

**RACISM**  
and **PUBLIC**  
**POLICY**

Durban, South Africa  
3 - 5 September 2001

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CONFERENCE PAPER

**Cataracts of Silence**

Race on the Edge of Indian Thought

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**UNRISD work for the Racism and Public Policy Conference is being carried out with the support of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. UNRISD also thanks the governments of Denmark, Finland, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom for their core funding.**

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# Cataracts of Silence: Race on the Edge of Indian Thought

Vijay Prashad

Paper prepared for the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD)  
Conference on *Racism and Public Policy*, September 2001, Durban, South Africa

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In the warm summer of 1992, Ram Pyari sat with me on a grassy patch outside Indira Gandhi International Airport in New Delhi. A sanitation worker in the airport, Ram Pyari spoke to me of her predicament in tones familiar to working class people the world over. "Poor people make rich people. Without poor people how would rich people become rich? Who makes them rich? We make them rich, and as they get rich and powerful, they suck our blood."<sup>1</sup> Those who sat with us murmured their assent, and one spoke of how their supervisor was now building a new house with monies earned from bossing the workers around.

But Ram Pyari is not just any worker. She is a Dalit, a member of a community oppressed for social, political and economic reasons by communities that claim to be of a higher caste. One sixth of India's population are Dalits. These 160 million people are divided into numerous communities with distinct customs and histories, but they are bound together by a common history of grinding oppression.

Dalit literally translates to "broken people," with "broken" often glossed as oppressed. Since the 1970s, radical Dalits have claimed the word for their communities and their liberation. Dominant castes used to call them "untouchables" (*achhut*), Gandhian liberals call them Harijans ("children of god") and the Indian Republic calls them Scheduled Castes (because they are on a government schedule that entitles them to certain protections and affirmative actions). Most Dalits are like Ram Pyari: poor folk who work in the fields, factories, streets, shops, and public buildings -- wherever labor is in demand.

Unlike people of color in the U.S. or blacks in South Africa, Dalits are not physically distinguishable from other Indians. In some regions, occupation, surname, or dress can sometimes identify them, but Dalits are usually hard to pick out. The experience of Dalits shows that apartheid-like conditions can be imposed upon people who are marked by history, not appearance.

India's powerful independence movement (1885-1947) produced perhaps the world's most extensive system of affirmative action for oppressed peoples like the Dalits. And, since the 1970s, Dalits like Ram Pyari have organized to use these assets to overturn the caste system, organize for power, and fight for their rights. Yet Dalits still face an uphill struggle against starkly unequal conditions. The election slogan of the Bahujan Samaj Party (a Dalit-dominated, but largely opportunistic political group) in 1994 is still apt: "*Vote hamara, raj tumhara. Nahin chalega, nahin chalega*" ("We vote, you govern. This won't go on, this won't go on").

When national level discussions for the WCAR began in India last year, the problem of caste immediately stirred controversy. The Hindi-Right dominated government was chary to raise the issue of caste on the world stage, particularly at this juncture when it revels in the US-sponsored praises for being the world's largest democracy (and to secure India a much-coveted seat as a permanent member of the UN Security Council). The government seeks to avoid anything that makes India "look bad" on

the world stage. Apart from these international political reasons, the Hindu-Right government has a commitment to the perpetuation of caste discrimination. Not only are its ranks filled with representatives of the dominant castes, but its public policy platforms frequently privilege the rights of those dominant castes who hold wealth over the rest of society (of oppressed castes and religious minorities). Furthermore, allied organizations of the Hindu-Right have even convened religious conclaves given to the topic of a formal “revival” of strict Brahmanical social organizations, such as *varnashramadharma* or the four-fold division of *varnas* (the four social orders, Brahman, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras). On 7 February 2001, the External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh noted that “we must ensure that the Conference does not lose sight of its focus on racism.” In other words, the Hindu-Right would then be able to preserve itself not only as an anti-racist nationalist force, but that it could occlude the several discriminations and prejudices that structure the Indian polity.

Dalit rights activists have, naturally, been eager to raise the question of caste discrimination on the international stage, particularly since this government (in power since 1998) has been the first to block discussion of caste in international forums. Martin Macwan, national head of the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights, reminds us that “in earlier international forums, notably the Committee on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, the Government of India had successfully taken up the issue of caste-based discrimination. Why is it insisting that caste is an ‘internal’ matter?”<sup>2</sup> The idea that caste is an “internal” matter is specious, mainly because “caste” as we know it today is decidedly fostered by a combination of Indian social relations, European-driven colonialism, and global capitalism. These three factors produce what we know as caste today, since the practice cannot claim to be an ahistorical reflection of what one reads in Sanskrit texts. Caste, then, is not “internal,” but a form of social discrimination that is in conversation with similar forms elsewhere. It is in this spirit that most Dalit rights activists want to hold the international discussion.

