

Caste in the mirror of race

D.L. SHETH



THE demand to equate caste oppression with racial discrimination has triggered a new debate in the dalit movement. A section of dalit activists have initiated a global campaign for incorporating the issue of untouchability in India within the wider western discourse on racism. This campaign gained visibility at the Geneva conference attended by several dalit intellectuals and activists as well as some government representatives and was further strengthened at the World Congress against Racism and Xenophobia (WCAR) held recently in Durban. Among other objectives, it aims at making the United Nations accept that caste oppression be officially treated as a form of racial discrimination and, as such, an international campaign be launched against it under the aegis of the world organization.

Notably, political parties like the BSP and the Republican Party who claim to represent dalit interests did not join the debate and the campaign remained more or less confined to the NGOs. Particularly active were the organizations attached to the World Council of Churches. Indeed, some of the organizations leading this movement even hoped to assume political leadership of dalits, replacing those whose primary political preoccupation, in their view, has only been with electoral calculus. This new, aggressive politics of NGOs has contributed to a situation where anyone even in slight disagreement with these organizations is labelled a supporter of untouchability and brahmanism.

As for the attitude of the government, it was, as ever, a knee-jerk reaction. Whether it is an issue of violation of human rights by its own institutional agencies, of child labour or the demand for declaring tribes as indigenous peoples, we witness a similar conditioned response from the government. If those opposing a particular policy do not achieve a degree of coherence about the terms in which to oppose the policy, it gives the government an additional excuse to ignore the opposition.

Yet, I believe, the political implications of viewing the problem of caste from the perspective of race could be quite serious and should, therefore, be examined as dispassionately as possible. I would, however, like to make it clear at the very outset that I see nothing wrong in the internationalization of caste. First, caste discrimination is by no means confined to Indian society alone. It is found in several countries of South Asia and East Asia, even though its nature and extent may vary. Even untouchability is not an exclusively Indian practice. For example, because of their long association with leatherwork in the past, the Buraku of Japan suffer a predicament comparable to that of the chamars of India. The case of the Peekchongas of Korea and Ragyappas of Tibet may also be cited in this context.

Second, if untouchability is a crime against humanity, which it indeed is, how on earth can we assume that all of humanity is

exhausted in the Indian nation state? The question of untouchability should not be seen as one of nationalism; it is about the right to be human. As such the question must be raised in all available and appropriate fora so that a powerful politics against its ideology and practice can be built up, both nationally and globally. It is necessary to construct a universal moral discourse against all types of social and cultural practices leading to different forms of sub-humanization of the excluded 'others'. This, however, should not compel us to mix metaphors/categories in a manner that might prove counter productive in devising a politics to counter the process of sub-humanization of specific population groups in society.

To enter into the debate about whether or not to equate caste with race would be futile. For, it is easy to show theoretically, sociologically and scientifically that the Asian phenomenon of caste is in some basic respects dissimilar to the western phenomenon of race. Race has a biological connotation whereas caste is a socio-cultural construct. It is obvious that like any other caste conglomeration, the dalits of different regions of India cannot be seen as of *one* race.

To be sure, both caste and race are hereditary. Unlike race, however, a caste formation is not determined by biological characteristics such as the colour of one's skin. It is a function of a complex socio-historical structure within which a social group is assigned a ritual status specifying a degree of purity or pollution attached to it, an occupation, and a specific range, within which its members can forge matrimonial alliances. Racism on the other hand is a form of social and political discrimination based on biologically manifest inter-group differences. In any case, the European

claims regarding the inherent superiority of one social group over the other have been thoroughly discredited.

While the fact that caste is different from race cannot be disputed, several aspects of injustice on account of racial discrimination in Europe, America and Africa appear similar to those perpetrated in the name of caste in India. The earlier generation of dalit leaders even started a Dalit Panther movement, drawing inspiration from the Black Panther movement in the US. A number of established dalit litterateurs have fruitfully used the idiom and imagery of the anti-apartheid movement to analyze and articulate dalit awareness and aspirations.

II

The fact of the matter is that the issue of caste vs. race is primarily political rather than academic, and must be understood as such. While it is true that no national society can objectively be divided into racial groups, for the idea of racial purity has been proved to be nonexistent, discrimination on the basis of a perceived notion of race is a reality. It is, therefore, irrelevant whether the notion of race is scientific or not. It is a socially, culturally and politically operative construct on the basis of which a section of the population is seen as the lesser and inferior 'other'. A racial division of 'us' and 'them' has thus become a prevalent classificatory scheme, even when the idea of race is scientifically rejected.

