

Caste on the couch From <http://www.ambedkar.org/News/News051503.htm> (previously published at <http://www.himalmag.com/2003/april/report.html>]

REPORT

Do brahminical ideologies permeate Indian psychological theory?

By Siriyavan Anand

My five years of stay in Europe and America had completely wiped out of my mind any consciousness that I was an untouchable and that an untouchable wherever he went in India was a problem to himself and to others. But when I came out of the station [in Baroda] my mind was considerably disturbed by a question, "Where to go? Who will take me?" I felt deeply agitated. Hindu hotels, called Vishis, I knew, there were. They would not take me. The only way of seeking accommodation therein was by impersonation. But I was not prepared for it because I could well anticipate the dire consequences which were sure to follow if my identity was discovered as it was sure to be.

- BR Ambedkar in

Waiting for a Visa

Unwilling also to impose on friends – one a caste Hindu and the other a Brahmin-Christian – a young, scholastic Bhimrao did take recourse to impersonation. He faked a Parsi identity to take shelter at a Parsi inn, and was unceremoniously turned out when discovered. Humiliated by stick-wielding Parsis, Ambedkar said, "It was then for the first time that I learnt that a person who is an untouchable to a Hindu is also an untouchable to a Parsi".

Not much has changed in India since that time in 1918 even for an educated, urban dalit. A dalit continues to face the prospect of getting booted out of public spaces; but more shameful still, even today, a dalit is under pressure to pass for a non-dalit. As much became evident to those of us not otherwise bothered by this at a seminar in Pune on 'Caste and Discourses of the Mind'. Overseen by SushrutJadhav, a psychiatrist and medical anthropologist of dalit-chambar origin, currently at University College, London, and Pune-based Bhargavi P Davar, a Tamil-brahmin researcher on women's issues in mental health and director of the Bapu Trust, the two-day seminar (14-15 December 2002) put caste on the couch. Dalits, brahmins, non-brahmins, Americans, Europeans and a Japanese grappled with the issues at hand. The seminar was, ironically, part-funded by a trust that takes its name from Sir Dorabji Tata, a Parsi.

A range of issues was debated. Does casteism lead to stigmatised identities? How are such identities contested/subverted? Does religious conversion diminish or further stigmatisation? If yes, how? What are the psychological consequences of casteism for victims and perpetrators? Are there indigenous dalit psychologies? Do indigenous dalit psychologies differ from historically ascribed ones? What shapes a dalit self? What are the parallels with oppressive and persecutory experiences of other communities worldwide? Do brahminical ideologies permeate Indian psychological theory? To most questions there could be no definite answers, while much remained unexplored simply because the participants were on new ground.

The deliberations, as tend to happen in discussions of caste these days, focused on dalit identity, as if to speak of caste means to speak of untouchability and untouchables. The few born-brahmins at the seminar problematised the brahmin's role in the order of things, but compared to the dalit participants, they clearly had done little homework. The seminar's aim was not to apportion guilt to communities, but the lopsided focus on dalits gave the impression that the emphasis was on understanding the psychological consequences of casteism for victims rather than for perpetrators. That non-dalits, particularly brahmins, have dominated the discourse on caste and dalit issues in academic and non-academic fora perhaps explains this bias.

The white American-born sociologist and activist Gail Omvedt, in her insightful paper on how Hindutva and brahminical ideologies penetrate the social sciences, said: "In the US, when you study social stratification you examine the whole system. There is nothing such as 'black sociology'; you equally study the ruling class. But in India we find a sociology of the weaker sections and not the stronger ones. There is a strong unwillingness on the part of the social sciences establishment to study their own imbrication in dominance". The result, said Omvedt, is that the few dalits, members of other backward communities and adivasis who have done doctoral research have been encouraged to study their own communities and not the oppressor castes. "Such has been the lack of commitment", she said, "that there has been no effort to generate sociological data on inter-caste marriages".