It should be said, however, that there are some that want to reduce caste to a form of race, and therefore make a strong connection between the anti-racist work and the anti-caste work. Afrocentrics and Dalitocentrics are particularly notable here, especially with the claim that Dalits are “negritos” and that they suffer oppression at the hands of their “Aryan” oppressors, just as black folk around the world are held down by white folk. That the evidence for race as biology has been discredited does not seem to bother the indigenistas, many of whom deploy old racist texts to make their claims. One reason many indigenistas use the language of race in an unreconstructed manner is because they get ideological sustenance from a simple-minded US race politics, where the black-white dyad drives the political landscape. Indeed, in an interview with me, a leading US-based Afrocentric scholar who was instrumental in the creation of the Afro-Dalit thesis conceded that “I feel bad about it. I think I oversimplified the situation of Dalits to make it palatable to a [US] Black constituency. I gave the impression that Dalits are Black people.” Nevertheless, he argued that “I think large sections of Dalits would be seen as Black people if they lived anywhere else.”<sup>3</sup> One of the dangers of US imperialist hegemony is that the global anti-imperialist agenda may also end up being set in US anti-imperialist terms. That is, the anti-racist program for organizations and activists from across the global might replicate the terms of the US movement. Race, then, as a central category for the struggle may be self-evident in the US context, but it may not be as useful in other settings. The enthusiasm for epidermal determinism occurs despite the Dalitcentric editor V. T. Rajshekar’s early warning that “in India, it is no longer easy to distinguish a touchable from an Untouchable, especially for foreigners (unlike in the US where the difference between skin colors is more pronounced).”<sup>4</sup> Whether it was ever possible to tell caste by skin color is a question for debate, but certainly to make such judgements now is rather impossible.

In this paper, I will offer a brief overview of the history of the caste concept, allied as it has been since the modern period with its kin term of race. No discussion on caste can be conducted

without a discussion of the fight against discrimination in South Asia. Then, I offer an analysis of the fight against caste in contemporary India, as well as a few suggestions for the international engagement in this struggle. The problem of the Dalit struggle is posed front and center in this paper not to ignore other problems of caste, but to stress, with the Dalit leader B. R. Ambedkar, that “the problem of Untouchability [and caste] is a problem of the class struggle.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Apartheid by Any Name.**

When the Portuguese first landed in the southwestern coast of India in 1498, they came upon a form of social organization to which they gave the name caste (from *castus*). What they referred to was not one system, but a series of social formations to which they gave one name. But there was never just one simple caste hierarchy in India. Even today there are some 4,635 ethnic communities, many with distinct land bases and systems of hierarchy. What the Portuguese called caste was probably a social form called *jati* (community). The Europeans saw *jati* as rigid and oppressive, perhaps forgetting their own rigid feudal social order. *Jati* hierarchies emerged from the ancient world in various forms: occupations, marriage bonds, dietary habits, and religious customs. Indeed, no one principle explains “the caste system.” Different *jatis* attained dominance in different parts of southern Asia, but all commanded the fealty and labor of others based on their monopoly over land and force. Over time, these others would come to be branded as “Untouchables.” Historian Suvira Jaiswal, who is an expert in ancient South Asian history, has written a wonderful account of the complex genesis of caste and of the myriad genealogies that can be drawn for each and every caste.<sup>6</sup> There is no subcontinental-wide caste system, since each locality produced various forms of local oppression – where those who came to dominance, in and around the fight against Buddhism (and other *Sramanic* orders), adopted ideas of superiority. Many of these xenophobic and elitist ideas articulated with and drew from the Brahmanic texts of an earlier era, notably with the *varnashramadharma* of the *Puranas* (the ancient system of differentiation known as *varna*, where society is divided into four categories, Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras). Endogamy, ritual ranking and class power are three of the most important forces that constitute, in varying degrees, the complex of social differentiation and power in South Asian pre-modernity. There was nothing polite about the way the dominant *jatis* made their demands. Dalits fought off routine violence from dominant *jatis*, who, in turn, tried to erect vicious mechanisms to control the will of Dalits. Like the US South and South Africa, the Dalits could touch all manner of dominant *jati* things, if it was a way for them to provide labor. But, when the Dalits worked for themselves, then their touch was seen by the dominant *jatis* as a form of social pollution. Dalit women worked in the homes of the dominant *jatis*, and they fell prey to the sexual violence of elite men. However, these men disdained from any other interactions with the women.

