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## **Comparative Social Analysis of Caste in India and Race in America**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper attempts to explore the similarities between Caste and Race. The differences between them are studied to understand if one is a subset of the other. The sociological thinkers and theories are relied upon to understand the interplay between Caste and Race. The effect of Race and Caste on women is also explored. The paper concludes after looking at what both countries have done or must do to challenge problems of Race and Caste.

### **Introduction:**

*“We must work together to ensure the equitable distribution of wealth, opportunity, and power in our society.” - Nelson Mandela*

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was pushed from a train by a White man because of his skin colour. Gandhiji had an upper Caste status in India and in a then White dominated South Africa he had to encounter racial discrimination. Such incidents raise the question of whether Caste and Race are like two sides of the same coin and up to what extent?

In spite of certain historical differences, it is observed that Racism, Casteism and Gender discrimination are all similar forms of oppression of the weak by the strong which are assigned by birth. Race and Caste are forms of social stratification in the United States of America and India respectively. Social stratification is a social organisation where people are divided on the basis of power, class and status. Now, this idea of social ranking is a common observation in any society. However, when this social stratification becomes a justification given by the Whites and Upper-castes to ensure imbalance in privilege, power and money, it results in oppression and violation of human rights. According to scholars like Gerald Berreman, these inherited stratifications and inequalities can be abolished only when these structures are challenged. Further, the George Floyd killing and many such series of shootings of Black people and Race playing an important role in America's 2020 elections has brought back the Race debate. Similarly, in India Caste-based violence makes headlines almost every passing day. While man is moving ahead in the fields of science and technology, these centuries old forms of discrimination are still very much prevalent. Therefore, it becomes imperative to compare these social phenomena in two of the largest democracies from a sociological perspective to address structural social inequalities created by Race in America and Caste in India.

### **History of Prejudice:**

Race and Caste are the result of rigid social stratification in social institutions. Social categories have been formed by dominant Whites and dominant upper-Caste by giving

importance to social hierarchy. In the rigid Indian Caste system, ranking is based on religious and philosophical justification which turned into a system of domination or ability to control others is observed in Brahmins over untouchables, similar to that of Whites over Blacks. For African-Americans it started with the slave trade by Europeans and social categorisation on the basis of physical and even cultural features. While Dalits had to live as untouchables, Blacks had to live as slaves. An example of such untouchability was evident in the form of access to water, a basic human necessity for survival. There were restrictions placed upon both Dalits and Blacks to access water to drink. Both the groups were severely oppressed. They had to fight for their freedom, beginning with basic needs like water. This was the harsh and infamous legislation in America called Jim Crows Laws. According to these laws, Blacks were provided with poor quality water that was not consumable. Preventing someone from having clean water to drink is inhuman and unimaginable, which the Blacks had to face. This was practised in America from 1877-1964.<sup>1</sup> Even a great intellectual like Ambedkar was denied drinking water as he hails from the untouchable Mahar community. Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her bus seat to a White woman which shows how prominent racial segregation was in those times. Such heinous social practices have been put in history after a lot of struggle. Caste and Race which are based on 'pollution' led to social and economic exploitation.<sup>2</sup> Till today despite modernisation, African-Americans and Dalits continue to be victims of violence, social exclusion, dehumanising work and negative stereotyping.

### **Discrimination and Social Exclusion of Dalits and African Americans:**

Sociologists have studied similarities between Race and Caste closely. The dominant forces of society have led to the social construction of Caste as well as Race. Social exclusion based on birth is present in both Caste system and racial segregation. It is the denial of resources and inability to socially interact with others. Race and Caste are descent-based discrimination.<sup>3</sup> The dominant groups in both Race and Caste believe their culture is superior and is the highest social standard while the other social groups must be looked down because of that.<sup>4</sup> Segregation based on caste prevails even in the urban regions of India. Cities like Rajkot, Kolkata and Bengaluru have no Dalits inhabitants in most of their localities.<sup>5</sup> It was not until the Federal Fair Housing Act, 1968 that racially restrictive properties in the USA were declared to be illegal. This social exclusion occurs because most property owners are able men belonging to the White and Upper caste community.