Psycho-biography

At the seminar, it was also evident that untouchability is not manifested evenly across the landscape. The contrast in the experience of the urban and the rural dalit was discussed by Professor Sukhdeo K Thorat of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Delhi. Thorat recounted his experiences of growing up untouchable: "In the village, the range of social interaction of a dalit is predetermined. From the age when you learn to walk and talk, the limits are delineated: residential, physical and social isolation combined with day-to-day humiliation. All rural dalit children face one form of humiliation or the other. At school, there is hardly any interpersonal relationship between the dalit student and the teacher, and the feeling of isolation is heightened". Thorat studied at an Ambedkar-founded college, "so there was no discrimination since interaction with caste Hindus was almost not there". But pursuing a PhD at JNU, he missed the close communication he had become used to. Later, in his first teaching job at an Aurangabad college, the students comprised mostly denotified tribes and dalits; besides most teachers were dalit too. Here, again, he felt socially comfortable.

Thorat contrasted his experience with that of his son. Born of an academic couple and brought up in the left-liberal JNU campus atmosphere, the Thorats' son did very well in school. But after enrolling for a bachelor's degree at a Delhi University college, he inexplicably failed in his examinations. It emerged that there had been 'incidents' at the college, which had taken their toll. It seems that a teacher on the very first day told the class: "Look, those of you who come from a reserved quota background have somehow made it to the first semester, but you cannot survive beyond this period". The young dalit student, never exposed to such an openly discriminatory threat, did not know how to handle subsequent pressures and succumbed. So, Thorat concluded, "For a dalit child in a village, untouchability or humiliation is real, open and constant. For an urban child when it happens suddenly one day, it is too shocking and much tougher to handle".

Thorat grew up in a village where ritual submissiveness was not the norm. "When I was about eight, the Ambedkar movement entered our village. Many of us rejected the Hindu social order, Hindu idols and temples. We melted the images of gods and goddesses and created implements out of them. Creating a new identity is necessary. Today, I am probably the only dalit teacher in JNU who does not celebrate Diwali". Thorat feels that an average dalit child has a severe inferiority complex. "A dalit develops feelings of humility, timidity and submissiveness in order to be able to socialise with caste Hindus. Dalits are under immense psychological pressure when their identity is about to be disclosed".

As for Ambedkar, for Thorat too a sustained stay away from caste society enabled him to emerge stronger. Thorat, by age 31, had a remarkable academic record. He had produced four books and 30 papers. But once he returned to JNU as faculty, a downslide set in. He did not write or publish for several years. He was left out of the informal networking on caste, language, regional and religious lines that are crucial to academic success. After some struggle he landed a three-year trip to Iowa's International Food Policy Research Institute. This recharged him. "My esteem among JNU colleagues grew. There was newfound respect. African-American writings helped me put some perspective to the problems I was facing here". SushrutJadhav told Thorat: "Dislocation, exile – the trip to the US – did you good. You returned a hero as in the classic mythical Hindu and Greek texts". Such a journey outward can enable reframe issues inward, foster additional identities and reconfigure oneself to feel healthy again.

Thorat's experience proves that when not under pressure to interact with caste Hindus, and there is no need to be vigilant about prospective discrimination or humiliation, the dalit is socially and

intellectually at ease. Ambedkar was alive to this. After being blackmailed into signing the Poona Pact of 1932 by Gandhi's dramatic fast, and subsequently realising that joint electorates were deployed by the Congress to effectively block the chances of genuine dalit candidates, Ambedkar came to believe that not just separate electorates at the political plane but also separate village settlements for dalits at the social level was the only way of countering caste-Hindu hegemony. The decision to seek separate settlements resulted from the deliberations of the All-India Scheduled Castes Conference at Nagpur in July 1942. As recognised by Resolution No IV: "...so long as the Scheduled Castes continue to live on the outskirts of the Hindu village, with no source of livelihood and in small numbers compared to Hindus, they will continue to remain Untouchables and subject to the tyranny and oppression of the Hindus and will not be able to enjoy a free and full life". This rings true even today.

Validation of this perception came from SushrutJadhav, whose paper examined the psycho-biographies of five 'creamy layer' dalits. One, a dalit information technology professional trained at an Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) and an Indian Institute of Management, and now based in Bombay, recalled practising "reverse discrimination". He remembered sometimes even bashing up brahmin fellow students who acted smart. Given that his parents, like most dalits in the area, were employed in a factory, he remembered growing up in an ambedkarite stronghold in Maha-rashtra where his parents had only a 'working class' identity and not an 'untouchable' identity. "My parents never had to stand before caste Hindus and cower or beg for money, loan, or any help or mercy". Reinforcing the need that Ambedkar felt, of isolating the dalits from caste Hindus, this scholastic overachiever never had to use the reserved quota for admission to elite institutions or for getting his job. Caste, however, hit Jadhav's interviewee in the face when he felt he was bypassed for a deserved promotion.

One of the other narratives was of a well-known writer, a senior official in a bank, who with a brilliant record at school aspired for and nearly won a coveted Sanskrit award usually pocketed by Pune brahmins. However, when he switched to an English-medium school at the higher secondary level, he lost his early confidence and fell silent for a year. He feared that his identity would be revealed if he opened his mouth. Jadhav characterised this as selective mutism, and presented a narrative account detailing the stuttering suffered by yet another of his research subjects, now a senior bureaucrat, during his student days at an IIT. This stuttering, a symptom of psychological distress, resulted from an internalisation of the perception of 'incompetence' that was consistently projected on him.

Another of Jadhav's interviewees, an internationally acclaimed dalit poet, continues to grieve for the loss of her family. Her son committed suicide following the caste-based discrimination that he suffered during his initial years at a premier medical school in Bombay; and her husband died of the alcoholism that commenced after this terrible tragedy. Her daughter took an overdose, preferring to die rather than suffer through the revelation of her caste identity that risked being disclosed at the time of marriage with a non-dalit boy. The poet now copes with the tragedy through her literary work which addresses a wide range of issues on dalit suffering.

Transference

To return to the problem that Ambedkar faced in Baroda, several papers replayed the theme of identity, the trauma of its concealment, and tried to come to terms with it. Thorat felt that most dalit academics are in a coma, "When I write a book on Ambedkar and water policy, my standing is not high among academics". Jadhav introduced the idea of "inter-caste transference", elaborating that it is accompanied either by over-compliance, extra-friendliness, a denial of caste, or anger and distrust. Sometimes, through a process of collusion, a dalit can suffer from over-identification with caste Hindus. Jadhav also argued that humility could be good, suggesting that one may need to be the 'wounded healer' to come out of the coma. In response, Gail Omvedt pointed out that American blacks have a sense of pride in their identity, which they have built. They can never pass for being what they are not, whereas in India dalits can pass for non-dalits, and are under pressure to do so. This takes a very heavy toll on them.

From Gail Omvedt's paper one could conclude that the dalit inability to hit back when subjected to obvious discrimination owes to the larger brahminisation of history, language and memory. She pointed out that even progressive left-leaning historians such as Romila Thapar have their 'Hindu' biases, evident in their uncritical participation in the brahminical incursions into their profession.

Consequently, the hierarchies and inequities of brahminical Hinduism are to be found in the output of the historian. Thus, the pre-vedic non-brahminical Indus valley civilisation is categorised as prehistory merely because its script has not yet been deciphered.

Omvedt compared the dalit in India – “unaggressive, soft and gentle” – to the blacks in the US. A black colleague had once told her, “The day I stop saying motherfucker I will know I have been co-opted”. Demonstrating how and why language becomes a tool for contestation, control and psychological humiliation, Omvedt spotlighted orthographies as received through history. “In Thapar’s work there is a bias for north India, bias in spellings and a lot more. The matrilineal Satavahanas (who used names like Gautamiputta) are ignored by scholars like her. In Satavahana literature the word for baaman is used, but this figures as brahman in Thapar. Historians rely heavily on puranic texts, but puranic texts never mention Asoka. Asoka was discovered by British scholars. All Buddhist literature was found outside India. Pali and Prakrit inscriptions are found in India before Sanskrit inscriptions. The first Sanskrit inscription came in the Gupta period, 600 years after Pali inscriptions. And despite all this evidence, we continue to read of ancient India as Hindu India and not as Buddhist India”.

If in the Satavahana period, brahman was actually spelt baa-man, in Telugu country even today non-brahmins refer to the brahmin as baapanodu, without the ‘r’ indicative of the brahminic influence. Similarly, it is paappaan in colloquial Tamil and bamman in much of north India. In Marathi, the Kanoba of dalit-bahujan circles becomes Krishna under Sanskrit influence. Omvedt said a similar brahminisation of village names took place in the suffixing of the nasal ‘n’ to the term gao to render it gaon; the village where Omvedt lives, Kase-gaon, being originally ‘Kasegao’. Takasila becomes Takshasila; Pai-than becomes Pathistana, and so on. “It is almost a conspiracy”, said Omvedt. Obviously, the consequences of such linguistic violence and sustained erasure for the psyche of dalit-bahujans can be terrible.

