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RACISM IN INDIA

Ania Loomba

Race, to adapt Stuart Hall’s words about blackness, is “a narrative, a story, a history. Something constructed, told, spoken, not simply found.” Upon such narration depends its visibility, its centrality to the way we understand history, philosophy, and literature, and how we conceive our present political commitments. Although recent scholarship has investigated the multiple lineages and histories of racial difference, and the different philosophies in which racial thinking was embedded, the dominant narrative about it still conceives of it as a post-Enlightenment ideology forged on the twin anvils of colonialism and Atlantic slavery, and one that hinges on pseudo-biological notions of human differentiation, especially somatic color. Many histories of racial differentiation that do not fit into this narrative are neglected. In South Asia, for instance, while ideologies of difference are not exactly neglected, there is a strenuous effort made to deny that they are racial. In my understanding, ideologies are racial in effect when somatic color or other physiognomic traits, religion, ritual status, or geographic origin are perceived to be inherited, innate, or indicate some essential truth about a group of people, and when these perceptions justify the treatment of this group as intellectually or morally inferior, its systematic oppression, and the policing of the boundaries between it and the more privileged members of society. This is the understanding that will guide my discussion of key philosophies that have shaped the racial landscape of India, with occasional references to other parts of South Asia. As I do so, I will also trace what has been at stake in the effort to align them with, or to exclude them from, the established narrative about race.

On September 30, 2014, the New York Times carried a story with the heading “Beating of African Students by Mob in India Prompts Soul-Searching on Race.” It described a horrific incident in which three men from Gabon and Burkina Faso were practically lynched in a New Delhi metro station by men who shouted “Bharat Mata Ki Jai,” or “Victory for Mother India.” It was not clear what prompted this attack, but explanations included an allegation that they had misbehaved with women, and made “anti-India” comments. In January that year, another mob, led by a minister of the newly elected Delhi government, had dragged four young African women out of their beds at midnight, shouted racist slurs at them, held them captive, and forced them to urinate publically in order to undergo drug tests. The incident prompted widespread acknowledgment, rare in Indian media, that racism against Africans and other blacks is rampant in India. Since then many other such incidents have been publicized and discussed in India.
Such antipathy should not come as a surprise in a country where dark skin is widely reviled. Diepiyre Kuku, an American student in India, wrote in an English-language newsmagazine:

Racism in India is systematic and independent of the presence of foreigners of any hue. This climate permits and promotes this lawlessness and disdain for dark skin. Most Indian pop icons have light-damn-near-white skin. Several stars even promote skin-bleaching creams that promise to improve one’s popularity and career success. Matrimonial ads boast of fair, v. fair and v. very fair skin alongside foreign visas and advanced university degrees. Moreover, each time I visit one of Delhi’s clubhouses, I notice that I am the darkest person not wearing a work uniform. It’s unfair and ugly.7

These hostile attitudes to black Africans are not new, even though Africans have lived in India for many centuries not just as slaves but also as artisans, military commanders, traders, and even rulers.8 This complex history was reshaped during British rule in India. Even as the British characterized South Asians as inferior to Europeans, they suggested that the former were—intellectually and culturally—superior to blacks, who were, however, considered physically stronger.9

European racial hierarchies were reproduced at every level by South Asians, even by anti-colonial nationalists fighting British racism, as is evident from Mahatma Gandhi’s opinions about “kaffirs” in South Africa, from whom he sought to distance himself even as he protested white discrimination against Indians:

Ours is one continual struggle against a degradation sought to be inflicted upon us by the Europeans, who desire to degrade us to the level of the raw Kaffir whose occupation is hunting, and whose sole ambition is to collect a certain number of cattle to buy a wife with and, then, pass his life in indolence and nakedness.10

Efforts to build Afro-Asian solidarities in the postcolonial era were similarly complicated by negative attitudes to Africans. African students came in large numbers to study under new government of India schemes, but they found it hard to find social acceptance. Paternalism as well as racism marked the official relations between India and African countries.11 Similar attitudes have also shaped the mentalities of Indians in the United States, at least from the early twentieth century onwards. According to the 2000 US Census, 25% of second-generation South Asian Americans identified themselves as white.12

Was color prejudice simply introduced by centuries of British colonial rule in India? Did Indians internalize and reproduce Victorian racial hierarchies, which entrenched a division between all whites and all people of color, but at the same time also posited distinctions and gradations between the latter? Before the British, the Portuguese and Dutch had brought European ideas of difference and color to the Indian subcontinent. But it is important to remember that such ideas were not imposed upon a blank slate, as it were, but interacted with pre-existing ideologies and hierarchies. The crucial question is this: “were Victorian notions of race accepted so eagerly because they resonated with earlier ideas of social difference, or did they instead represent a qualitatively new way of distinguishing groups of people?”13 In this chapter, I will indicate some key points
of resonance, as well as disjuncture, between colonial and pre-colonial ideologies that are necessary to understand contemporary ideas about race in South Asia.

Let me start by briefly invoking the seventeenth-century history of Portuguese Goa. Here the Europeans were struck by the divisions within Indians, and used the word “caste” to describe them. They used the word to describe social rank, religious groupings (for example, “caste of Moors” or “caste of Christians”), and also the hierarchies within Hindu society. In 1567, the Portuguese Sacred Council of Goa noted that

In some parts of this Province (of Goa) the Gentoo [Hindus] divide themselves into distinct races or castes (castas) of greater or less dignity, holding the Christians as of lower degree, and keep these so superstitiously that no one of a higher caste can eat or drink with those of a lower.14

Note that “race” and “caste” are here used interchangeably, and also that upper-caste Hindus are described as regarding Christians as equivalent to their own lower castes.