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<sup>1</sup> TF Pettigrew, Free Press and Macmillan Company, *The Sociology of Race Relations* (Free Press 1980).

<sup>2</sup> A Teltumbde and S Yengde, *The Radical in Ambedkar: Critical Reflections* (Penguin Random House India Private Limited 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Gerardo Vildostegui, 'The Caste-Race Debate and Its Broader Implications for the WCAR' (2001) <<http://www.imadr.org/project/dalit/Caste-Race.Debate.Gerardo-Vildostegui.html>>.

<sup>4</sup> NAUNIDHI KAUR, 'Caste and Race' (*Frontline*) <<https://frontline.thehindu.com/nation/article30251084.ece>> accessed 22 May 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Dilip Mandal, 'Not a Single Dalit in 60% of Kolkata's Neighbourhood. How Caste Divides Indian Cities' (*ThePrint*, 11 March 2020) <<https://theprint.in/opinion/not-a-single-dalit-in-60-of-kolkatas-neighbourhoods-how-caste-divides-indian-cities/378799/>> accessed 23 May 2021.

Jyotiba Phule observed the commonalities between racism and Casteism as early as 1873. His book *Gulamgiri* (Slavery) is about American abolitionists. An abolitionist is a person who sought to abolish slavery. Jyotiba Phule said that he wrote the book *Gulamgiri*, “*in an earnest desire that my countrymen may take their example as their guide in the emancipation of their Sudra Brethren from the trammels of Brahmin thralldom*”.<sup>6</sup> Race and Caste can push a human being to the lowest strata of the society. Because of this, African Americans and Dalits are forced to do menial jobs.<sup>7</sup> The workforce is divided and the labour market is stratified with African-Americans earning less than 25% than others when they are employed.<sup>8</sup> Despite reservation in government jobs, Scheduled castes in India form around 47% of the labourers implying their low wages and job insecurity.<sup>9</sup>

Endogamy, a practice to marry only within their community is another common aspect in Race and Caste. Hence, inter-racial and inter-Caste marriages are not very common within African-American and Dalit communities. Atrocities against Dalits are unfortunately still prevalent in the form of honour killings because of strict endogamy. The Whites and upper-Caste Indians are blind to the oppression they cause. They still carry ‘privilege’ because Race and Caste are generations-old systemic problems.<sup>10</sup> Custodial violence and deaths like the George Floyd incident happen in India too. Caste-related and Race-related custodial violence or deaths in the hands of police authorities must be prevented as these are violent crimes that often go unnoticed due to power imbalance and existing racial or Caste hatred. Legal changes were made to protect Dalits and Blacks in India and America respectively. However, these legal changes were met with social resistance from the dominant groups, who could not abstain from oppressing. This led to the emergence of Black panthers which inspired the formation of Dalit panthers in India. Law could not put an immediate and effective end to this age-old social discrimination. So, Black panthers and Dalit panthers rebelled for protection of their civil rights and human dignity. Even the ‘Black lives matter’ has motivated many Dalit activists in India.

### **Some crucial differences:**

W.E.B. Du Bois in his Race Theory observed that colourism-based discrimination was there not only in America, but worldwide.<sup>11</sup> This becomes relevant in the current discussions on xenophobia. Xenophobia is hatred or prejudice of people from other countries. Caste and Race have differences that should not be ignored. The main difference is that the Caste

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<sup>6</sup> Yengde (n 2).

<sup>7</sup> Vildostegui (n 3).

<sup>8</sup> Marianne Bertrand and Sendhil Mullainathan, ‘Are Emily and Greg More Employable Than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination’ (2004) 94 THE AMERICAN ECONOMIC REVIEW 30.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Scheduled Castes among Worst Sufferers of India’s Job Problem’ *Hindustan Times* (7 September 2018) <<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/scheduled-castes-among-worst-sufferers-of-india-s-job-problem/story-Qh0hyHy9UUTg1cIOpi5I2K.html>> accessed 23 May 2021.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Glorious Resistance: The Similarity between African American and Dalit Movements from The Radical in Ambedkar’ (*Penguin Random House India*, 20 November 2018) <<https://penguin.co.in/glorious-resistance-the-similarity-between-african-american-and-dalit-movements-from-the-radical-in-ambedkar/>> accessed 22 May 2021.

<sup>11</sup> George Ritzer and Jeffrey Stepnisky, *Sociological Theory* (10th edn, SAGE Publications, Inc 2017).

system has been around for several centuries. Whereas, racial discrimination is over 400 years old. The history of US would be incomplete by ignoring racism and slavery. Race is binary unlike Caste because Caste is further divided into *jatis* and *varnas*.

Caste and Race are not synonyms. They cannot be used interchangeably. The *Mandal* judgement relies on the Indian Constitution to differentiate between Caste and Race.<sup>12</sup> When Race and Caste are seen as different, it could suggest that Race is more dependent on biological factors than Caste. Also, seeing Race as merely a biological factor does little to fight racism. Affirmative action is framed differently in India and America. This shows that the problems of Race and Caste do have differences. Therefore, the approaches to deal with them are slightly different. The similarities and dissimilarities between Race and Caste are both helpful in knowing and resolving issues of discrimination.

### **Race and Caste: When it turns into a social class struggle:**

Unlike race and caste, social class is not assigned by birth but acquired. However, class differences among these groups is very tangible in aspects like economic and social inequality. The oppressors have always been economically and occupationally privileged. Oliver Cox, an African American sociologist studied the relation between American capitalism and racial discrimination. According to him the concept of Race and racial exploitation were built along with the development of capitalism.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, Race was a social construction. This is similar to the concept of Dalit capitalism. Black capitalism and Dalit capitalism unite the struggle against Race and Caste. Sociologist Gail Omvedt and Dalit activist Chandrabhan Prasad have explained on Dalit capitalism.<sup>14</sup> Chandrabhan Prasad said he was inspired by Black capitalism and believed Dalit capitalism is a similar tool to challenge dominance.<sup>15</sup> Indian sociologist Dipankar Gupta also views Caste as economic exploitation, which can be termed as Dalit Capitalism.<sup>16</sup> Classical sociologists have studied Caste through the theories on class structure. This has been accurate to a certain extent. An exclusive understanding is necessary which is possible by studying Indian social thinkers.

Caste and racial prejudice are not just on an individual basis, but on institutional too. This has become a part of the social structure. The society operates on this prejudice and discrimination. Social movements have helped the Blacks and Dalits in their fight for an equal place in the society. The movements were targeted at civil rights and basic human rights. Casteism is deeply rooted in the Indian society. The dominant Caste or Race enjoy greater privilege in society at the cost of basic human rights of the oppressed Caste or Race. Indian society is based on hierarchy. So, the Caste system could survive on hierarchy. Whereas, modern Western society was based on equality. The influence of modern Western

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<sup>12</sup> *Indra Sawhney Etc. Etc v Union Of India And Others*, AIR 1993 SC 477.

<sup>13</sup> Adolph Reed Jr Topics: Inequality Race, 'Monthly Review | Race and Class in the Work of Oliver Cromwell Cox' (*Monthly Review*, 1 February 2001) <<https://monthlyreview.org/2001/02/01/race-and-class-in-the-work-of-oliver-cromwell-cox/>> accessed 22 May 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Yengde (n 2).