When the Europeans began to conquer and administer the landmass of South Asia in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, they began to pay careful attention to the social order that lay before them. The anthropologist Bernard Cohn has shown us that the British impact on South Asian social life was decisive, mainly through the classification regime set in place by the colonial rulers.<sup>7</sup> Certainly, work on two oppressed castes (Dalits) shows us that the British intervention transformed their relations to production and power: the Balmikis, as Chuhras, and the Jatavs, as Chamars, lived with control over land, as well as shares of the commons, until the British land officials decided, mainly in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, that these Dalits should work only as drudge labor and not toil on land that was their own.<sup>8</sup> What was the reason for this British response and how was it put into place? The reason was the Haitian Revolution of 1791-92 (in the aftermath of the French Revolution) and of the birth of raciology as a means to justify the brutal control over labor with dark skin. In 1793, Jeremy Bentham,

otherwise quite clear about the importance of the “rights of man,” asked “Would the declaration of rights translate into *Sanscrit*? Would *Bramin*, *Chetree*, *Bice*, *Sooder*, and *Hallochore* meet on equal ground?” Being culturally relativist *avant la lettre*, and justifying the rule of joint-stock multinational corporations like the English East India Company, Bentham noted that “if it is to be determined that they must have masters, you will then look out for the least bad ones that could take them: and after all that we have heard I question whether you would find any less bad than our English company.” Hegel, after the Thermidor in Paris and in Port au Prince, checked his enthusiasm for freedom, with the caveat that “universal freedom can produce no positive work or deed, only *negative action* remains to it; it is the *fury of destruction*.” In 1822-23, Hegel, as Bentham had earlier, said that “the English, or rather the East India Company, are the lords of the land [India]; for it is the necessary fate of Asiatic Empires to be subjected to Europeans,” and to be ruled without even a qualified kind of freedom for the darker skins.

The East India Company disregarded, indeed squelched, the dynamic for freedom within South Asia, as they produced knowledge about India that was, in many ways, the template for their land revenue and other public policies. The Europeans liked the stereotypical order of the “caste system” and they did all they could to bolster the Brahmanical order (in cahoots with their monarchical allies, many of whom retained their nominal rank, but lost their real power).<sup>9</sup> An early text was *Hindu Manner, Customs and Ceremonies* (1816) by the Abbé Dubois, who had fled the French Revolution with the Missions Étrangères in 1792. “I believe caste division to be in many respects the *chef-d’oeuvre*, the happiest effort of Hindu legislation,” he wrote in this book that was very influential for the East India Company officialdom (the manuscript was purchased from Dubois by Major Wilkins, the Resident of Mysore, published by the EIC and distributed to its officials). “I am persuaded that it is simply and solely due to the distribution of the people into castes that India did not lapse into a state of barbarism, and that she preserved and perfected the arts and sciences of civilization whilst most other nations of the earth remained in a state of barbarism.” The point is taken further in his discussion of the Pariahs, the Parayars of the Tamil speaking regions. “I am persuaded that a nation of Pariahs left to themselves would speedily become worse than the hordes of cannibals who wander in the vast waste of Africa and would soon take to devouring each other.” If Africans can be ordered by the brutality of chattel slavery (in the Americas) and by a reconstructed tribalism (in the continent of Africa itself), then the dark skins of South Asia can be ordered and managed by the reconstruction of caste along imperial lines. The discourses of race and caste (as well as tribe), then, emerged simultaneously, as both terms enabled the Europeans to justify the expropriation of values from certain parts of the world to what was to become the center of the world economy: Europe. In the aftermath of the French Revolution, European conservatives justified their ill-gotten gains on the basis of race/caste, now rendered in terms of biology, and they continued their reliance upon military force on the basis of their imputed racial superiority. Caste-Tribe became the words used to index the lesser forms of social organization in India-Africa, social forms used by racial inferiors. This had labor effects: just as the labor power of the European (white) worker was commodified, the labor power of the darker skins was animalized, treated as something that required physical coercions to extract the maximum effort. The notion of race, then, was at the foundation of the reconstruction of caste in modern times.

In an act of bad faith, the European powers blamed the oppressed for their own oppression and they exculpated themselves from the manufacture of biological ideas of inferiority. Take Dubois again. “The idea that the [Dalit] was born to be in subjection to the other castes is so ingrained in his mind that it never occurs to the Pariah to think that his fate is anything but irrevocable. Nothing will ever persuade him that men are all made of the same clay, or that he has the right to insist on better treatment than that which is meted out to him.” But if Dubois and the early EIC officials asked the Parayars what they thought of their subjection, they would have got a different answer: when the colonial ethnographer, Thurston, did just this in 1909, the Parayars of the Tamil-speaking region told

him that they suffered the social indignity because of an ancient betrayal due to a linguistic error. Two poor brothers went to pray to the divinity, but they found a dead cow on the road. God instructed them to remove it. The elder brother said, *een thambi pappaan*, or “my younger brother will do it.” The divinity misheard him: *een thambi paappaan*, or “my younger brother is a Brahmin.” The elder became a Parayar, the younger a Brahmin. But Dubois did not care for this self-awareness. While the Balmikis tell a similar story, they end with one of the young men declaring, “I wish to make a nation of my own.” But the political economy does not allow this resolution to their oppression.