The situation was to change dramatically over time. As the Portuguese entrenched their rule, their own hierarchies of difference reversed this situation. The inter-mixing between the Portuguese and Indians resulted in stratifications that mirrored the hierarchies in colonial America:

Firstly, the European-born Portuguese, or Reinol. Secondly Portuguese born in India of pure European parentage, who were very few and far between. Thirdly, those born of a European father and a Eurasian mother, who were termed castiço. Fourthly, the half-breeds, or Mestiços. Fifth and last, the indigenous pure-bred Indians and those with hardly a drop of European blood in their veins.15

As in the Americas, in India too the Europeans drew a distinction between European settlers in the colonies and those who remained at home. But if in colonial Mexico or Peru, they saw European inter-breeding as a way of improving the racial identity of the local people, in Asia fears of the racial degeneration of Europeans were rampant. Here, for example, is the Dutch traveler John Huighen van Linschoten's description of Portuguese settlers in India in 1598:

The Portugals in India are many of them married with the natural born women of the country, and the children proceeding of them are called mestiços, that is, half-countrymen. These mestiços are commonly of yellowish colour, notwithstanding there are many women among them that are fair and well formed. The children of the Portugals, both boys and girls, which are born in India, are called Castiços, and are in all things like unto the Portugals, only somewhat differing in colour, for they draw toward a yellow colour: the children of those Castiços are yellow, and altogether like the Mestiços, and the children of Mestiços are of colour and fashion like the natural born countrymen or Decanijns of the country, so that the posterity of the Portugals, both men and women being in the third degree, do seem to be natural Indians, both in colour and fashion.16

These fine color lines generated within Eurasians of different hues were to leave a lasting mark within Asia.
In Dutch Sri Lanka, similar caste-race groups emerged:

1. The Europeesch, those born in Europe. 2. The Casties, who were born on the island but whose parents were born in Europe. 3) the Mixties, who were of mixed European and Asian origin. And 4) the Psuties, who were descendants of the Casties. The distinction between the Casties and Psusties points to the notion that a prolonged stay in Asia on the part of Europeans inevitably led to degeneration.17

There, too, classification was shaped by clothing, occupation, caste, and ethnicity. These definitions were malleable, since both the Portuguese and the Dutch asked individuals to perform duties not ritually prescribed by their caste.18 One fascinating example of their intervention is when the Dutch, seeking to increase the number of cinnamon peelers who belonged to the Salagama group, decreed that all children fathered by a Salagama man should take on his caste identity, no matter what the mother’s caste. This reversed the existing convention that the children of a higher-caste man and a lower-caste woman would take on the mother’s caste status.19

These histories remind us that European and South Asian ideologies of difference have collided and intermeshed for many hundred of years. If black Africans face hostility in India, if darker skinned people are looked down upon by Indians at home and elsewhere, it is not simply because Indians have internalized foreign, colonial ideologies, but also because these ideologies worked through, and reworked, pre-colonial and indigenous notions of identity and difference. Caste was the most important of these, but as I will show, caste ideologies cannot be separated from those that turn on religious identity, regional belonging, and somatic difference.

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Caste has been described as India’s “hidden apartheid,” but as a matter of fact, the violence of the caste order is hardly concealed.20 As I write this, there are reports of a village council decreeing that two young sisters, aged 23 and 25, be raped by all the men in the village. They are to be punished for a “crime” committed by their brother—he eloped with a woman of a higher caste.21 The siblings are all Dalits or “Untouchables,” among the more than 160 million outcastes who are situated outside the pale of caste society, stigmatized even more than the lowliest within it. It is impossible to summarize the complex and regionally variable hierarchies of caste, but basically they pivot around four large groups or “varnas”—Brahmins (priests and teachers), Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors), Vaishya (merchants), and sudras (workers and peasants). This bio-moral and occupational fourfold division was proposed by writers of classical law manuals who wished to promote order in a society they saw as disintegrating. The categories took hold in the popular imagination, so that thousands of existing endogamous groups or “jatis”—Brahmins (priests and teachers), Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors), Vaishya (merchants), and sudras (workers and peasants). This bio-moral and occupational fourfold division was proposed by writers of classical law manuals who wished to promote order in a society they saw as disintegrating. The categories took hold in the popular imagination, so that thousands of existing endogamous groups or “jatis” sought to identify themselves, or were identified by rulers, along this notional scale.22 While large sections of sudras are stigmatized, “outcastes” or Untouchables are even more so. Indeed, it is the difference of outcastes from the rest that is of fundamental importance to the material and ideological basis of caste. Gandhi called outcastes “Harijan” (Children of God); the paternalism of that name is contested by the term “Dalit” (broken or crushed people), which was adopted by anti-caste activists in the
1970s. This term includes those outcastes who converted to other religions, whereas the governmental nomenclature “Scheduled Castes” does not.23 Stories such as that of the two young sisters are routine. Inter-caste marriages or love affairs, especially those between lower-caste men and women of higher castes, regularly result in murders, kidnapping, and the public punishment of the individuals and their families. As with black women during slavery, Dalit women remain subject to constant sexual assault by upper caste men. Not unlike blacks during the days of Jim Crow, Dalits are subject to different forms of discrimination—they are denied access to places of worship, clean water, housing and land; their children are still kept out of schools or ill-treated within them; and they are forced into menial and degrading occupations, notably manual scavenging. Despite governmental policies of affirmative action, they remain largely excluded from the country’s businesses, educational establishments, judicial services, and bureaucracy.24 Caste segregation shapes India’s rural landscape, as well as large parts of its urbanity.