In his paper, Lokamitra, a white British-Buddhist activist based in Pune, addressed the question of religious conversion; specifically, how and why neo-Buddhists of Maharashtra tended to relapse into Hinduism. “Since the Ambedkar-led mass conversion of mostly mahars to Buddhism in 1956, the brahminical interest in Buddhism has declined. The international community of Buddhists preferred to send preachers of dhamma to the West and not to India. So there are many dalit-Buddhists with very little knowledge of Buddhism. The net result is the dalit thinks instead of praying to SantoshiMaa, saying ‘buddhamsaranamgachchami’ will help beget a child. In Maharashtra, if you say you are Buddhist they would ask if you are mahar. To a large extent, Buddhist identity came to be tied with mahar identity. After 1956, caste Hindus saw Buddhism as a good thing for dalits but not for themselves. So it is not as if conversion in itself reduces stigmatisation. The consequence is today the neo-Buddhists prefer to marry their next generation to non-Buddhist Brahmins than to non-Buddhist dalits”.

Spectre of humiliation

Political scientist and Delhi University professor, Gopal Guru, theorised on humiliation, elaborating on the psychology, structure and the transcendence of humiliation. At times, in some societies, humiliation can be a ‘state’, whereas in others it is a ‘condition’. Guru offered ragging – humiliation by a peer group – as an instance of the former. A state is temporary, and consequently holds the possibility of transcending humiliation. In India and the United States, however, humiliation has been a condition, implying permanence. Where humiliation is a condition, its structure is constantly (re)produced. To emerge from this condition, a person has to acquire self-respect. This is possible in a society where liberal humanism is the credo since the language of rights enables self-respect (as was the case for the blacks in the US). A person transformed into a vegetable cannot have self-respect. And even if she or he were to invent images of self-respect, a situation of conflict would arise with the oppressor who would be tormented by any assertion of rights. In India, where society is based on the language of obligations to the preclusion of the idea of self-respect, the subjugation is total and a person is sometimes reduced to a cipher.

According to Guru, in caste societies one can produce humiliation without an object, as an abstraction. In Western societies, there must be an object (such as a sweating body) for it to be the subject of humiliation. In India, the presence of the gross body is not even required. It is already condemned if the humiliation has been designated. Guru gave the example of a woman who is a

'scavenger' (sanitation work is invariably done by dalits), but whose daughter is not. Yet, the daughter is also humiliated – she too is seen as a scavenger. Through the transference of the abhorred labour, humiliation travels across time and space. This is not the case in most Western societies, except perhaps where racist segregation operates. Guru said that an act of humiliation has structural requirements – of a victim, a victimiser and an observer. A victimiser must have some power – in the form of race or class or caste or state or sex – to be able to humiliate a victim. And without an observer, an act of humiliation is not complete.

On the issue of transcendence, Guru said, transcending humiliation was possible only if human worth is recognised – as an essence in itself, as a non-transferable non-exchangeable value. Indian caste society lacks the conditions to appreciate genuine human worth. For instance, Kolhapuri leather footwear and cricket balls are highly valued but (because they deal with cowhide to produce these goods) not their makers. The commodity is aestheticised but the person responsible for it, and indeed the community, suffers humiliation. At the abstract level, the dalit product is appreciated, but the dalit person – the concrete being – is humiliated.

As a secondary source of humiliation, a dalit can also be a victim-iser. To illustrate, SushrutJadhav suggested the dynamics of the victim turning victimiser as may happen in cases of sexual abuse. Asking a corollary question – whether it is possible to shame a brahmin – Bhargavi Davar took the discussion towards brahmins and shame. Why is the brahmin shameless? One participant suggested that brahmins do not like to publicly acknowledge shame (there is a private/personal sense of shame), but reflecting the lack of brahminical scholarship on the oppressor castes, there were no structured answers from among the brahmins. Guru pointed out that in the Hegelian master-slave context, knowing that he lacks a certain skill that the slave possesses, the master can be humiliated. It was observed that brahmins such as VD Savarkar and BG Tilak felt ashamed vis-à-vis the British, shame defined here with regard to someone perceived to be superior. With regard to someone hierarchically lower, brahmins think of themselves as above shame. The brahmin – always articulating, never self-reflective even as a reflex – claims to be above-board; there is intellectual arrogance as in Sankaracharya.

In their next seminar, SushrutJadhav and Bhargavi Davar hope to bring together a new set of participants with the aim of understanding the brahmin and non-dalit non-brahmin minds that perpetrate humiliations. Dalit autobiographical accounts of pain and sorrow, which have become grist for the academic and publishing mills, are now available for easy consumption for non-dalits. It is time we insisted that the perpetrators of casteism reflect upon themselves.

ShivdharmaAndAmbedkarite Opinion

Vasant Rajas, a well known Ambedkarite thinker and writer from Belgaon (Karnataka) and a prominent activists against Devdasi system has expressed his opinions about the new Shivdharma movement in Marathamarg of April 2003. Following excerpts:

Renouncing of Hindu religion is the need of the day, says Mr. Rajas. Shrewd and wily Brahmins created for their own protection, a host of false religious books in the name of gods and got the nonbrahmins entangled in the useless rites making them mental slaves and exploiting them on religious, social, economic and cultural fronts. The process is still continuing and Brahmins are enjoying the fruits of labour and services of the bahujans. They are glorifying the outdated Hinduism in the name of gods and are creating riots in the society. They have prohibited the bahujans from reading their religious books for centuries, just to keep the Bahujans oblivious of their wily tricks. The great personalities like the Buddha, Mahavira, Charvaka, Basaveswara, Chakradhara, Shivaji, Phule, Shahu, Ambedkar rebelled against the tendency. But the wily Brahmins engineered counter revolutions and reestablish their hegemony. Now Shivdharma has decided and has undertaken the great task of freeing the people from the slavery of Brahmins. There are going to be hurdles in this and there is a need to be vigilant.

This religion called Hinduism is nothing but an amorphous collection of various castes based on false religious books, false Puranas, rituals, blind faiths, yajnas, fatalism, and vain rites. Many dignitaries like Buddha, Phule and Ambedkar. worked hard to free the nonbrahminbahujan masses from this

slavery and to base the new society on liberty, equality, justice, morality and fraternity and create an universal religion for the benefit of majority like -- 'bahujanhitaybahujansukhay' --

But they were strongly opposed by the shrewd Brahmins. So Dr.Ambedkar had to renounce Hinduism with his innumerable followers and vowed to convert the whole of India to Buddhism. The Brahmins ridiculed him saying many have tried before to destroy Hinduism but it still exists. But the fact remains that the Dalit converts have been free from the clutches of god, fatalism, rituals and the slavery of Brahmins. This is the ground reality. Therefore it is essential for the Bahujans to renounce Hinduism if they wish to free themselves from the slavery of Brahminism.

Bahujans have declared to renounce Hinduism and adopt Shivdharma on 12th of January 2005. This is going to be big blow to Hinduism and Brahmins are going to create the rift among the Bahujans. So I like to make certain suggestions to the leaders of Shivdharma.

1. The real tricks, truths and untruths in the Brahminic books must be properly explained to the Bahujans. This is because the Bahujans are gullible and much traditional, ignorant about religion, and a mentally slaves of Brahmins and so need a lot of awakening.
2. Religious conferences, mass meetings, seminars, lectures of scholars and brain storming sessions must be organized to awaken the Bahujans and cause transformation.
3. "Satya--shodhak" movement should be started to explain the truth and untruths about gods, fatalism etc. and to remove blind faiths and evil customs and traditions.
4. The real history and work of Bahujan heroes must be explained to masses by observing the birth anniversaries celebrations etc.
5. New ceremonials should be created for religious and marriage functions etc. and nonbrahmins should be created. There should be a "dharma peeth" for the Shivdharma and a "Dharmaguru".
6. Our festivals should be the birth anniversaries of our heroes.
7. Warn the Bahujans against the wily Brahminic tricks.
8. The religion of the slaves and those who make them slaves can not be the same. Therefore the Bahujans should renounce Brahminic Hinduism and adopt Shivdharma or consider adopting Buddhism which is scientific.