

Reaching out to the 'Untouchables'

Paul Ghuman gives a psychological perspective on Dalit resistance and identity

The Untouchables in India are still at the bottom of the caste hierarchy in terms of poverty index, unemployment, housing and health matters. The caste system has reproduced itself in the Indian diaspora (indeed in people of South Asian origin) in the UK and elsewhere in the West through endogamy, early socialisation, social networking and, paradoxically, places of worship.

There is evidence that the Untouchables are facing a double discrimination – high-caste prejudice and white racism. They are, however, raising their caste status through education, socio-economic advancement and 'religiosity'. This is in line with the predictions of modern theories of identity formation and its functioning in the social world.

I was born in a family where my parents experienced humiliation since childhood and denial of access to full participation in everyday social life. (Dalit psychiatrist who works in London, quoted in Jadhav, 2012)

Suppose you heard it said over and over again that you were lazy, a simple child of nature expected to steal and had inferior blood. Suppose... this opinion were forced on you by the majority of your fellow citizens... because you happen to have black skin. (Allport, 1954, p.14)

The term 'Dalit' – meaning 'the oppressed one' in the Marathi language – was introduced in the 1970s by activists highlighting the plight of those deemed too polluted to be included within the Hindu caste (Varna) system. The first quote is from an interview given by a Dalit (formerly called Untouchable) psychiatrist who works in London. Nowadays, this term is used not merely to express identity but also to convey the aspiration and struggle of these 'Untouchables' for change and revolution (see Guru, 2001). The caste system remains at play in the UK – the psychiatrist quoted above went on to say that his high-caste colleagues struggle to acknowledge 'casteism' or to link it to the racism that can affect the mental health of all Indians and people of colour in the UK (Karlson et al., 2005).

Yet atrocities against Dalits are reported almost daily by creditable newspapers. Last year *The Guardian*

related the case of Sai Ram, a 15-year-old boy burned alive because of a stray goat, 'just one of 17,000 Dalits to fall victim to caste violence in the state of Bihar' (tinyurl.com/kkzgg7p). And interview data from the National Institute for Economic and Social Research (Metcalfe & Rolfe, 2010) has shown that caste awareness and differentiation transfers from the Indian subcontinent to the UK:

My brother used to get sworn at because of his caste when he was at work – with comments like 'You are not even equal to our shoes'.

And a Dalit woman told a newspaper (tinyurl.com/nvdyaez) that she couldn't escape the sting of India's caste system, even in Canada:

Racism is something I can understand, because 'we' look different and have different culture, but by God, my colour is the same, my language is the same, my living standard is the same. But they are still discriminatory to me.

A comprehensive study by Dhanda et al. (2012) confirms that the caste system has reproduced itself through endogamy (intra-caste marriages), separate places of worship (e.g. Gurdwaras and temples), early socialisation of children within *biraderi* (kinsfolk), and caste-based community centres. But they also note that Hindu organisations, such as the Hindu Council UK, refuse to accept its prevalence, whereas Dalit associations (Amedkarite and Ravidassia) consider caste as hereditary, hierarchical and originating and justified in Hindu scriptures and traditions, and that it is now being transmitted in the UK and elsewhere in the West. It follows that within the Indian diaspora there is a huge gap even in acknowledging the social reality of the caste system in the UK.

This article deals with a number of themes. First, it compares casteism with racism, on which a great deal of literature is to be found. Second, we discuss the possible psychological harm it can have

questions

Can we equate and compare casteism and racism in the ways in which they affect individuals?

Are the effects of casteism on society and individuals similar to class distinctions in the UK?

resources

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on its victims. Third, we explore what strategies are adopted by Untouchable communities to challenge (and cope with) caste prejudice. Fourth, we discuss caste awareness among children and caste-based bullying in schools. Finally, we examine what type of research is needed in this underexplored field. Before addressing these themes, I offer a brief background to the origin of the caste system in India, and its acceptance and legitimisation.