This scheme is informed by a culturally constructed belief that certain communities are lacking in specific biophysiological virtues because of the colour of their skin, a particular shape of nose or a specific type of hair texture. This biocultural belief,

however, is sought to be presented as a 'scientific truth'. Even after the legitimacy of such beliefs is conclusively repudiated, the structures of associated ideas and prejudices continue to affect inter-community relations. The racial discourse is thus designed to marginalize certain groups and deprive them of normal individual and group rights. That is why, despite its scientific invalidation, racism not only survives but continues to grow. It finds its expression in the inter-community relations within a national society as also in relations between nation states. Indeed, racism today is more prevalent in international relations than in inter-community relations in non-western societies.

Having lost its scientific basis, race, like caste, has become a cultural and political means of marginalizing disempowered groups in society. In spite of this obvious similarity, thus seen, the dalit problem is fundamentally different in its constitution from the problem of the blacks.

But what if the demand to see caste as race is accepted by the United Nations, and casteism is 'officially' viewed as a manifestation of racism? If this happens, the social and democratic movements against caste in India will have to revise their ideological and organizational objections to the caste system that have been developed and effectively used to counter it. This would be unacceptable to the leaders of the dalit movement, when they begin to confront such objections on the ground, in everyday politics.

True, the 'international community' understands racial discrimination more

easily than casteism. Yet, if the vocabulary of race is given currency merely to make caste as an understandable, palatable category to the international community, many significant achievements of the movements against caste and untouchability would be lost to the anticaste movement in India.

At one level, the discourse issuing from the Durban conference is welcome. It has drawn the world's attention towards the inhuman oppression and human rights violations of the dalits. But the more important question is: How will the conceptual and ideological consequences of viewing caste as race affect the dalit movement?

A possible consequence might be that the readymade conceptual categories developed by the anti-racist movement would replace those developed by the long experience of dalit struggle. Today the ideology of casteism and untouchability finds expression in the context of perceived higher/lower status of communities, not in the vocabulary of biophysical discrimination. Casteist ideology uses a moral and religious language. Categories determined by a religiously sanctioned social hierarchy fix the limits of purity and impurity within which social groups are assigned different status. The entire system helps legitimize the association of social hierarchy with ritual purity. Racism does not operate in this manner. The language of racial discrimination is about fixing stable and total alienation of communities, whereas that of caste-discrimination leaves the scope for appropriating social and cultural spaces for caste-communities and thus expands their

communal and secular interests simultaneously.

Because of their position at the bottom of a hierarchy based system, dalits are the most deprived among the lower castes. Even today most of them are condemned to live more or less in a subjugated condition. Yet, they are not outside the system. Rather, they may even be kept forcibly 'within' the system. On the other hand, the ideology of racism totally alienates those who are biosocially demarcated as the 'other'. The 'ruling races' can accomplish such domination through a blatant exercise of power. Moral or religious arguments have little scope in racial discourse. To put it differently, democratic politics can obviate caste status but not do the same thing so easily for a race. In a racial system, non-whites continue to exist outside the moral-ideological universe of the whites. In the case of caste based discrimination, however, moral language can be deployed to ensure and elicit co-operation even of the subjugated. In the racial context this can be achieved only through power.

Racism is thus practiced through use of coercive power, whereas caste-based discrimination depends to a significant extent on the consent of the oppressed (which could conceivably be withdrawn in democratic politics). Accordingly, casteist society imposes certain definitions on communities as if they represent their own self-image as communities so that they accept their state of being as 'natural'.

At the root of caste oppression is the notion of purity/impurity. Untouchability should, therefore, be understood as an ideology that goes far deeper and has much more complex meaning systems than any form of racial discrimination that is primarily a

relationship of power between two or more biologically demarcated groups.

Another important difference between race and caste is that the Indian caste society allows an opportunity for upward mobility to the 'lower' castes under certain conditions, although such opportunities were in practice rarely available to castes in the fifth *varna* (pancham). Significantly, however, a large number of such castes claim that historically they were the upper castes, but were pushed down in the hierarchy for practicing a 'polluting' occupation for survival – as an *apad dharma*.

Today's powerful community of nadars in Tamilnadu, for example, were considered untouchable in the past. The edavas of Kerala, who today have a decisive voice in the politics of the state, were once 'untouchables'. Within a span of 50 years, greater occupational diversification has been witnessed in these two communities than even the agricultural and artisan caste groups otherwise higher in traditional social hierarchy. Many members of these erstwhile untouchable communities have not only broken out of traditional caste occupations but have succeeded in registering socio-economic progress through employment in the industrial and other sectors of the modern economy.

There are other examples of those in the hereditary occupation of cleaning who, at

least individually, have succeeded in acquiring a better social status. Obviously, it is inconceivable to even theoretically establish claims of upward mobility for a subjugated race, unless, of course, it succeeds in changing the power relationship as was done by the South African blacks who also happened to be a majority. It would sound baseless and illogical, for instance, to talk about two races being the same in the past or becoming so in the future.