In the transition to capitalism, Marx argued, labor is freed in a “double sense, free from the relations of clientage, bondage and servitude, and secondly free of all belongings and possessions, and of every objective, material form of being, *free of all property*, dependent on the sale of its labor capacity or on begging, vagabondage and robbery as its only source of income.”<sup>10</sup> The means of production are wrenched from the workers at the same time as they are free to sell their labor-power as a commodity on the market. At the periphery of capital, labor is made free only to be damned to unfreedom through the Brahmano-colonial mythology of an ancient division of labor known as the caste system. Caste, as a form of social relations, certainly predates colonial rule. However, caste as we know it today was radically transformed during the colonial period. Colonial sociology and policy worked together to expropriate Dalits from the soil (many then turn to cities to be hired into specific occupations, Balmikis as sweepers and Chamars as leather-workers, when both worked as agricultural workers before). In Punjab, for instance, the land laws in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries specifically noted that Dalits, as drudge labor, should not be allowed to own land, a marked departure from the facts of land holding at that time: these Dalits lost control over their resources and fell prey to the direct, and brutal exploitation of newly landed classes, as well as of the wiles of capitalism’s economic cycles. Modern employment was segregated along a stereotyped version of “native tradition” despite the fact that these “traditional” modes had not previously existed (except perhaps in ancient Brahmanical texts). This process demonstrates how labor is freed in the Indian colonies -- freed, that is, into caste.

In 1999, Human Rights Watch (New York) published a report entitled *Broken People: Caste Violence Against India’s “Untouchables.”* HRW found that the situation of Dalits was deplorable and called their condition “hidden apartheid.” There is nothing *hidden* about the violence against Dalits, one that moved M. K. Gandhi (1869-1948) in the 1930s to bring their struggles to the center of the Indian national movement. His was a liberal gesture, far from the radicalism of some sections of the politically active Dalit movement led by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1956). Ambedkar, a Dalit from western India, felt that ‘it is wrong to say that the problem of Untouchables is a social problem,’ a reference here to Gandhi’s attempt to create social reform. Rather, he argued, “the problem of the Untouchables is fundamentally a political problem (of minority versus majority groups).” It is also, as we’ve seen above, an economic problem, one of land rights and control over capital. Rather than become the “mere recipients of charity,” Ambedkar called upon the Dalits to “educate, organize and agitate” for a struggle which he called “the reclamation of human respectability.”

Ambedkar tapped into a long history of resilience among Dalits, and one can get an intimation of these vibrant Dalit struggles from the songs of Dalit poets. Raidas (1414-1540), for instance, sang that “don’t ask of jati, we are all equal in the eyes of divinity.” Or Kabirdas (1440-1518) who asked his fellows to seek truth in themselves and in their acts. By the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, the region of Punjab was treated to the anti-clerical songs of Bulleh Shah who sang that “God permeates each and every house, and he permeates every human soul.” These songs against hierarchy based on a claim to religion remind us that few among the oppressed took their condition for granted. The tradition of protest does not exist only amongst the most oppressed castes, but the history of the Lingayats, Jains, and others, shows us that middle-castes too found the entire ensemble inhuman. (Incidentally, there is not even

agreement among ancient Brahmins on the question of caste. The *Upanishads*, in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, took a strong position against Brahmanic supremacy, in contrast to the *Rigveda*: the story of King Jansruti Pautrayana who went to the carter Raikva for education is instructive).

Over the past two hundred years, more self-conscious acts of anti-jati campaigns resulted in a further awareness of the outrageous of untouchability and anti-Dalit violence. Just as Frederick Douglass reminded the world that “power concedes nothing without a demand,” Jyotibai Phule (1826-1890) declared that “we know perfectly well that the Brahmin will not descend from his self-raised pedestal and meet his low caste brethren on an equal footing without a struggle.” Jyotibai and Savitribai Phule founded the Satya Shodhak Samaj (Truth Seeking Society) in September 1873 to educate the oppressed jatis as well as to conduct cross-jati marriages, radical acts against hierarchy. Alongside the Phules, Dalit peasants rose in hundreds of revolts against the yoke of British colonialism, local landlords and moneylenders. These are the precursors to the vast struggles of the next century, movements such as Sri Narayan Guru’s SNDP Yogam, E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker’s Self-Respect Movement and the work of Ambedkar.