Background

Although the caste system is found in all South Asian countries, here I cite evidence from 'Indian heritage' communities in the UK and in India. This reflects the research emphasis, and the fact that it is clear from the literature (Deliege, 1999; Jodhka, 2004; Mendelsohn & Vicziany, 1998) that the caste system was (and is) being justified by Hindu holy texts.

The caste system was originally based on occupation, like socio-economic class in the UK, but later became rigid and ossified with there being little social mobility. Hindu lawgiver Manu (circa first

to second century BCE: see Dumont, 2004; Olivelle, 2004) systematised and legitimised the existing divisions of society into four hierarchical Varnas, with Brahmins at the top of the hierarchy – the priests who performed religious rituals and looked after the spiritual matters. Next in the pecking order came Kshatriyas – the warriors and rulers of widespread kingdoms in ancient India (circa 1200 BCE) were drawn from this caste. Third in the hierarchy came the Vaishyas – the wealth producers such as farmers, and business people. The fourth caste consisted of Shudaras – the serving classes that consisted of barbers, blacksmiths and weavers. Then there were a number of communities who were marked as outside the four castes – the untouchables. They did the degrading and menial work of cleaning toilets and cowsheds, took care of the dead animals and were seen to be scavengers. They were called Chandalas – the achutes – whose mere touch, even a shadow, would defile/pollute the two upper castes. In common with black communities in South Africa and the southern states of the US, they were forced to live in 'apartheid' outside villages and towns,

only coming in to serve the other castes. This practice continues to the present day in many Indian villages (Jodhka, 2015). Caste was (and still is) deemed to be hereditary and there was no social mobility, save in the two upper castes (Srinivas, 1996, 2002).

This system was sanctified by two important concepts, which are the linchpin of the Hindu religion (Doniger, 2009). 'Karma' implies one's right and wrong deeds in past lives have determined one's present caste position and that one should accept the social

hierarchy; and 'Dharma' (*swadharama*) is a complex concept that essentially means religious duty and social obligation – basically, individuals should stick to their parents' caste.

Modern social identities

In India the caste system has endured for over two millennia and still has its hold on the people's psyche, though in a much attenuated form. The vast majority of Dalits in India are still at the bottom of the social hierarchy in terms of income, unemployment, poverty index, housing, health matters, such as infant mortality, and morbidity levels (see Michael, 1999; Singh, 2005). And the karmic and Dharma dimensions are being joined – replaced, even – by a new form of casteism, which blames the 'victims' themselves for their own lowly position in the caste hierarchy because of their low abilities, lack of zeal and hard work. These negative stereotypes justify high-caste people's conscious/subconscious prejudice and discrimination. The new form of racism, seen in the wider context of racism in Britain and the US, eschews 'biological' arguments in favour of deficit and the aberrant cultures of ethnic minority groups (which might include such practices as arranged marriage, female genital mutilation, honour killings, and the subjugation and oppression of women).

What of those Dalits in the UK? After emigrating in the 1950s and 1960s from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh along with large numbers of their fellow compatriots (see Anwar, 1979, Ghuman, 1999, Shaw, 2000), most settled in London, the Midlands and the north of England, and in Glasgow, Scotland. They are estimated to number between a quarter to half a million, though exact figures are not known. According to research reports (Metcalf & Rolfe, 2010; Jaspal, 2011), many Untouchables in the UK face the same type of stigmatisation and abuse they experienced in their country of origin. In employment, where



The term 'Dalit' is used to convey the aspiration and struggle for change and revolution

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high-caste people are often in the majority, Dalits are on the receiving end of both racial and caste discrimination – a double exclusion.