But two hierarchically differently located castes can plausibly lay claim to have enjoyed similar and equal status in the past and can visualize attaining equality vis-[^]-vis each other in the future. This makes it possible for members of such unequal castes to claim equal opportunity. It is for this reason perhaps that the dalits have been able to utilize the constitutional provision of reservation in India far more effectively than the blacks have done in USA. We, therefore, cannot rule out the possibility that the progress registered by the nadars and edevas will not be replicated by other dalit castes in other parts of India in the new century.

In brief, if the modes of caste and racial oppression are different, the movements against them must also adopt different strategies. To put it differently, the process of democratization and modernization affords far greater possibilities of uprooting caste oppression than of doing away with racism. Victims of caste oppression can subvert the system from within, using ideas from without. The victims of racial discrimination can only locate themselves in a position of permanent opposition, but cannot subvert the system while acting as insiders.

It is not that those appealing to the United Nations to consider caste discrimination as

identical to racial discrimination are devoid of this basic understanding. If nevertheless they continue to raise this demand, it is because they hope to derive certain advantages for dalits through this route – advantages that are not available through the current political and constitutional provisions.

Perhaps the first significant gain that they see in adopting such a position is that caste based injustice would be globally understood almost instantly within the given categories of racial discrimination, making it easier to raise the problem at international fora. To fit one's case in readymade, given categories does save one the trouble of thinking through and communicating the specificities of one's own situation. The protagonists of the campaign are, however, not prepared to face the question as to what impact this international recognition of caste as race might have on the more than a century old anti-caste movement of the dalits. Would the promise of a few short term advantages deprive the dalits of benefits gained through a long movement?

Even more serious is the apprehension that in the anxiety of fitting the purely Asian category of caste into the western template of race, the dalits might allow the socially emancipatory perspective of the movement into accepting for itself an identity of permanent victimhood. Those searching for arguments in favour of equating caste with race should, therefore, first try to foresee the possible problems they may create for themselves and the dalit movement.

If caste based discrimination can be construed as racial discrimination, will not the brahmans of Tamilnadu, pundits of Kashmir, Buddhists of Ladakh and the religious and linguistic minorities in various states avail of the opportunity to portray themselves as victims of racial discrimination? Once castes other than the dalits are also considered a race, casteism would begin to be understood in a bland and generic international idiom rather than in its distinctively Indian character that hurts dalits in a different and deeper way than racism does the blacks. Racism casts the 'other' away; casteism draws the 'other' nearer. The former creates an adversary, the latter a 'willing' victim.

Another aspect that needs to be considered is the impact this move would have on the caste structures in communities outside the Hindu fold. Every religious minority in India has its own dalits – the discriminated 'other'. Claims and reassurances to the contrary notwithstanding, the Christians, Sikhs, Muslims and even the dalits themselves have failed to break free of the scourge of caste.

Even conversions did not solve the problems of the victims of caste oppression and that is why the converted dalits are rightly demanding reservation benefits. Seen in this context, it seems that those campaigning for equating caste with race are looking for an opportunity to dilute the issue of caste polarization and discrimination within their own minority communities. This would eventually pave the way for the 'racialization' of minority politics. It is therefore necessary that the impact of this discourse on the dalit movement be examined both from the immediate as well as from the long term perspective.

One immediate consequence might be that the constitutionally guaranteed provisions for reservations could come under question. The opponents of reservation would get another chance to reopen the policy and place it at the centre of the newly revived political and constitutional debates. Even worse, the moral passion against untouchability in the wider public sphere may lose its political edge. The non-dalit radical consciousness, seeds of which were sown by the rich egalitarian traditions of anti-caste movements, may also be blunted by the new, exclusionary politics of dalit discourse epitomized in the Durban debates

Ambedkar's message to get educated, organized and agitated – itself a product of anti-caste discourse – might appear pale in the midst of a new discourse which celebrates victimhood of the dalits rather than cultivate their social and political power to overthrow the structure of caste dominance. Indeed, the whole range of Baba Saheb's ideas might face a big question mark as there was no scope in his scheme of things for viewing caste through the prism of race.

To put it in his words: 'The purpose of the caste system cannot be considered to be a prevention of racial intermixing, nor can this system be understood as a means of preserving purity of blood. The truth is that even before the caste system came into being, the various races had already got intermixed in India as far as culture and blood is concerned. To consider different castes as if they are different races would be to completely distort the facts. What racial similarity can there be between a brahman of Punjab and a brahman of Madras? What

racial similarity can there be between an untouchable of Bengal and an untouchable of Madras? What racial similarity can there be between a brahman of Punjab and a chamar of Punjab? What racial similarity can there be between a brahman of Madras and a paria of Madras? Caste system does not divide races; it is the name of social division within a race' (Bhim Rao Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, Anand Sahitya Sadan, Aligarh, 1989, p. 40).