## 2. Dalits as Citizens.

In 1947, the Indian national movement ejected British colonialism and inaugurated a period of national construction. These were heady days, as anti-colonial movements from Indonesia to Ghana took power of States to make freedom something tangible for the masses. India was no exception. The first Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964) was impatient to rework the oppressive present, so the State in the 1950s took a few bold steps toward the emancipation of the Dalits. Ambedkar is known, in many Dalit circles, as the architect of the Indian Constitution. Recruited by Nehru, and well-known for his outspoken views on the need for a wide sense of democracy, Ambedkar pushed through many enlightened articles into the Constitution, and, as India’s first Law Minister, he was instrumental in creating a very progressive legal regime to ensure protections for Dalits as well as mechanisms for their emancipation. If there was no political movement of Dalits to back-up Ambedkar, the judiciary provided that cover. When the government’s protections of freedom for Dalits was challenged in the Courts, a Supreme Court justice argued that “advantages secured due to historical reasons cannot be considered a fundamental right guaranteed by the Constitution.” When Martin Luther King, Jr., traveled to India in 1959 he was stunned by the State’s monetary and legal commitment to Dalit emancipation. When Nehru was asked if this discriminated against other jatis, he replied that “well it may be, but this is our way of atoning for the centuries of injustices we have inflicted upon these people.”

While Article 14 of the 1950 Indian Constitution guaranteed equality before the Law, the Courts refused to interpret it to mean absolute and unequivocal equality. In order to produce equality, the courts developed a framework to prevent the notion of equality from suppressing active governmental intervention on behalf of certain groups. In order to produce social and economic equality, the Courts allowed the State to intervene on behalf of oppressed and exploited groups, to use equality as the means to freedom.<sup>11</sup> The Courts identified women and backward classes as the two major groups towards whom the State was enjoined to act in a compensatory manner.<sup>12</sup> In 1964, Justice Subba Rao argued the logic of compensation forthrightly: “centuries of calculated oppression and habitual submission reduced a considerable section of our community to a life of serfdom. It would be well nigh impossible to raise their standards if the doctrine of equal opportunity was strictly enforced in their case. They would not have any chance if they were made to enter the open field



competition without adventitious aids till such time they could stand on their own legs.”<sup>13</sup> The institutions that the Indian State created were a means to the politicization of ‘equality’ in order to produce a future moral, free community. Rather than bear the full implications of this courageous policy, the Indian administration settled for the ‘reservations’ policy that enabled a few Dalits to join what was once called the ‘Harijan elite.’<sup>14</sup> The actual benefits from the policy of compensation were not evenly distributed among the Dalits because certain caste groups benefited more than others and only a few individuals and their families were able to capitalize on State policy. The vast mass of the Dalits remained outside the purview of the ‘reservations’ packages. The Balmikis, for instance, were only able to take advantage of the reservations scheme as a collectivity in their monopoly over one particular occupation in the municipalities: Class IV employment, typically with the sanitation departments. Most of the reservations are in low-skilled, low-paying jobs that do little to move Dalits up the economic ladder. Since compensatory discrimination is restricted to government jobs, the much larger private sector remains free to discriminate against Dalits.<sup>15</sup> Reservations, in this manner, are a far cry from the enlightened State policy envisaged by the Indian Judiciary.

By the mid-1960s, the limited compensation schemes began to suffer from the economic and political crisis that followed the Sino-Indian war of 1962, the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965 and the monsoon failures of 1965 and 1967. A serious crisis of political hegemony followed from the late 1960s, which developed into the ruling clique taking extraordinary powers into its own hands through centralization, whose most notable instance was the promulgation of the Emergency in 1975. Among Dalits, serious doubts were being raised about the commitment and ability of the State to provide the conditions of equality. In 1969, L. Elayaperumal’s report on Dalits for the Department of Social Welfare pointed out that “to our utter dismay the Committee found that untouchability was still being practiced in virulent form all over India.”<sup>16</sup> In the Lok Sabha on 19 August 1970, the Minister of State for Home (R. N. Mirdha) announced that between 1967 and 1969, 1117 Dalits had been reported murdered. Of these, 63 cases were in Maharashtra, 332 in Uttar Pradesh and 76 in Punjab.<sup>17</sup> The “Harijan Atrocity” of the 1970s was not part of an ancient story of the caste system, but must be imbedded in the social relations of the caste struggle that intensified after Dalits felt emboldened by their constitutional protections. When Chief Minister Kapoori Thakur’s regime in Bihar (1977-1980) opened space for Dalit advancement, the dominant castes, the Kurmis, massacred some of Pipra village’s Chamars in 1980. Pipra was in line with a host of such massacres whose aetiology may be in the revanchist attempt by dominant castes to hold onto power that seemed to be on the wane.

In response to the failure of India to resolve the contradictions of political democracy, young Dalits in the late 1960s took inspiration from world-wide student movements, from the Black Panther movement in the United States and from the resurgence of militant left-wing activity within India to escalate their own struggle for freedom. On 29 April 1968, Shyam Sunder launched the Bheem Sena in Gulbanga to militarily confront caste Hindu atrocities against Dalits.<sup>18</sup> In June 1972, the Dalit Panthers emerged as the major political formation of this new militancy. In a manifesto penned by one faction of the movement, the Panthers declared themselves in favor of “a complete revolution” as opposed to “partial change.” After independence, they argued, the “government did not do anything to eradicate [untouchability] except passing some laws against it.” This was, for the Panthers, insufficient. In their 18 point program, they called for land redistribution, an increase in wages, free education, and censorship of offensive literature, and an end to economic corruption and most radically, “all means of production must belong to the Dalits.” Calling for “people’s democracy” (which was also the slogan of the Communist Party of India [Marxist]), the Panthers argued against the contradictions of the liberal state and put forward the slogan, “in our struggle we will become free.”<sup>19</sup>

The Panthers' alert us to the manner in which the Indian State attempted to resolve the contradictions of "equality." The Untouchability Offences Act of 1955 and the workings of the Commission of Scheduled Castes understood untouchability to mean the social and cultural oppression of the Dalits by caste Hindus and by Muslims. To compensate for the lack of access to public buildings (including restaurants, temples, etc.) and lack of expression (whether in choice of clothing or of speech) were the central tasks set by the state in its anti-untouchability campaign. Most of the recorded complaints by Dalits to the Commission were along these lines. By the late 1970s, however, most complaints to the Commission concerned issues such as land rights, housing and education. Harassment continued to be an important issue, but it was not the major issue.<sup>20</sup> From the perspective of the Panthers, untouchability had to be seen both as status and class inequality, for that is the peculiarity of Dalithood. The Panther intervention dramatized the structural critique of 'untouchability and it alerts us to see caste not only as a political-cultural-ritual system, but also as the form of socio-economic exploitation. Colonialism recast caste in such a way as to provide for the various economic and political needs of a system ravenous for the wealth generated in India. In his thoughtful study of the ideology of Lucknow Chamars, Khare makes a remarkable statement: "from the Untouchable's position....all the powerful waves of social reform, radicalism, and revolt must finally crash within the same old Manu-ordained parameters."<sup>21</sup> No doubt the *Dharmashastras* continue to influence the doings and thinkings of caste Hindus, but the experience and structures of contemporary untouchability can hardly be interpreted on the basis of a text written sometime in the first two centuries B. C. E. To interpret the quotidian experience of untouchability we must investigate both the political-cultural and the socio-economic dimensions as well as locate the conditions of today's untouchability in the modern structures whose roots are found in colonial times.

The Panthers were unable to craft wide enough solidarities to make a mark on the national political scene; further, infighting amongst the leaders and the cadres on the status of whom to ally with ended any hope of building a political opposition to the State's limited policy towards untouchability. In recent years, the most effective, but largely opportunistic, Dalit political bloc to emerge on the national scene has been the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). The BSP has its roots in the All-India Backward SC, ST and Minority Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF) founded in December 1978 by Kanshi Ram to organize the elite among the Dalits to fight for social change. Since the government put restrictions on its employees from doing political work, Ram formed the Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti (DS-4) in December 1981, which, in April 1984, formed an electoral wing, the BSP. In 1987, Ram told the media that the Dalits "nurse a feeling that the government in spite of its best efforts has not been able to remove poverty. This is truly unfortunate. The bureaucracy, which we inherited from the British, is caste ridden and officers have yet to rise above caste. I have seen how they work half-heartedly towards implementing the government's programmes for the backward communities."<sup>22</sup> The BSP is not the only organization to lay claim to the Social Democratic tradition of Dr. Ambedkar. They are joined in their commitment to Dalit politics by the historic Dalit parties, the Scheduled Castes Federation (founded by Ambedkar in 1942) and the Republican Party of India (founded shortly after Ambedkar's death in October 1957) and by various socialistic parties which draw from Rammanohar Lohia and from Jayaprakash Narayan. What these parties share is a commitment to protecting the Dalits from the harshness of capitalism: as Barbara Joshi put it, "'Equality' has increasingly taken on tones of equality of political power needed by the Scheduled Castes to fend for themselves. Political power could generate more paved streets in Scheduled Caste neighborhoods, more education and jobs for the neighborhood's young men, as well as protection from what the businessmen saw as the discriminatory harassment of government bureaucrats and the encroachment of higher caste business competitors."<sup>23</sup> The brief alliance between the BSP and militant Hinduism in 1995 demonstrated the impoverishment of the defensive agenda which has been cultivated by the social democratic parties which draw inspiration from Dr. Ambedkar.

