

Caste and Class Discrimination in Modern India:

Text of presentation at MFC Annual 2014

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I am reproducing below a remembered version of my presentation at the MFC Annual 2014 on how to think of discrimination in relation to modern India. This is my current understanding and doesn't pretend to be a final explanation of the issue.¹ It is based on my several engagements with the question in relation to development, health care and education over the last two decades and is put together to provide some understanding of the common phenomena that we observe in relation to discrimination against dalits.

Figure: Matrix of discrimination in relation to dalits in India

Systems	Effects	Social bias	Individual Experience	State Functioning
Caste formation (domination of land, labour, power)		Against equality/ against liberty/	Stigma/humiliation/ punishment (to death)	Interferes with state on equality and liberty
Capitalist class structure (control of land, labour, power)		Against equality/ for liberty	Disrespect	Interferes with state on equality
Norm based (Welfare aspect of development State)				
Positive (ambiguous)		For equality/ for liberty	? (supposed to be egalitarian – Constitutional commitment)	Health care, Education, (housing neighborhood) Mental Health
Negative		Against liberty/ against equality	(Unconstitutional aspect of planning and neoliberalism)	(Eugenics), population control, abandonment, informal labour

¹ Note: It has important limitations in that it does not deal with community and gender discrimination which are extremely complex fields of investigation in their own right. Perhaps the underlying reason for this is that it is not meant to be a universal theory that takes care of all problems in one go. I doubt if such theories are viable. It has also no direction to proceed toward in terms of a political programme. That is something a more competent political thought will have to decide, and if it results in a complete criticism of this perspective, so be it!

The matrix above represents the different systems and effects of discrimination that seem to come together in the reality of dalit/marginalized life.

Broadly speaking there are three systems at play in my schema: Caste formation, class structure and the state. I have described each of them according to their effects in terms of social bias, individual focus/experience and state functioning.

Caste Formation:

The caste formation is an aspect of the social structure that precedes Independence. It is an explicit system of discrimination in the service of the domination of economic resources, social power and cultural authority. Caste functions as customary law coupled with a socially dominant belief in its 'truth'.

Social bias

Caste decided who owns land, who supplies labour, who marries whom, the occupation one has, who eats with who, who speaks, who gets an education, etc. ***It is an explicitly discriminatory system of laws which is against both the modern notions of liberty and equality. It has no sense of fraternity, except within the caste group.*** To the extent that it exceeds simple economic questions, caste envelops and extends beyond what was called a 'mode of production'. It is a system that allocates prestige, power and wealth on the one hand, and labour, servitude and oppression on the other. Caste laws ensure through its various strategies, the hereditary transmission of privilege, wealth and opportunity to those who have and the hereditary disempowerment from these goods among those who have not. The cultural entrenchment of caste means that it is extremely difficult to fight since there is an everyday practice that implicitly enforces its supreme coercion to the exclusion of all else.

Individual experience and focus

Caste functions on the individual through stigma and punishment – up to and including death. Caste blocks mobility and ensures social crystallization within specific margins of caste differentiation. As Ambedkar put it, 'caste is a division of labourers'. It ensures the hierarchical gradation of jobs, with invisible, yet clear borderlines that may not be crossed by those who do not belong.

It is experienced by the dalits and other marginalized castes/tribes as humiliation, injustice and violence.

Caste is experienced by the dominant as 'justified' rage against those who cross social boundaries, occupy prime geographical and administrative locations and avail of 'undue' opportunity. The source of this ***systemic rage*** is as invisible as it is diffuse and widespread.

State functioning

At this point, let me in an anticipatory fashion suggest that the caste formation ***interferes with the state on issues of liberty and equality***, and strengthens the functioning of the state where it is repressive. I

will explore these issues at greater depth in discussion of the interlocking function of the three systems (caste, class and state).

Capitalist Class Structure

The class formation under capitalism has a different logic of operation. It consolidates the power over land, labour and the extraction of surplus value through wage labour, the production of commodities and the market. On the whole, I would accept the Marxist formulation that class in capitalism is related integrally to a specific mode of production. The fundamental ethical (or more cynically, ideological) principle that supports capitalism is respect for the right to private property. If you have private property and it is legal according to the laws of capitalist society, no one can ask you how you got it or take it away from you *regardless of how much you have*.

The theoretical charm of capitalism, both from the liberal perspective and the Marxist one, is that capitalism brings about a great increase in productivity. Liberalism argues that the capitalist market provides the most efficient distribution of goods and the maximum happiness of the greatest number. Marxism argues instead that capitalism provides a universal mobility to the wage labourer, depriving him of everything that binds him to a social and geographic location. The contradiction between this universal mobility and common consciousness of exploitation on the one hand, and the overproduction of goods on the other will lead to revolution. Thus capitalism is seen as a progressive change from 'feudalism' by both liberal and Marxist theory.

In practice however, capitalism comes to life in different ways in different societies. As Gramsci had pointed out, the path and effects were different in France and Italy. English capitalism was of its own kind. In Japan, the Meiji Restoration brings in capitalism with a specific path and with different social effects. The equalization of pre-capitalist social status does not follow the establishment of the labour contract in some countries. It certainly does not in India.

Social bias

Capitalism's social bias is towards liberty, but against equality. You are free to amass as much wealth as you can; you are entitled to the property you acquire. You can under no condition ask for a share of what you cannot earn. The engine of capitalism depends on this ideological justification to amass property according to capability. The principle of capability is seen as the most important and positive attribute of the individual under capitalism. Capability is individualized, in the sense that typically liberal thought (that underlies capitalism's ethical stance) does not permit the attribution of capability to social structure, historical advantage or cultural capital.

Individual focus and experience

The individual focus of capital's social bias is on the one hand, imprisonment (or punishment more generally) for those who acquire property illegally. Capitalism wouldn't make sense if the laws of property and the right to private property were not upheld by state violence. This is because both sale and purchase of any kind of property (be it land, grain, clothing, housing, vehicles, accessories) would be

nullified if the person who bought the property were not able to claim rightful ownership to it, i.e, if someone were simply able to take it away from him by force.

Two aspects need clarification here. One, the ideological counterpart to the legal right to private property is the respect for private property. One who has amassed wealth under capitalism is heaped with the respect of society (watch any TV show to see how true this is). Absolute wealth commands absolute respect. Two, property is now widening its reach. With capitalism, the term (private) property widens its base beyond land, to all forms of moveable property. Of more recent history, property is a term that is beginning to cover education, health care and well being in general. This becomes clearer if we focus on the fact that we have to pay a fortune for health care and education – and I will have more to say about this later.

The converse of respect for private property, is disrespect for those who don't 'earn' property, i.e., for those who get access to any form of property as dole. ***Capitalism's individual focus against equality takes the form of disrespect for those who acquire any property (minimum wage, food or fuel subsidy, health care, education etc.) through welfare and state redistributive means.*** This is the classical liberal ideology of which neoliberalism is merely a slightly more extreme form. According to capitalism, you don't deserve property if you don't have the ***ability*** to earn it.

State functioning

Again, in an anticipatory fashion, let me simply say that ***capitalist ideology interferes with the state's programmes with respect to any principle of equality, i.e., where the state steps in to equalize any obvious inequality of opportunity or benefit between individuals.***

Norm driven functions (State programmes)

The development state in India has specific norm driven programmes that arise in the historical conditions of India's Independence. Norm driven programmes are those that try to achieve a statistical goal of 'goodness' in specific aspects of society: e.g., educational qualification, health, literacy, family size, GNP per capita, etc. As I will argue in this section norm driven strategies are ambiguous – they redistribute wealth in welfare initiatives, and also cut against the poor in highly authoritarian programmes.

One important historical condition here is that India was widely recognized to be underdeveloped – that meant not enough capital, and not enough capitalists. The independent state faced the dual problem of amassing capital on the one hand, and increasing the number of capitalists. The unwritten rule was to ensure this happened within the elite caste groups. Another rule was to ensure that this was done without instigating rebellion due to excessive exploitation. This was stated euphemistically as mitigating the 'rigors of transition' to a modern economy.

This meant that the development state had two functions – increase economic growth and also redistribute wealth to a small extent to ensure that resentment was controlled. This was the logic of the

five year plans: core industry, capitalization, on the one hand, and food security, primary health care, universal primary education, etc., on the other.

Another important historical condition was that the freedom movement obliged the state to incorporate positive discrimination in the domain of caste and social equality, for example reservations in education, government jobs and parliamentary representation. This history is woven into the self-reformation and ascendancy of Hindu upper caste domination in the freedom movement. Caste ascendancy is knotted integrally to the marginalization of the depressed classes and the minorities through different 'social' and political initiatives like satyagraha, the practice of seva and the battle for swaraj. It is as a result of the compromises and negotiations for *political legitimacy* (i.e., the unquestionable right to rule) that the Indian Constitution has made space for the provisions against untouchability and upper caste oppression and for reservations for the depressed classes and tribals. It is symptomatic that the upper castes rage against these unavoidable political compromises to avoid confrontation and political delegitimization in the eyes of the world seeing them as 'concessions' towards the dalits. It is also another matter, though again highly symptomatic that such negotiations were impossible for the Muslims.

Be that as it may, the modern Indian state as a quintessential representative of the Third World also puts into effect negative discrimination on a broad terrain: in terms of population control among the poor, abandonment in the face of catastrophe (the Bhopal gas tragedy), the relinquishment of commitment to a minimum wage and the informalization of labour.

The development state's positive discrimination to ensure a level playing field (universal health care, reservations) and rights of equality among citizens (right to dignity, work and residence anywhere in the country) are opposed by the evolving forms of social domination. Its negative discrimination against the poor, especially in the neoliberal avatar after the 1990s is intensified by these same forms of domination. The logic seems to be simple. In the Indian variant of capitalism, the hitherto dominant castes and classes that expressed their power in the national movement are in the process of forming the capitalist elite in India. In doing so, they find ways to maximize their advantages both in caste and class terms (by denying access to the underprivileged and marginalized). These processes also result in the selective concentration of disadvantages of both class and caste among the marginalized. Anything that redistributes symbolic (ritual) status, political (caste) power or economic wealth is automatically opposed and a plausible explanation for the ruthless repression is immediately available in the ruling cultural vocabulary.

Individual experience of discrimination

More specifically, where do the dalit and marginalized experience negative discrimination? They do so precisely at those points where they are given the benefit of positive discrimination by state policy to ensure a level playing field under capitalism. For example, dalit students find the most severe discrimination in elite institutions like the AIIMS, the IITs and Central Universities. The term used to defend this discrimination is of course 'merit'. Dalits are not 'meritorious' according to brahmanical wisdom. What does merit stand for? It stands for the embodied entitlement to a higher education that

phenomenally improves the ability to acquire wealth. It is an embodied entitlement because merit is the simply result of economic investment, caste assertion and social power over generations that results in the capability to score high marks. Leaving aside the exceptional student (+3 SD, 99th percentile) who is present in all social strata, the discipline, training and cultural ability to score high marks is nothing but embodied forms of property (money), power (to be permitted an education) and prestige (to be treated well at school and outside) that are gained through social advantage. Thus the disrespect and humiliation of those who don't have the cultural capital of 'merit' arises in a coming together of social privilege, caste power and class domination. On the one hand, minority institutions like the CMC Vellore show on a routine basis that high marks (i.e., signifiers of 'merit' in the conventional sense) are not necessarily the prerequisite to make a great doctor (to take a specific instance that is of interest to MFC). On the other hand institutions like AIIMS show that highly meritorious doctors simply migrate to better pastures with their 'well earned' property of good medical degrees. Seeing education as private property is what results in the routine dispersal of highly educated upper caste graduates to foreign countries.

The poor are discriminated against by corporate hospitals when the state decides to give them free medical care under the Aarogyasri programme. It doesn't matter that the coverage is miniscule – what matters is that the moment the Aarogyasri programme comes, the corporate hospitals construct Aarogyasri wards to ensure that the poor and 'paying' customers don't get the same 'respect in treatment'. In fact, the poor are used to teach inexperienced doctors the skills required to make them better doctors, able to command a higher salary. Thus the equalization of poverty through a governmental health care insurance scheme simply becomes a way to increase the wealth (earning capability) of the doctor and the medical capitalist, thus increasing the caste/class advantage. This is in spite of the fact that the government pays market prices for Aarogyasri patients – the point is that the poor are not seen as having *earned* the health care and therefore are not entitled to respect. This could be seen at the first level (see following paragraph) as an example of the respect for private property (paid health care) giving rise to an intolerance of redistribution of wealth (in the form of free health care). This same process of discrimination results in the ill treatment in government hospitals – what is often described as callousness, is actually disrespect for those who cannot afford to pay for health care in private hospitals. At the same time, it is well acknowledged that government hospitals are the greatest places for training a doctor! It is worth pondering over who gains, who loses and what the property at stake here is. There are many other examples you can find in your own experience. The point is that all governmental statistics point to the significant statistical overlap of poverty and the lower castes. Thus there is a glaring caste based inequity that continues and in my view *increases* in capitalism.

What is the relation between the ideological formation of upper caste thought and the neoliberalism that is the basis of capitalist ideology today? It seems to me that in many cases, there is a doubling of upper caste thought and neoliberalism so that there is an extremely felicitous ambiguity in the intentions behind any upper caste mode of thinking. For example, the caste hatred and rage against reservations is easily shifted into the ideologically and globally more acceptable (though theoretically

inadequate and abstractly essentialized) idiom of the ‘justified’ anger of individualized merit. In another register, take the decision to build special Aarogyasri wards even though the government pays full cost to the corporate hospital. Here the upper caste decision on what the poor deserve in terms of respect and care, and how they and the money they bring from the government will be used for the ultimate benefit of the hospital and doctors is immediately translated into a liberal disrespect for those who come on government dole. In this way, upper caste ideology is masked by neoliberal idiom in such a way that the Indian ruling elite are rarely criticized for the atrocious discrimination that exists in the name of Indian liberal democracy. It appears as if the unconscious strategy of an upper caste thought will mask its articulation and growth at each step, in a neoliberal language.

The individual of the targeted caste/ community experiences discrimination in several unconnected registers and places:

- Discrimination in attention, time (doctors, nurses, pharmacists) as Sanghamitra Acharya’s report shows (Acharya 2010).
- Humiliating mode of address, disrespect, insult (dalit students in Universities and prestigious colleges – see account of student perceptions in Fact Finding Report.. 2013)
- Severe discrimination in availability of promised services treatment/help (unavailability of PhD guides, absence of access to laboratories, surgical theaters, refusal to accept poor patients in hospitals, etc. – see Implead Petition, 2013)

The varied experiences of discrimination form a pattern in the lower caste mind. This discrimination and humiliation are seen as a coordinated strategy, but no individual strategist or enemy controls all cases. They result in helplessness, anger, disillusionment, disempowerment. Thus the dalit has to constantly confront and surmount the social force that tries to make him feel unwanted, unvalued, worthless. In the end, discrimination here is structured to make a person fail at the project of becoming a modern citizen as promised by the Constitution. It tries its best to cripple the lower caste individual and make him unfit to become a member of the elite in capitalist society (caste agenda). Thus, discrimination breaks the spirit of democracy.

When this historical configuration of discrimination is used to observe the pattern in health care, it results in an insight: Discrimination is not a ‘flaw’ – it is fundamental to the structure of elitist health care – therefore it is seen in ‘egalitarian’ policy choices market functioning, administrative processes and social attitudes. These attitudes are there – invisible and masked, yet in open view.

Dalit politics is a struggle against this Himalayan stronghold of economic oppression, social exclusion and political discrimination. It is a somewhat unique, fragile, yet powerful initiative against Hindu upper caste domination in India, and has not (yet?) found strong correlated movements among the minorities and tribals.

The challenge ‘to change the world rather than interpret it’ is to emphasise these insights in a form that permits the dimension of discrimination to be challenged and fought in an effective political battle. This battle should result in the self-emancipation (throwing off of fetters) of the dalit and the marginalized with their own strength and that can only be supported by medical activism given its contradictions engendered by its upper-caste/neoliberal history.

References

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Some papers in this conference

- Anant’s reflections on casteism in modern India touches on many important aspects of the problem with a structural understanding of the situation from a Marxist perspective. There are several points of convergence between the perspective discussed above and the one he has proposed. There are also important differences.
- Devaki’s sociological reflections on stigma are a useful contribution. Different aspects of stigma: experiential, symbolic and structural. Experiential violence is the process of exclusion, status loss and discrimination; Symbolic violence promotes the dominance of elite; Structural violence the result of agential power in locations of domination.
- The force of the caste structure is visible in Premdas and Obalesha’s paper on the kind of multi-dimensional discrimination that is put on the untouchable castes by the transition to capitalism (the commercial complex).
- Another very important view for occupational health and safety is shown by Mithun’s paper ‘Why did Satyam die?’. This paper shows the vast, complex, yet detailed processes of discrimination which lead Satyam down into the manhole where he dies.
- Professionals in healthcare – Ravi’s paper shows how the professional sector is dominated by the upper castes (It is necessary to see experts as part of the ruling formation of capitalism).
- In Anand Zachariah’s paper, the market forces determine the pattern of specialty education and the dominance of tertiary health care which result in skewed priorities. He gives examples (OP,

snakebite, TB, Kalaazar, Blood transfusions, Ultrasound examinations) in different aspects of health care showing how capitalism in medicine shapes it in a discriminatory way.

- Similarly the question of snakebite and low priority is explored in Yogesh and Parag's paper. Both these papers discuss the structure of medical priority that comes from a combination of market medicine and the lack of care for the periphery that result in inappropriate orientation of medical care.
- The Srivats and Veena papers on diabetes experience looks at some historical effects of discrimination that emerges in relation to the poor and the upwardly mobile castes. It stresses the importance of thinking of discrimination in terms of structure and institutions, how health systems, priorities and policies in effect discriminate against the poor/'lower' caste communities.
- Similar issues are indicated for exploration in Prabir's notes on Kalaazar and TB.
- The papers on Ayush (Devaki and Venkatesh) and those on homeopathy (Jagannath and Dhananjay) throw some light on the 'step-sisterly' treatment given to non-allopathic forms of medicine. Again, it is important to see that 'step-sisterly' discrimination is not an incidental flaw, but central to a) allopathic medicine's exclusionary logic, and b) the importance of the pharma and medical industry to capital
- Veena's paper on caste and nutrition shows how the problem of caste and untouchability remains invisible in the scientific perspective in the early ICDS programmes. This invisibility was because the scientists refused to look at problems of implementation because it was not their domain. She then discusses how in the NNMB caste wise collection of data after the 1990s, the data on caste is collected in a way that defeats the purpose – insulating the analysis from the caste problematic.
- The PHRN study of the health of the elderly shows again the pattern of discrimination that may be discerned in the marginalized.
- The problem of discrimination in mental health arises in a quite different trajectory. Historically, as one of the papers (Anveshi and Survivor Research) shows, knowledge forms in mental health and psychiatry have intimate relations with race. Many forms of mental illness were degenerations of good races, and many were equally due to primitive racial origins.
- When the problem of mental health is seen in the Indian context, there is a crisis. Healing shrines (Shubha) are both discriminated against, and are also seen as a convenient post to peddle psychiatric drugs.

- On the other hand, there is the ever present reality (Anindiya et al.) that people who suffer mental distress die early due to various stubborn forms of structural discrimination: inaccessibility of health care, poor quality of life, etc.