III

The campaign to equate caste with race might have the following possible consequences for the dalit movement:

* The culture of voluntary organizations would make inroads into the dalit movement leading to its NGOization. As a result, the movement might distance itself from the mainstream of electoral and party politics, and thus reduce for itself the possibility of sharing governmental power and may construct its role in terms of a permanent confrontation between the establishment and its victims.

* This new tendency might – on the basis of the exigencies associated with the apolitical, developmental and foreign funds – subvert the original and abiding thrust of the movement as a socially emancipatory and politically participative process.

* A politics of a permanent 'minoritization' of the dalits might be initiated. If this happens, the prospects of dalit-bahujan unity would vastly diminish.

* By framing caste in the racial discourse, dalit politics will be trapped in the situation of opposing the immediate, rather than the

distant but real oppressor. More specifically, it would lead to a dalit verses OBC polarization. The first signs of this have already appeared in the form of attempts by some academics to project Mandalite and dalit politics as two separate and antagonistic models of politics.

* It is likely that the upper castes may eventually support the position that the government opposed at Durban, i.e. of equating caste with race because it might give them another opportunity to reopen the issue of caste based reservations.

* This may result in a total communalization of the politics of religious minorities as that would help hide caste discrimination within minority groupings and present themselves as racially discriminated essentialized entities.

* The process of incorporation of dalits into the middle classes – part of the current thrust of anti-caste movements – might give way to ethnicization of dalit politics.

* The debate that is currently conducted in terms of Manuvad vs. the bahujan might be converted into one between the state and the dalits.

* The dalit movement might witness a new factionalization between the governmental (*sarkari*) and ‘radical’ dalits, leading to a further fracturing of the movement.

* Symbolic politics might begin to overshadow the real politics of power sharing in the government. There is a danger that dalit politics might be caught in the whirlpool of that brand of ‘twice-born’ politics that attempts to render the state powerless and empower market forces. This when the dalit and other backward communities are getting closer to political

power and the upper castes are being pushed away from it because of Mandalite politics.

IV

The crucial question in the whole debate is: When will we shed our colonial mentality and give up attempts to understand Indian reality through western categories of analysis? In this context, the usually invisible process of globalization of ideas and concepts must also be taken into account. Caste is a South Asian reality, most densely manifested in India. Instead of trying to trim it to fit into the readymade western category of race, can we not try to understand social discriminations in the U.S., Canada, other western countries and Japan through the category of caste? Such an exercise would surely strengthen the positive aspect of comparative sociology.

So far, we have been taught to ignore and reject the experience of our own society. We have attempted to see images of caste in the mirror of class and look for a purely hierarchy-based social system in the mirror of the West. Instead of trying to see caste through the mirror of race, let us now also try to see race in the mirror of caste. It is understandable if the victims of racial discrimination were to develop an elementary understanding of caste through race, but we have no such compulsion. In fact, after losing its scientific-ideological basis, the nature of racial discrimination has in practice largely approximated caste discrimination.

South African apartheid is a case in point. At the root of apartheid is an ideology of white superiority, very similar to the brahmanic ideology that legitimizes caste. Even after being legally removed, this

ideology persists in social behaviour and seeks to project the majority of the population as sub-human. It is also essential to note the predicament of gypsies in Europe, probably the most oppressed community in the whole world. While they do not suffer from untouchability, they have no rights and are totally ostracized and expelled. They are not allowed to stay at one place and their oppression is not even talked about. They are truly the international dalits.

The origin of the Buraku of Japan is also similar to that of the untouchables of India. Even after giving up their traditional occupation of leatherwork, they have been unable, in practice, to obtain any social-civil rights in Japanese society. If these examples of discrimination are seen from a caste instead of race perspective, it will surely enrich the understanding of their condition and the ways of overcoming them. The international community too will then be able to take more effective initiatives against such discrimination. From the same perspective, appropriate categories of analysis might evolve to understand the problem of American blacks and the indigenous peoples of North America.

The internationalization of caste based injustice is in itself a worthwhile objective provided it strengthens rather than weakens the institutional and organized efforts against casteism. This is possible only if caste is presented as caste and not forcibly fitted into the category of race, and at the same time an attempt is made to promulgate an international charter against caste discrimination. This might yield new perspectives on those forms of discrimination in other societies of the world

that have hitherto been seen only in the context of race.

* The original Hindi version will appear in Abhay Dube (ed.), *Adhunikta ke Ayane men Dalit*, CSDS (forthcoming), 2002.