The violent effects of this apartheid have been obscured by its very longevity and because it is woven into the fabric of everyday life. Martin Macwan writes:

The systematic elimination of six million Jews by Nazis hit us hard on the face because it took place in such a short span of time. In the case of Dalits, though the “genocide” has been systemic, it has taken place at a slow pace. The current government statistics of murder, rape and assault that Dalits are subjected to paint a horrible picture if extended to a history of 3000 years. We have reason to believe that approximately 21,90,000 Dalits have been murdered, 32,85,000 raped and over 7,50,00,000 assaulted.25

If caste violence does not provoke the outrage the Holocaust or South African apartheid did, it is because of the widespread notion that it is a unique ideology, embedded in Hinduism’s ritual order, and incomparable with any other idea of difference. But the caste order is patently a class order. The lowest castes and the Dalits constitute the bulk of the laboring populations (although of course some upper castes may be impoverished, and some lower castes well off). It is important to emphasize that endogamy is itself a means of conserving the connection between caste and class. But like race, caste is also more than class—economic advancement does not result in caste mobility, or inoculate anyone from caste discrimination. Indeed, as with racialized populations, it is precisely an attempt at upward mobility, both economic betterment and aspiration to education, or marriage with someone of a higher caste, that results in violence. In an early essay, Stuart Hall pointed out that “Race is, in short, the modality in which class is ‘lived,’ the medium through which class relations are experienced, the form in which it is appropriated and ‘fought through.’”26 This is exactly true of caste as well.

It was because he understood this material basis of caste that American sociologist Gerald D. Berreman suggested in 1960 that it was productive to compare caste with race in the southern United States:

In both the United States and India, high castes maintain their superior position by exercising powerful sanctions, and they rationalize their status with elaborate philosophical, religious, psychological, or genetic explanations. The latter are not sufficient in themselves to maintain the systems, largely because they are incompletely accepted among those whose depressed position they are thought to justify.
In both places castes are economically interdependent. In both there are great
differences in power and privilege among, as well as class differences within, castes
and elaborate barriers to free social intercourse among them.27

Berreman's view challenged the supposition, enshrined in Eurocentric scholarship, that
caste was a unique social hierarchy, one that was accepted by all rungs of Hindu society,
and therefore could not be compared with race. Berreman was harshly dismissed by
Chicago sociologist Oliver Cromwell Cox, whose book Caste, Class, and Race argued
for the dissimilarity of the two concepts, because he felt that thinking about race as
caste obscured the deep connections between American racial hierarchies and capital-
ism. But Cox's contrast between these concepts depended upon ignoring the material
and economic aspects of caste, and thus echoing the Eurocentric view of it as unique
and incomparable to any other kind of hierarchical society.

It is the absence of any tendencies toward radical social change in the caste sys-
tem which is of consequence. There has been no progressive social movement
for betterment among outcaste castes in Brahmanic India. . . . The caste sys-
tem is not a simple societal trait which may be universalized by “cross-cultural
comparison.” Rather, it constitutes the social and institutional structure of a
distinct pattern of culture. To identify it with race relations in the South seems
to be no less an operation than to identify the social structures of capitalism
and Hinduism.28

This conclusion is remarkable on many counts: not only does it ignore the entire vol-
atile history of anti-caste movements of the twentieth century, but in suggesting that
race is an outcome of capitalism and caste of Hinduism, it places caste firmly outside
any mode of production. In contrast to Cox, Berreman's pioneering scholarship high-
lighted that both systems of discrimination are anchored in economic oppression, but
it also suggested that both exceed simple economic determinism. In this respect he
was outlining the logic of caste as it had been articulated by anti-caste activists such as
Jyotirao Phule and B. R. Ambedkar, who I will discuss at greater length shortly. Forcing
one group of people to be landless, work for others, live apart, be reviled and raped, and
face constant collective violence, makes India undeniably a slave society as much as
the United States. And indeed, the comparison between caste and race, and its inter-
sections with class, is most valid when it comes to the Dalit/non-Dalit divide, which is
of a different order than the differences between other castes. The difference between
Dalit and non-Dalit is the most policed, the most rigidly enforced divide, and the most
marked forms of racial distinction are drawn at that line.29

Dominant Indian scholarship also tended to regard caste as “unique,” and until
recently, there was, as Chris Fuller notes, “an inclination towards Indianist intellectual
parochialism.”30 Such parochialism was on full display when Dalit activists wanted to
have caste discrimination discussed at the 2001 United Nations Conference Against
Racism in Durban. They found that it was still hard to dislodge theories of caste excep-
tionalism. In their efforts to deny the validity and implications of the Dalit stance,
the government of India as well as some of the country’s most pre-eminent sociolo-
gists argued that caste and race are very different concepts. Resorting to the colonial
and pseudoscientific definition of race as a concept based on the idea of biological
difference, they argued that caste was, on the other hand, based on a socially ordained hierarchy.\textsuperscript{31} Indeed, one such sociologist protested that to compare caste to race would be to view India through Western and Eurocentric eyes, and thus to deny its irreducible uniqueness. But Dalit activists were not arguing for the \textit{identity} of the two concepts but for the \textit{comparability} of their effects. They were arguing that casteism is a form of racism, fully as virulent in its effects, and equally condemnable. Earlier anti-caste activists had made the same point, although they were divided on the issue of the congruence of race and caste. Writing when the pseudo-scientific understanding of race was still prevalent, they wanted to deny that caste has any biological basis, but they could not argue the same for race. As far back as 1873, Jotirao Phule compared the “thraldom” of caste to the experience of slavery in the United States.\textsuperscript{32} Others coming after him tried to connect with black activists and thinkers, and in 1973, the militant Dalit Panther group explicitly claimed an affinity with the Black Panthers.\textsuperscript{33}