The contradictions of equality reappeared on the national political agenda in the 1980s through the second Backward Classes Commission that the government appointed on 1 January 1979 under the chairmanship of B. P. Mandal. The Janata Government (1977-80) responded to the grassroots mobilizations which characterized the 1970s in India (from the Nav Nirman movement in Gujarat, to J. P.'s Sampurna Kranti in Bihar, to the Naxalite Movement in Bengal, Bihar and Andhra Pradesh and finally, to the Dalit Panther movement itself) by putting forth certain limited reforms of which the Mandal Commission was exemplary. The Commission offered its report on 31 December 1980. On the issue of equality, the Commission was remarkable:

In fact, what we call merit in an elitist society is an amalgam of native endowments and environmental privileges...The conscience of a civilized society and the dictates of social justice demand that 'merit' and 'equality' are not turned into a fetish and the element of privilege is duly recognized and discounted...when 'unequals' are made to run the same race...On the face of it the principle of equality appears very just and fair, but it has a serious catch. It is a well-known dictum of social justice that there is equality only amongst equals. To treat unequals as equals is to perpetuate inequality.<sup>24</sup>

The Mandal Commission warned Indian society in 1980 of the very contradictions identified by Ambedkar in 1949: the contradiction between the principle of equality before the Law and social and economic inequality. Unwilling to grapple with the contradictions at the foundation of Indian society, the unrest over Mandalization after 1990 revealed the reluctance of many Indians to even consider the project of producing equality. The attacks on the "protections" to "minorities" (communalism) and to the "public sector" (liberalization) have made the struggle for freedom hard and yet imperative. The State is pledged to interpret untouchability as harassment and the anti-untouchability movement as a struggle for civil rights; once the question of structural disenfranchisement is put on the table and once the struggle is for human rights, the dominant classes and castes enjoin the state to undercut those political gestures. "Mandal" has prevented the dialogue about equality from proceeding in a productive manner: the privileged has used it as a means to mock the project of compensation, the State has used it as a means to roll-back on the project and the Dalits and the Left have once again been put in the defensive position of praising policies which do not truly get at the heart of exploitation. For the Balmikis, compensation has meant that a few of the community succeed and that they are allowed to control the sanitation departments in municipalities; there is little to defend in the system from their point of view. Nevertheless, many do defend the system, saying much the same thing as a Dalit socialist said to Barbara Joshi about the Dalit Congressman Jagjivan Ram (1908-1986): "I don't know his caste and I don't like his politics, but I do know he is 'achut' like me, and when I see him at the top of the government, I laugh at the Brahman landlord who used to be afraid I would 'pollute' his well. I am no more afraid of any Brahmans. For us, democracy works."<sup>25</sup> Democracy works in that the Dalits now have the possibility to effect change; that they have not been able to effectively gain power is a mark of the strength of the dominant classes and castes in India.

Dalits still fight forms of apartheid. The State failed the Dalits because it did not truly dismantle the "advantages secured for historical reasons," such as land relations and the control over capital. Attempts by the state to extend favor to Dalits (such as in the 1980 Mandal Commission Report), draw an enormous resistance from the dominant jatis. Among Dalits, as a result, their rate of literacy is barely 22%, only 16% of Dalits live in cities, about 50% are agricultural laborers, and only 4% work in the industrial workforce. The extent of poverty, because of these factors, is about 50% (as against 30% for the population as a whole). Of those who work in the fields, 71% are marginal farmers who must sell their labor at low rates to dominant jatis. The poverty of Dalits is matched by their lack of political power. Since the 1970s, militant Dalit groups emerged to fight landlords and to use the franchise. The exertions of the Dalits have, by all accounts, increased anti-Dalit violence. In this

cauldron of struggle, many Dalit organizations emerged, such as the Dalit Panthers (inspired by the Black Panthers), the Republican Party of India, and the Bahujan Samaj Party. Over the years, these groups have floundered on the rocks of either opportunism or of extreme nationalism (the Panthers now resort to violence against other Left formations). In recent years, liberal Dalit groups have made linkages with non-governmental organizations to create such platforms as the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights. Their exertions, Smita Narula of HRW says, drew the attention of the Human Rights Watch to the atrocities against Dalits. The National Campaign has produced a series of “Black Papers” with a stark subhead, “Broken Promises and Dalits Betrayed.”

Part of the problem is the lack of focus on land relations, and this is what differentiates the fight for anti-racist justice in the advanced industrial North with the relatively rural South. The compensatory discrimination scheme created by the Indian government concentrates on public jobs (of which a seventh are “reserved” for the Dalits and Tribes), but this occludes the fact that only 16% of the total Dalit population live in urban India. Most of the rest are marginal farmers, sharecroppers or landless laborers (this despite the various prescribed occupations of certain Dalit communities). For these Dalits land ownership is the cornerstone of liberation. The recent reportage of celebrated journalist P. Sainath confirms the centrality of land, as do news reports of anti-Dalit violence in rural Bihar and Haryana.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the failure to underscore the importance of the land question serves to undermine the centrality of the Left to Dalit liberation. For most Dalits, wealth is land. This is not the view of the so-called Dalit parties, such as the BSP: when Dalit landless workers forcibly occupied the land of the ex-Raja of Benares in Uttar Pradesh, the BSP Chief Minister Mayavati sent in the police to arrest them. Her actions once more subordinated the Dalits to poverty. The centrality of land to the Left, on the other hand, is made clear by the 20 December 1998 All India Democratic Women’s Association Convention in support of Dalit women’s rights against untouchability and oppression. The first demand of the convention reads as follows: “Land reforms - land distribution, joint *pattas*, special priority to Dalits and in particular to Dalit female headed households. Return of land to Dalits which are in illegal occupation and arrest of the guilty. Access to all community land and use for fuel and fodder collection.”

Meanwhile, on the ground, change is afoot. Narula of HRW reports that processes of emancipation can be gleaned in the fight to gain local political power. In 1996, the Dalits of Melavalavu (Tamil Nadu) won control of the local governmental body. As they tried to take office, local goons killed six of the leaders. Of the six, the man elected to lead the body was beheaded, a “brutal reminder,” Brinda Karat of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) notes, “that, for the non-Dalits, Dalits are meant to serve, not rule.” Karat points to the data from West Bengal where the Left has been in power since 1977. Only there, she says, the Dalits have benefited from land reforms and from the devolution of political power. West Bengal has only 3.58% of the cultivatable land in the Indian Republic and yet, it has contributed over 20% of the total surplus land that falls under the land ceiling laws. Of the 4.8 million acres distributed in the country as a whole, West Bengal contributed 920,000 acres. Further, of the 2 million landless cultivators who received land, 56% came from socially oppressed communities (37% to Dalits and 19% to Scheduled Tribes). Apart from land reform, the Left Front-initiated Operation Barga in 1978 which registered 1.4 million tenant farmers and provided them with legal instruments to stave off eviction and to struggle for shares of the harvest. These land reforms are “the backbone of Dalit self-respect and dignity in the state.”<sup>27</sup>

In 1949, Ambedkar told the political leaders of India that their hesitant approach to land reform (and wealth redistribution) did not bode well for democracy. “How long shall we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life? If we continue to deny it for long, we will do so only by putting out political democracy in peril.” Caste, as constructed in colonial times and lived in the contemporary moment, is not identical to race, even though both emerge simultaneously as methods to

exert imperial control and to justify white supremacy. Where caste and race share much is in the way in which these forces of social oppression are related to the economic domain: both are about the denial of the means of production to certain peoples. Nevertheless, the agenda for social justice is not identical, since the social context of the fights are separate: where the human rights agenda of civic justice may be more important in one context, the fight for land rights may be central in the other. To collapse the contexts of social justice in the service of internationalism and solidarity is to harm all our struggles.

The Left and liberal Dalit groups have taken it upon themselves to be the guardians of political democracy by fighting for social and economic democracy. One hopes that their struggles will make India *truly* the world's largest democracy in the fullest sense of the word.

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<sup>1</sup> The discussion with Ram Pyari and others took place while I conducted the fieldwork for *Untouchable Freedom: A Social History of a Dalit Community*, Oxford University Press, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Naunidhi Kaur, "Caste and Race," *Frontline*, 6 July 2001, p. 95.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Runoko Rashidi, 22 December 1999. For a critique of epidermal determinism and more on the Afro-Dalit thesis, Vijay Prashad, 'Badge of Color: An Afro-Dalit Story,' *The Toronto Review*, Summer 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Rajshekar, *Dalit*, p. 52.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted by D. C. Ahir, *Buddhism in Modern India*, Sri Satguru Publications, 1990, p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> Suvira Jaiswal, *Caste. Origin, Function and Dimensions of Change*, Manohar, 1998. For a useful overview of the sociological literature, see Robert Deliege, *The Untouchables of India*, Berg, 1999.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard S. Cohn, *An Anthropologist Among the Historians*, Oxford, 1987.

<sup>8</sup> Prashad, *Untouchable Freedom*, for the Balmikis, as Ram Rawat's forthcoming research on the Jatavs.

<sup>9</sup> For the latter point, see N. Dirks, *The Hollow Crown*, Cambridge, 1987.

<sup>10</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 507.

<sup>11</sup> *Chiranjit Lal Chaudhury v. The Union of India* (1950).

<sup>12</sup> For women, see *Anjali Roy v. The State of West Bengal* (1952); *The University of Madras v. Shanta Bai* (1954); for backward classes, see for example *The State of Madras v. Champakam Doirajan* (1951).

<sup>13</sup> *Devadasan v The Union of India* (1964), S. C., 179.

<sup>14</sup> Sachchidananda, *The Harijan Elite*, Thomson Press, 1976.

<sup>15</sup> For details, see Oliver Mendelsohn and Marika Vicziany, *The Untouchables. Subordination, Poverty and the State in Modern India*, