to define caste ('varna' and 'jati') varna which is employed to categorise the four groups ('brahmana', 'kshatriya', 'vaisya', 'sudra') derives from

the root meaning 'colour'. Romila Thapar infers that "the connotation of colour is symbolic since the four colours associated with the groups are white, red, yellow and black"; yet it remains a telling fact that the package has 'white' at the top and 'black' at the bottom. And what a tale, worldwide, hangs thereby. So that even when one concedes readily that caste-formation as a dynamic historical process has been an evolving one, taking in conquest, political formation, occupation, and religious-sectarian factors, the white/black binary of the Rig Vedic text continues to resonate in, for example, such flaunted notions as of the 'suvarna' (the golden-hued) in opposition to the dark-complexioned 'dasa', denied access, for instance, to knowledge on that basis of a constructed inferiority of status. After all, one of the things that Lord Rama does as he is returning from exile (Valmiki text) is to behead the Sudra Sambook for presuming to engage in meditation. Thus racial totems of a hierarchy were built that also translated into

notions of the pure and the polluted and commensurately sacred and profane space was apportioned to the castes through India's unedifying Hindu social history.

It is, therefore, not conclusively clear that caste discrimination may be set apart wholly from constructions of race. Nor is it clear that important functionaries of the union government disagree. Consider, for example, how the honourable secretary to the human resource development ministry views the matter. Writing euphorically on the exclusive deserts of the Kashmiri pandits as a group, he asserts that such exclusivity "befits the representative of a race composed entirely of brahmins"; there is more: their 'fair' complexion and 'light blue or green eyes' evidence that they are "pure Aryans and have retained the purity of their blood". So, brahmin by 'race'/aryans/pure of 'blood' – indeed the Fuhrer could not have said it better (*Kashmiri Pandits: Looking to the Future*, APH Publishing House, Ansari Road, Delhi 2001, pp 13-14). **EPW**