As I have already indicated, the history of European governance in South Asia makes it hard to think of caste as an entirely isolated ideology untouched by Western attitudes. Ironically, it was British colonialists who firmly defined caste as the essential feature of Hinduism, and therefore of Indian society, even as they tried to bring it into alignment with theories of race as they were evolving in Europe. The historian Nicholas Dirks argued that they systemized Indian ideologies of caste and tried to use these as the basis for understanding and controlling the heterogeneous population of the region. In contrast with the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, where very little was written about caste, in the late nineteenth century caste became “the locus of all important information about Indian society” as well as “the basis for all governmental interventions.” In particular, the 1901 Census of India played a crucial role “in installing caste as the fundamental unit of India’s social structure.”\textsuperscript{34} Sir Herbert Risley, the Census Commissioner of India, is a key figure in this history. His sprawling text, \textit{The People of India}, used anthropometry to align caste with European racial categories and hierarchies. Risley claimed that his research—involving cranial measurement and other latest “techniques” of race assessment—proved that caste divisions corresponded to the racial hierarchies of European science. The upper castes were closer to Europeans than were the lower so that “community of race, and not, as has frequently been argued, community of function, is the real determining principle, the true \textit{causa causans}, of the caste system.”\textsuperscript{35}

Risley’s ideas dovetailed with the theory of an Aryan conquest of India as propounded by the German orientalist Max Müller. According to this theory, the Aryans came to India via Central Asia, and over time, became the upper castes, conquering indigenous people who were forced to toil for them, and who came to constitute the bulk of the lower castes. Included in the latter category were the darker-skinned inhabitants of South India, or Dravidians. Linguistic discoveries of the time suggesting that North Indian languages were related to an Indo-Aryan group, and those of the South to a different “Dravidian” group appeared to bolster such a theory of Aryan conquest. The “Aryan myth” as it is now widely termed, aligned caste, region, and indigeneity with European notions of race. The Aryan myth was enthusiastically supported by European intellectuals and Orientalists, as well as by the Indian upper castes.\textsuperscript{36} It was both questioned and appropriated by anti-caste movements and thinkers. For example, anti-Brahmin movements in South India deduced from the Aryan myth that no Brahmin could be a true Dravidian. Thus Dravidian identity and dignity could only be
safeguarded by expelling Brahmins. The anti-caste philosopher and activist E. V. Rama-
samy, popular as Periyar, who started the Self-Respect Movement, used this strategy, but
he also questioned the equation of Dravidians with the lower castes and Aryans with
the higher castes: “I am not a believer in the race theory as propounded by the late Nazi
leader of Germany. None can divide the South Indian people into two races by means
of any blood test. It is not only suicidal but most reactionary.”37 In his view, there had
indeed been a historic clash between Aryans and Dravidians, but the division between
these two groups of peoples did not correspond to caste identities as the Aryan myth
suggested. In other words, he turned the self-identification of Tamil Brahmins as Aryans
against them, while also ridiculing the theory they held to.

Previously, in the nineteenth century, Jotirao Phule had compared the Aryan con-
quest to the colonization of the New World:

The cruelties which the European settlers practiced on the American Indians
on their first settlement in the new world had certainly their parallel in India in
the advent of the Aryans and their subjugation of the aborigines [that is, Dra-
vidians] . . . This, in short, is the history of Brahman domination in India. . . .
In order, however, to keep a better hold on the people they devised that weird
system of mythology, the ordination of caste.38

Later, B. R. Ambedkar, the most important modern leader of Dalits, was to question the
idea that the Aryans were a race:

...to hold that distinctions of caste are really distinctions of race . . . is a gross per-
version of facts. . . . The caste system does not demarcate racial division. The
caste system is the social division of people of the same race.39

Ambedkar’s refusal to think about caste as race marks his opposition to theories that
suggested there were real genetic differences between the castes, and his acceptance
of the dominant theories of race at the time. At the same time, as I will discuss later,
Ambedkar’s work makes it possible for us to see, once we have discarded such a pseudo-
biological view of race, the parallels between racism and casteism.

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Such appropriations and refutations notwithstanding, the Aryan myth became part of
South Asia’s racial landscape. It informed, for example, the 1923 application of Bhagat
Singh Thind for US citizenship on the grounds that he was “a high caste Hindu, of full
Indian blood,” and thus should be considered on par with white immigrants who at the
time were the only immigrants eligible for naturalization. The Aryan myth also informed
the judgment that rejected Thind’s application; the judge concluded that despite the
strictures of caste, there had been too much “intermixture of the ‘Aryan’ invader with
the dark-skinned Dravidian” in India. Therefore Thind couldn’t be pure Aryan, and
there was distinct racial difference between someone like him and the “great body of
our people.”40 The Thind case reveals the racial assumptions of both the US state and
many Indian immigrants to the United States, a majority of whom are upper caste. Till
today, they understand themselves to be racially superior to African Americans, and
caste ideologies are a crucial component of this self-perception.41
In India, even left-wing intellectuals and activists bought into the idea that “Aryans... possessed a superior civilization and culture” and compared the lower castes and other “backward races” in India with “Negroes.” In 2001, precisely at the time when Dalit groups were lobbying to take their case to Durban, the Aryan myth was upheld by a study published in the journal Genome Research which argued that “the upper castes [in India] have a higher affinity to Europeans than to Asians, and the upper castes are significantly more similar to Europeans than are the lower castes.”

Even though such conclusions have been rebutted not just by historians but also by geneticists, they continue to be part of the “common sense” of South Asian societies. Today, the Aryan myth underlies the prejudice on the part of North Indians who are generally fairer towards those of the South, who are darker.

But there is equal, if not greater prejudice, accompanied by racist practices, on the part of both North Indians and South Indians towards people from the seven states that lie in the North-East of India, a region which borders China, and whose people are understood as “Mongoloid” and hence racially different. Following India’s war with China in 1962, thousands of Chinese-Indians were incarcerated in internment camps, and held for years without trial. Today, people from the North-East are routinely asked whether they are from China. In recent years, students from this region have suffered discrimination and violence in both the North and the South of the country. Here it is not dark skin but particular facial and bodily features, as well as cultural habits, that are targeted. Typecast as “chinkies,” eaters of strange foods, sexually promiscuous, and Westernized, North-Easterners face harassment in public places, discrimination in their workplace, and indifference or hostility from the police.

Even more vulnerable are India’s Adivasis or First People, a large and diverse population that makes up around 8% of India’s population. Largely forest or hill dwellers, Adivasis have, since colonial times, faced encroachment of their mineral- and produce-rich lands as well as violence and prejudice from both the state and mainstream India. Although not regarded as ritually impure by caste Hindus, they are nevertheless viewed as primitive and devoid of culture. Colonial anthropology and law advanced the idea that Adivasis were criminals—the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 had ruled that all the people belonging to about 200 tribes (largely nomadic, pastoralist, hill and forest dwelling, and Adivasi) were criminals by profession. But since the British understood that occupation in India was linked to caste, and since they increasingly viewed caste as race, colonial administrators suggested that criminality was part of the very nature of particular groups of people: as one administrator explained:

When we speak of professional criminals, we... (mean) a tribe whose ancestors were criminals from time immemorial, who are themselves destined by the usage of caste to commit crime, and whose descendants will be offenders against the law, until the whole tribe is exterminated.

Colonial law thus suggested that particular kinds of labor and ways of living indicated not just social but quasi-biological differences between groups of people. These differences marked and defined the mental and moral make-up of people, more than their bodies. These mentalities, moreover, would be transmitted through generations, and were unchangeable. Criminality resulted from forms of labor decreed by caste; in other words, occupation shaped an internal and unchanging nature. A criminal gene had been located without the use of genetic vocabularies. Colonial ideologies became widespread common sense, but the point I am making is also that these ideologies...
appropriated and transformed existing categories of difference, notably those of caste. This was the case even though color and other somatic differences were unevenly or even not attached to these categories. Certainly not all lower castes or tribal peoples are darker skinned, and today, scholars who want to differentiate caste from race always point to this fact. However, fairness is understood to be an attribute of the high-born, and darkness—both literal and metaphoric—that of the low.

In contemporary India, the racist stereotypes of Adivasis as criminally inclined and violent, or else childlike and primitive, continue to be evoked to justify violence against them. Today, they are the among the most marginalized people, but they have also organized to become the most militant. Drawing upon a long history of challenging the colonial state, they are the backbone of an armed resistance to the Indian State which seeks to facilitate the entry of Indian and foreign big businesses into the forests and hills of the Adivasi homelands. This is a violent process—huge numbers of tribal people are displaced as Indian and foreign companies seek to build large dams, or extract minerals in massive quantities from indigenous lands. The resistance movement, now led by groups who call themselves Maoist, faces the military might of the Indian state, which has labeled this movement as the greatest internal security threat in the country.48

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I have been delineating the intricate braiding of region, caste, and indigeneity that shapes racial philosophies in India. Such layering is further complicated by the question of religious difference. Most people today, in India and abroad, tend to understand caste as an essential and unique feature of Hinduism, and Hinduism alone. But caste differentiation also structures Muslim, Christian, and Sikh communities in South Asia. Each of these communities is divided by caste, so that those who converted from Hinduism in order to escape the stigma of caste find themselves still trapped in its grip. Thus, many upper-caste Christians, especially in South India, still observe rituals of purity and pollution and caste rules of marriage vis-à-vis lower-caste Christians.49 In North India, and in Pakistan, Dalit Christians are condemned to occupations such as scavenging. That these attachments to “tradition” have very real material benefits for the upper castes is dramatically illustrated by the fact that after the Partition of British India in 1947, the newly formed state of Pakistan, ostensibly formed as an Islamic Republic and haven for Muslims, refused to allow Dalits, including those who identified as Hindus and Christians, to migrate to India. To do so would be to lose a huge population of menial workers, condemned to occupations reviled by others.50 All over South Asia, Muslims also remain divided by caste hierarchies that have a huge overlap with class stratification. According to a report submitted by various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) in 2009, “Pakistan is one of the few countries of the world where slavery still exists in the form of bonded labour.” Most bonded workers in Pakistan come from Dalit and lower-caste Muslim and Christian families.51

It is widely supposed that caste practices continue to structure Muslim or Christian communities because converts to these religions from Hinduism carry their ideologies with them. Although this cannot be denied, caste groups emerged not only from Hindu society, but more messily out of diverse occupational and power groups across regional and religious affiliations. Extending and complicating Nicholas Dirks’s argument that it was British rule that calcified caste, a recent book by historian Sumit Guha argues that not just the British,
but Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Dutch, and Portuguese rulers all endorsed or even created particular groupings and castes for administrative and particularly taxation purposes. The historically variable and shifting groupings included, at one time, Portuguese Christians as a caste, as well as Parsis, who came to India from Iran, as another. If caste was shaped by these diverse sets of rulers and their interventions into a wide range of subjects, then it cannot be seen as emerging neatly from Hindu religious texts and practices.

To emphasize only the ritual implications of the caste order is to erase its political, economic, and social functions, and also to occlude the violence that accompanies the enforcement of this order. Colonial and Eurocentric scholarship achieved precisely such erasure, and the pinnacle of such scholarship was Louis Dumont’s influential book *Homo Hierarchicus*. Dumont identified ancient religious Hindu texts as the basis of caste, and argued that despite the bewildering variation in caste practices, there was a common underlying core to them. This was a belief in hierarchy, to which all participants, including those at the bottom, subscribed. The Indian was “homo hierarchicus,” to be contrasted with his Western antithesis, “homo aequalis.” *Homo Hierarchicus* did not regard the caste order as exploitative, because according to it, Indians did not view caste as an economic order at all: “an economic phenomenon presupposes an individual subject; here on the contrary everything is directed to the whole, to the ‘village community,’ if one likes, but then as part and parcel of a necessary order.” Couched though it is in a modern, and very particular, sociological vocabulary, Dumont’s thesis harks back to a long tradition of racial philosophy in Europe which divided human beings into people who were by nature slaves, and others who were naturally liberty-loving.

What Dumont’s thesis denies, and anti-caste thinkers were at pains to show, was that caste ensures systematic exploitation of a group of people by deeming them inferior through birth. That is why it is a racial ideology. In 1936, B. R. Ambedkar offered a brilliant exposition of the intermeshing of the ritual, social, political, and economic elements of the system. Ambedkar describes how in his part of the country,

the Untouchable was required to carry, strung from his waist, a broom to sweep away from behind himself the dust he trod on, lest a Hindu walking on the same dust should be polluted. In Poona, the Untouchable was required to carry an earthen pot hung around his neck wherever he went—for holding his spit, lest his spit falling on the earth should pollute a Hindu who might unknowingly happen to tread on it.

Ambedkar pointed out that the ritualistic aspect of caste only rendered its economic work more pernicious, and more permanent; as he famously put it, “the caste system is not merely a division of labour. It is also a division of labourers.” Caste hierarchies enable not only cheap and dispensable labor but forced labor. Caste ideology is what sanctions particularly oppressive forms of labor, perpetuates them, and indeed, disguises its everyday violence. Historically, as some recent revisionary scholarship has argued, most Dalits have been unfree laborers, not simply actors in a ritual drama. As Nathaniel Roberts succinctly puts it:

Quintessential outsiders, Dalits were paradoxically indispensable to the very existence, symbolic and material, of caste society: Compelled to remove polluting substances, their labor guaranteed that others remained pure; hereditarily tied to producing for others, they underwrote other castes’ material privilege.
Were “untouchables” consigned to a life of hard agricultural labor on account of their impurity, or was being coded impure and assigned polluting tasks simply part of what it meant to be under the total domination of others? Rupa Viswanath has demonstrated that the colonial state, while pushing some kinds of caste divisions as categories of governance, sought to deny Dalit difference precisely because it brought to the fore the existence of slavery, which they were not supposed to officially condone. Christian missionaries too defined caste as primarily a religious matter. When caste is understood as a matter of ritual precedence, the most important erasure is that of the tight link between slavery and Dalitness.

Like the history of Atlantic slavery, the history of caste is a story of labor, land, and property, through which other social and religious ideologies were refracted and shaped. Like that history, caste entrenches the exploitation, by a minority, of a large part of the populace. As with slavery, however, caste violence also exceeds a simply economic logic, so much so that it appears irrational, excessive, and “backward.”

The uneven attachments of caste to all religious groups in South Asia notwithstanding, the differences between religious groups are also central to racial ideologies in South Asia. Recall that British colonial scholarship and administrative practices had also folded caste into a Hindu and pan-Indian order. Dumont's theory of caste too identified India with Hinduism. The equation of Hinduism with India lies at the heart of right-wing Hindu ideologies, but it was also enabled by a supposedly liberal Hindu like Gandhi, who despite his ostensibly multifaith vocabulary, articulated his vision of a free India in terms of a return to “Ram Rajya” or the idyllic rule of the Hindu God Rama, which is celebrated by religious texts for its perfectly functioning caste system. Ambedkar exposed Gandhi’s devotion to the caste system and to a Hindu vision of India, quoting him as saying that the seeds of Swaraj (self-rule) are to be found in the caste system. Different castes are like different sections of the military division. Each division is working for the good of the whole. . . . To destroy the caste system and adopt the Western European social system means that Hindus must give up on the principle of hereditary occupation which is the soul of the caste system.

Gandhi preached against beef-eating, indulged in by lower castes, Muslims and Christians in India, and today the fulcrum of a violent campaign against them by the Hindu Right. As Nathaniel Roberts has elaborated, although Gandhi spoke of a multifaith nation, his rhetoric and his practice identified the “interests of his favored community, the Hindus, with that of the nation as a whole.” Gandhi was central to a historical shift whereby Dalits, not recognized as Hindus by caste Hindus until the early twentieth century, began to be—strenuously and even forcibly—included within the fold. Gandhi worked to ensure that Ambedkar’s demand for a separate electorate for Dalits in independent India came to naught. The legal inclusion of Dalits as Hindus as did not mean that their status changed within Hinduism, but it did mean that Hindus became a majority in India. In this way, the histories of caste difference and those of religious difference are deeply interconnected.

The equation of India with Hindus is a central tenet of faith for the Hindu Right. In their view, Muslims, India’s largest minority group today, are foreigners who belong to...
Pakistan, or to some other Muslim homeland. The idea that Muslims are a race apart from all Hindus was honed during the widespread carnage that accompanied the 1947 Partition of India, and is articulated with ever-greater stridency and violence by the Hindu Right. The overlap between their views of Muslims with European Islamophobia is striking: according to both, Muslims are inherently violent, and are culturally so different that they can never assimilate into Hindu India. In recent years, with the aggressive expansion of Hindu fundamentalism, this idea has spread wider and deeper into the Indian mainstream, and has been manifested in recent pogroms against them. It was evident during the large-scale attack upon Muslims in 2002 in the Western state of Gujarat. While particularly horrific, this was not an isolated incident, but one outcome of the systematic growth of a neo-fascist Hinduism since the 1947 Partition of the country. The perpetrators proclaimed that such “punishments” were necessary to teach Muslims their place; prominent leaders of the Hindu Right asserted that this “successful experiment” would be repeated elsewhere in the country. It was also consequential for India as a whole; Narendra Modi, who in his role as chief minister of Gujarat presided over the pogrom in which officers of the state were implicated, was later elected as prime minister of India.

I have suggested that the histories of caste and religious difference are interconnected, and also that Dalits as well as Muslims are viewed in racialized terms. Dilip Menon observes, however, that casteism and communalism (a word that is used in India to indicate conflict between religious communities) are treated quite differently. Hindu majoritarian violence against Muslims has been taken far more seriously by Indian intellectuals than has caste violence, he argues, and “in a curious way, caste violence becomes the object of reportage and communal violence the object of theorizing.” Right-wing Hindu organizations have been able to enlist Dalits and lower-caste Hindus against Muslims by inviting them to be part of “a Hinduism open to questioning and change, while at the same time projecting the menace of a resurgent and competitive Islam” (14). Recent scholarship offers more detailed insights into the wooing of lower-castes, Dalits, and tribal populations by the Hindu Right, which works not only by invoking the specter of Islam but also by providing “social services” such as education and health care to these populations, especially where the Indian state has failed to do so. But at the same time, Hindu right-wing ideologies also position these two groups in similar ways—both Muslim and Dalit men are seen as potential violators of the chastity of Hindu/upper-caste women and both are considered inherently violent. Recent reports confirm that Dalits and Muslims both find it difficult to rent houses from caste Hindus. Most importantly, anti-Muslim and anti-Dalit violence are often carried out by the same organizations. Very recently, there are signs that Muslims and Dalits may come together to fight right-wing Hindu nationalism, which is a very significant development that could alter the political landscape of India.

In an essay written some years ago, Etienne Balibar suggested that modern “neo-racism” (or “racism without race,” which “does not have the pseudo-biological concept of race as its main driving force”) illustrates that today “culture can also function like a nature,” becoming an uncrossable barrier between “us” and “them.” It is significant that Balibar compared new forms of racism, directed at largely Muslim immigrants in Europe, to the anti-Semitism of Reconquista Spain. Scholars of the early modern period in Europe, including myself, have made the point that these “new” forms of racism drew
upon long and continuing histories. In other words, it is not the case that religious discrimination is the “latest” form of racism; in fact, it was always central to European and trans-Atlantic ideologies of race. Scholars have drawn attention to the ways in which Muslim and Jewish identities were pathologized in Iberia, even as, at the same time, Europeans simultaneously marshaled their observations of other peoples in Asia and Africa to construct new ideologies of difference. But to call Islamophobia and anti-Semitism “racisms without race” is to leave intact a theory of race which depends upon its pseudo-biological definition, and ultimately, therefore, to reassert a boundary between those theories of difference which marshal “nature” and those which invoke “culture.” In practice, both nature and culture can be and have been invoked to justify racist categories of identity and the oppressive practices that such categories seek to legitimize; which is the case, as I have argued here, with racist thought in South Asia.

In a powerful lecture on incarceration in the United States as the latest avatar of the institutions of racial apartheid, Michelle Alexander repeatedly referred to the formation of a “caste hierarchy” or a “racist casteism,” by which she meant a system which defines people by birth, identifies them by color, and finds ingenious ways of renewing itself. Alexander is hardly the first to use the word “caste” in the context of race in the United States—not just scholars and activists, including W.E.B. Du Bois, but many literary writers had done so. An African American woman, Julia Collins, wrote a novel called The Curse of Caste, or the Slave-Bride which was serialized in 1865. In 1903 N.J.W. Le Cato also published a novel by the same name; both books highlight the slippery nature of racial identity. But Alexander’s use of the word caste has a very particular purpose because, as she pointed out, she is speaking in, and to, a society which likes to call itself color-blind. The word “caste” underlines precisely the ways in which the system of discrimination she addresses is based on birth, and segregates people into particular professions and particular neighborhoods, and, most importantly, suggests that they inhabit a particular, intractable culture. Alexander’s pointed usage of “caste,” the flip side of the coin to Dalit activists’ use of “race,” reminds us that by forging conceptual connections between the different racisms across the globe, we are often able to more precisely pinpoint—and resist—those we encounter at home.

Notes

1 Rupa Viswanath’s careful reading and astute comments on this essay have been invaluable. Nathaniel Roberts has long helped me think about caste. I also thank Auritro Majumdar and Suvir Kaul for their engagements with this essay.
2 Hall, “Minimal Selves,” 45.
3 Jonathan Burton and I have traced how this bias has resulted in a neglect of early modern racial histories, as well as in an outmoded theorization of race as a category. See the introduction to our Race in Early Modern England: A Documentary Companion, 1–36.
4 “South Asia” is a construct that emerged in the US academy during the Cold War. It supposedly encompasses the region in and around the Indian subcontinent, but demographic and cultural variations within it are enormous, making generalizations unsustainable.
5 Mackey, “Beating of African Students by Mob.”
6 See, for example, Bhuyan, “Black’s Not a Darker Brown.”
7 Kuku, “India is Racist and Happy About It.”
8 See, for example, Diouf, “Africans in India” and “South Asia.”
Here is what Sir Harry Johnson, the first commissioner of British Central Africa visualized in 1894:

On the whole, I think the admixture of yellow that the Negro requires should come from India, and that eastern Africa and British central Africa should become the America of the Hindu. The mixture of the two races would give the Indian the physical development which he lacks, and he in turn would transmit to his half-Negro offspring the industry, ambition, and aspiration towards civilized life which the Negro so markedly lacks.

(Quoted by Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 131)

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11 See, for example, Gupta, “A Note on Indian Attitudes to Africa,” 170–178, and Burton, *Brown Over Black: Race and the Politics of Postcolonial Citation*.


13 Rogers, “Racial Identities and Politics in Early Modern Sri Lanka.”

14 Decree 2nd of the Sacred Council of Goa, 1567. Camoes also uses it in this sense.


18 It is important to note here that, in practice, caste and occupation were never an exact fit, and such prescriptions were usually designed to enforce hierarchy. Thus, only a small percentage of Brahmins are priests, but virtually all “paraiyars” or untouchables were slaves.

19 Rogers, “Racial Identities and Politics,” 156.

20 Barbour et al., “Hidden Apartheid: Caste Discrimination Against India’s ‘Untouchables.’”

21 Rail, “Khap Orders Dalit Women Rapied After Brother Elopes.”

22 I thank Rupa Viswanath for suggesting the importance of this point.


24 See Thorat and Newman, ed., *Blocked By Caste: Economic Discrimination in Modern India*.

25 Macwan, “(Un)Touchable in Durban.”

26 Hall, “Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance,” 341.

27 Berreman, “Caste in India and the United States,” 120–127. Berreman was scoffed at by his better-known opponent, Oliver Cromwell Cox, the pre-eminent Marxist sociologist whose 1948 book *Race, Caste and Class* is a classic in the field. See Oliver Cromwell Cox, “Berreman’s ‘Caste in India and the United States.’”

28 Ibid.

29 I thank Rupa Vishwanath for pointing this out to me.

30 Fuller, “Caste, Race, and Hierarchy in the American South,” 604–621.


34 Dirks, “Castes of Mind,” 67–68. For a different understanding, see Bayly, “Caste and ‘Race’ in Colonial Ethnography of India.”

35 Risley, “The Study of Ethnology in India,” 260. Some recent scholarship suggests that Risley’s anthropology of caste did not have much effect on colonial policy as such. See Fuller, “Anthropologists and Viceroyos: Colonial Knowledge and Policy Making in India 1871–1911.”

36 See Figueira, *Aryans, Jews, Brahmins: Theorizing Authority Through Myths of Identity*.

38 Quoted by Omvedt, Dalit Visions: The Anti-Caste Movement and the Construction of an Indian Identity, 17.
41 See also Prashad, The Karma of Brown Folk, for an analysis of the politics of South Asian communities in the United States and US immigration policies.
42 E.M.S. Namboodiripad, a prominent leader of the Communist Party, is quoted and analyzed by Menon, The Blindness of Insight: Essays on Caste in Modern India, 47.
44 A 2011 study published in the American Journal of Human Genetics by a team from the prestigious Centre for the Cellular and Molecular Biology in Hyderabad concluded, as the Centre’s director put it, that “There is no genetic evidence that Indo-Aryans invaded or migrated to India or even something such as Aryans existed.” See Sharma, “Indians Are Not Descendants” and Tharoor, “The Aryan Race.” For the report, see Metspalu et al., Shared and Unique Components of Human Population Structure.
45 Thapar, “The Ugly Indian: How We Are Racist to Our People.”
46 See Press Trust of India, “Bangalore to Gurgaon,” in FirstPost; “Discrimination Against North-East People a Reality,” in Economic Times; and “India’s Northeast Speaks Out About Racism,” in Al-Jazeera.
47 Major Nemhard is quoted in the Criminal Tribes Bill, Proceedings of the Council of the Governor-General of India Assembled for the Purpose of Making Laws and Regulations, 420.
48 See Roy, Walking With the Comrades.
49 See, for example, this news report: Mondal, “Dalit Catholics Continue to Battle Upper-Class Oppression.” Arundhati Roy’s novel, The God of Small Things, traces the deep-seated racism of Syrian Christians and Roman Catholics in Kerala. The writer Bama Faustina Soosairaj, known as Bama, herself a nun for seven years, chronicles the lives of Dalit Christian women in Tamil Nadu. She was ostracized for her autobiographical novel Karukku (1992).
50 Bhavnani, The Making of Exile: Sindhi Hindus and the Making of India, 89. The book also discusses the discrimination faced by those who did happen to migrate to India.
51 Thardeep Rural Development Programme et al., The Choice of Reforms.
52 Guha, Beyond Caste: Identity and Power in South Asia, Past and Present. I am indebted to Nathaniel Roberts for drawing my attention to this book, and for sharing his review of it. See Roberts, “Setting Caste Back on its Feet.”
54 See Loomba and Burton, Race in Early Modern England: A Documentary Companion.
55 Ambedkar, Annihilation, 214.
56 Ambedkar, Annihilation, 232; emphasis in original.
58 Viswanath, The Pariah Problem: Cast, Religion and the Social in Modern India. See also Guha, Beyond Caste, and Roberts “Anthropology.”
60 Roberts, To Be Cared For: The Power of Conversion and Foreignness of Belonging in an Indian Slum, 144.
61 See also Viswanath, “Silent Minority: Celebrated Difference, Caste Difference and the Hinduization of Independent India,” 140–150.
62 Over three days, more than a thousand Muslims were slaughtered, over twenty thousand Muslims evicted from homes and business, at least 250 women raped, scores of children butchered, fetuses brutally ripped from wombs, and Hindu symbols carved into women’s bodies. See the report by Human Rights Watch, “India: Gujarat Officials Took Part in Anti-Muslim Violence,” and Kannabiran, Tools of Justice: Non-discrimination and the Indian Constitution.
63 Haynes, Religious Transnational Actors and Soft Power, 107. A detailed and moving documentation and analysis of the events is Rakesh Sharma’s 2004 film, Final Solution. While particularly horrific and consequential for the country, given that Narendra Modi, the chief minister of Gujarat at that time, was then elected as the prime minister of the country, this was not an isolated incident, but one outcome of the systematic growth of a neo-fascist Hinduism since the 1947 partition of the country.
64 A detailed report by investigative journalist Ashish Khetan shows that the state itself was involved in the planning and execution of the pogrom. See Khetan, “The Truth.”

65 Menon, The Blindness of Insight: Essays on Caste in Modern India, viii.

66 Thachil, Elite Parties, Poor Voters.


69 See also Loomba, “Race and the Possibilities of Comparative Critique.”


71 For the use of caste by scholars of race, see Fuller, “Caste, Race, and Hierarchy in the American South,” 615.

References


———. To Be Cared For: The Power of Conversion and Foreignness of Belonging in an Indian Slum, Berkeley: University of California Press.