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>16</sup> Dipankar Gupta, *From Varna to Jati: The Indian caste system, from the Asiatic to the feudal mode of production*, 10 *NULL* 249–271 (1980).

society has to a great extent impacted the awareness and laws targeting India's Caste discrimination. Louis Dumont observed this difference between Race and Caste. Dumont viewed Caste as a product of religion, hence its cultural impacts have to be looked at as well. This can be seen in his book *Homo Hierarchicus*.<sup>17</sup>

According to some Indian activists, Caste is not exactly Race. But Caste should be discussed along with Race on international platforms like the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia And Related Tolerance (WCAR).<sup>18</sup> This conference was held at Durban, South Africa in 2001. India's participation in this conference led to several debates among the sociologists. These debates help us look at the issues of Race and Caste sociologically. The influence of biological factors on Race and Caste were discussed in this conference. The very understanding of Caste by some sociologists is met with criticism as they see it primarily from a Brahmanical angle.<sup>19</sup> Caste relations and Race relations are evolving. But this change is met with Caste-violence or racial violence. Clashes between dominant groups and oppressed groups in Race and Caste are seen even today. B.R. Ambedkar was inspired by the way the Blacks achieved minority rights in the United Nations Council. This was the National Negro Congress petition.<sup>20</sup> Ambedkar spoke with American sociologist Du Bois to learn more about this and even referred to himself as a student of the Negro problem. Both Ambedkar and Du Bois believed that untouchables and Blacks were in a similar social condition.<sup>21</sup>

### **Position of women:**

BR Ambedkar stated that, "*I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress women have achieved*". Women form half the world's population, yet they always occupy the lowest social strata. The presence of patriarchy everywhere ensures that women suffer everywhere. A Dalit woman suffers more than a Dalit man and Black woman suffers more than a Black man. Socio-economic position of Dalit women is very poor. It is double discrimination as women have to confront dominance from two levels. In the recent times, India has witnessed an increase in the rapes of Dalit women.<sup>22</sup> When Casteism and patriarchy exist together, it leads to a society where Caste-based violence is inflicted on women. This results in double victimization of Dalit women. Even in the United States of America, women like Breonna Taylor are victims of racist violence.

Race and Caste are both social inequalities. These social inequalities increase manifold when it comes to women. It is because of gender-based social inequalities. Both Race and Caste discriminate against women. Women from both higher and lower social strata experience

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<sup>17</sup> KAUR (n 4).

<sup>18</sup> KAUR (n 4).

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>20</sup> G Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (SAGE Publications 1994).

<sup>21</sup> Glorious Resistance (n 7).

<sup>22</sup> 'Crimes against Dalits Increased by 6 Percent between 2009 and 2018: Report' *The Hindu* (New Delhi: 11 September 2020) <<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/report-flags-increase-in-crimes-against-dalits/article32584803.ece>> accessed 23 May 2021.

discrimination. This is true for both cases of Race and Caste. Men are more privileged than women irrespective of social strata. Women are sexually used and abused.<sup>23</sup> The dominant group is obsessed with 'preserving' the purity of its women. This is endogamy. Anything against this, leads to honour killings in the name of Caste pride. Honour killings are a testimony to the existence of Caste-based violence in India. A survey examined on Dalit women stated that around 72% of Dalit women in rural areas were illiterate, unaware of their legal rights like equal work for equal pay and complained of discrimination and harassment from their employers.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, 65% of Black women who participated in a survey contended that they face a pay gap issue due to racism and sexism.<sup>25</sup> Men from dominant groups in both Race and Caste share similarities. They oppress women from their own group as well as the oppressed group. They hold 'privilege'. There is a severe imbalance of power in Race and Caste. However, White women and upper Caste women enjoy the privilege of being in a dominant group. But that does not mean they're not affected by patriarchy. Upper-Caste women are restricted from having marital relations with men from other races or Caste. This also leads to honour killings in India. In the same way, inter-racial marriages were not legal till almost 1970. Women were controlled this way by men.

### **Representation and Affirmative Action by the Governments:**

Racial discrimination and Caste discrimination are generations of struggle. Due to this, even in the presence of discriminatory laws and practices, the struggle persists. Therefore, positive discrimination is essential in the form of Affirmative Action or quota reservation. Caste quotas are provided in India and racial preferences are provided in the USA.<sup>26</sup> Affirmative action in America is policy-based while in India, it is rights-based. It is written in the Indian Constitution whereas America's Constitution was written down much before slavery of African-Americans was abolished by the Fourteenth Amendment.

According to Ambedkar, those who have been socially disabled for a very long time, needed to be helped by giving them special provisions.<sup>27</sup> Education forms the backbone of affirmative action. It has been observed in both the USA and India that education has worked towards achieving social justice for both Blacks and Dalits. *Brown v Board of Education*<sup>28</sup> was a landmark case, whereby all laws establishing racial segregation in public schools was held to be unconstitutional and this laid the foundation step towards focusing on accommodating social diversity. Affirmative action seems discriminatory on the face. However, they protect the oppressed from continued subjugation. Government educational

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<sup>23</sup> Andre Beteille, 'Race, Caste and Gender' (1990) 25 Man 489 accessed 22 May 2021.

<sup>24</sup> 'No End to Discrimination against Punjab's Dalit Women Labourers, Says Study' <<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/governance/no-end-to-discrimination-against-punjab-s-dalit-women-labourers-says-study-69756>> accessed 23 May 2021.

<sup>25</sup> 'Gender and Racial Inequity During Crisis: The Pay Gap' (*TIME'S UP Foundation*) <<https://timesupfoundation.org/work/times-up-pay-up/gender-and-racial-inequity-during-crisis-the-pay-gap/>> accessed 23 May 2021.

<sup>26</sup> Andre Beteille, 'Matters of Right and Polity' <<https://www.india-seminar.com/2005/549/549%20andre%20beteille.htm>> accessed 22 May 2021.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Brown v Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

institutions provide a quota of reserved seats for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled tribes (STs).

British in India opined that India was a society with various Castes and communities and they need to be represented adequately.<sup>29</sup> It is important for Dalits and African Americans to have better education opportunities. They should also hold government positions that would ensure they are along with the dominant group, but not under them. Otherwise, the oppressed may never have someone to represent them legally, and politically. The fight for social justice and social equality of Blacks and Dalits has not ended. The dominance of Dalits and Blacks can be reduced by ensuring they have better employment opportunities. This would create a class of educated and employed Dalits and Blacks.<sup>30</sup> Social inequalities experienced by Dalits and Blacks can be reduced by ensuring their social and economic upliftment. This has to be done by Law and policy. A shift in 'privilege' is necessary.

### **Conclusion:**

The Constitutions of the United States of America and India are the greatest tools that could protect the African-Americans and Dalits respectively. Despite strong Constitutional protection, the discrimination of Dalits and Blacks continue to this day. The world-wide support to Black Lives Matter Movement has shown us that India's Caste system still requires more attention from the international community. Kamala Harris recently became the vice-president of the USA. She is the first female vice-president as well as first African American vice-president. Her victory is a milestone for the Black community, especially Black women. Racial discrimination and Caste discrimination are cunning, inhuman and evil practices. Eradication of such practices are important for a better society. Those oppressed by Caste and Race must not get crushed under the oppressor. Social exclusion encountered by Dalits must be dealt with. By moving away from dark practices of discrimination like from slavery and untouchability, the society has definitely moved forward. The hierarchy which has been existing within Race and Caste must be broken. Otherwise, the capitalist world we live in would only deepen the social inequalities between the Whites and Blacks, likewise for Upper-Caste and Dalit.

There needs to be mutual support between the oppressed of Race and Caste. Discussions on improving rights for eradicating Race and Caste discrimination must be held together. These discussions have to include women from both Dalit and African-American community. Otherwise, exploring only Race and Caste together would not deliver maximum justice to maximum people. Caste, Race and gender must be studied together. So, discriminations based on Caste, Race and gender would be challenged together. These are inter-connected sociological issues that have to be seen as a whole rather than individual social inequalities.

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<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Gerald D Berreman, 'Caste in India and the United States' (1960) 66 *American Journal of Sociology* 120.

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