Why do high-caste people carry their prejudice overseas, when many of them have personally experienced the humiliating experience of racial discrimination in the UK and elsewhere? Old habits and attitudes die hard, but perhaps it also makes them feel comfortable to know that they are not at the bottom of the British social hierarchy – their status anxiety is reduced by engaging in this type of prejudiced behaviour (Allport, 1954). (As an aside, Gandhi felt the full impact of racism in South Africa, yet he still justified the caste system – without untouchability, I hasten to add. This led to a bitter row with Dr Ambedkar, the revered leader of the Dalit community, who was born a Dalit but renounced and condemned Hinduism for treating them worse than animals, and embraced Buddhism along with thousands of his fellow Dalits. See Zelliott, 2001, and Pantham, 2009, for further reading.)

Another psychological theory may help to explain the behaviour of both high-caste members and Dalits. The basic postulate of Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory (SIT: Tajfel & Turner, 1979; see also Reicher et al., 2010) is that there is a need for every social group to create and maintain a positively valued social identity. I would argue that Dalits in the UK are striving to achieve this by comparison with outgroups on valued dimensions such as material and socio-economic advancement, religiosity, equality and social justice.

Take social creativity as an example. Both high-caste groups and Dalits have stopped trying to convert to other religions, but have resurrected and strengthened their own religions



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Caste-based bullying

Caste bullying in schools can have serious effects on the health, exam performance and wellbeing of its victims. In the Metcalf and Rolfe research (2010, pp.24–26, case study 4), a 16-year-old said that her friends had assumed that she was of higher caste, and when they found out that she was not, bullying started when she was 12 and continued for a couple of years.

I have presented a brief psychological explanation for caste and religious-based jokes following Allport's (1954) theories, and their more up-to-date interpretation and research by Dovidio et al. (2005) [see Ghuman, 2011]. Briefly, one of a dominant group's strategies is to make the subjugated feel inferior by caricatures that are mainly based on negative stereotyping. Thus hardcore Hindus, and indeed some others, have openly cracked jokes about Sikhs (calling them surd – a figure to make fun of) to portray them as 'stupid/thick/impulsive', to show that they are not fit for serious professional work and can't be taken seriously.

(see Lum, 2010, 2011). For example, a distinguished leader, Mangoo Ram, called the higher-caste people Aryan invaders, and outsiders, thus affirming their own position as indigenous people of India, as Ad Dharmis. This has led to a resurgence of pride, and a 'sense of self-worth' among Dalits. There is a renewed cultural, religious, and political movement of Dalits. But, paradoxically, it is also based on their 'old' established caste identities. A high-caste Jat may say: 'We are proud sons of Jats', matched by Ad Dharmis: 'We are proud to be sons of Chamars'. Chamars used to hide their caste, but now they throw up a challenge to other castes: *Deco ke panga loy* (Beware before you entangle with us!). Also, they have paid heed to Dr Ambedkar's advice 'to educate, organise and agitate'. Developing their own legends, myths and sacraments, salutations and emblems around their religions has enabled the 'Untouchables' to glorify and cherish their gurus and leaders (see Knott, 1986, 1994; Lum, 2010, 2011; Narayan, 2006), thus

enhancing their caste solidarity. This is known to help victims combat prejudice from an 'outgroup' (Dovidio et al., 2005). It's a creative way of trying to enhance prestige and status by developing alternative dimensions of comparison with the outgroup. To demonstrate their solidarity, Dalits in the UK have successfully mobilised their communities to lobby the government to include caste in the Equality Act of 2010, though its implementation has been delayed.

Of course, some Dalit individuals do try to redefine their social identity through mobility. Few are now engaged in their hereditary caste-ascribed jobs (e.g. Chamars – one of the major Dalit castes – used to work with leather). They are now as successful as their Indian counterparts in securing professional positions by pursuing higher education (see Ghuman, 2011, case studies 4 and 6, pp.124–132; Knott, 1986, 1994).

Finally, there is social competition, through which members of a low-status group challenge the position of high-

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status outgroups in an attempt to reverse the status differential. This is exactly what I found in a case study of a Punjabi village where Chamars are collectively challenging the legitimacy of Jats' (the land-owning caste) superiority by not working on their land, and by holding top positions in the village Panchayat (council), which controls the affairs of the village. These shifts in 'power' in favour of Dalits have had a significant effect in fostering reciprocity in social relations: Dalits are now invited to Jats' weddings and other family ceremonies in that village (Ghuman, 2011; also see Ram, 2004).

Caste awareness in children

Would we not expect caste prejudice to die out with the older generations who supported and reinforced it? Self-categorisation theory (SCT: Turner et al., 1987; see also Reicher et al., 2010) postulates that identity salience varies according to the intergroup comparisons that are made available by the prevailing social context. So can these contexts truly prevail, across generations?

In fact, children learn at an early age (7–8 years) not only that they are black, white, or brown (Asians), but also the rank ordering of ethnic/racial group to which they belong (Aboud, 2005; Davey, 1983; Milner, 1983). Likewise, in India, caste consciousness is instilled in children from the day they are born through religious rituals and later on in childhood through special initiation ceremonies (see Dosanjh & Ghuman, 1996, 1997). Many of the religious-based rituals, ceremonies and customs have been carried over from India – especially by high-caste communities – to make their young children aware of their respective caste status, taboos on eating, the concept of 'purification' and the importance of adhering to one's caste *biraderi* (kinship group) (see Kakar, 1981).

The impact of this was seen in pioneering research (Jackson & Nesbitt, 1993) which found caste awareness to be

present amongst young primary-school children. And there is evidence from my research (Ghuman, 1999, 2002) that caste identities become salient for students who attend schools where South Asians are in a majority. In such schools, children of high caste tend to 'self-categorise' into their respective castes, thus pressuring Dalit children to seek identification with their own caste. However, caste identity remains latent when these high-caste children attend a white-majority school. In this situation, 'Asian' identity becomes active and significant: they fall back to their ascribed social identity of Asians, and so they self-categorise accordingly and then seek to conform to the group's stereotyped behaviour. This is a cogent explanation from the perspective of SCT.

I also noted the importance of the social context within which the individual self-categorises when observing the change in Indian girls' social identification when they visited India (Ghuman, 2011).

Here where they described themselves as British/English, despite the fact that in England most of them described themselves as British-Indians, British-Asians, and so on.

In reviewing research that has used SIT and SCT to examine social identity in children, Barrett and Davies (2008) conclude:

Both SIT and SCT appear to have some relevance for understanding children's racial and ethnic attitudes... That said, however, there are also findings which both SIT and SCT have some difficulty in accommodating, particularly findings concerning the effects of teachers, the school curriculum and peers on children's identifications and attitudes. (pp.94–95)

They propose that researchers need to pay much closer attention to educational, peer group, family and media factors, as well

as to wider socio-historical and political factors that determine the relative status positions of ingroups and outgroups. Such an approach would be rewarding for future research to pursue.

Reaching further

Research on the Untouchables has barely begun in the UK, and much of it has been carried out by anthropologists and sociologists studying the impact of caste on the structure and functioning of Indian society. We badly need psychological perspectives, especially on ingroup and outgroup dynamics and the significance of caste in the formation of personal and social identities.

Priority should also be given to the study of the development of caste identity in children and adolescents and its impact on their day-to-day living. Phinney's (Ong et al., 2010) research on the development and assessment of ethnic identities would

be instructive here, as would models of ethnic identity (e.g. Marcia, 1994). We need to consider not only the cognitive developmental level of children and young people

but their socio-emotional abilities, and the influence of ingroup peers (see Aboud, 2005). Teachers in predominantly 'Asian' schools should be prepared for the issues that Dalit children might face in schools, and appropriate strategies should be worked out to deal with them.

Finally, we must understand the attitudes and behaviour of high-caste people, particularly the second- and third-generations who were born in the UK. It is perhaps only then that we can truly 'reach out' to the Untouchables.

"we must understand the attitudes and behaviours of high-caste people"



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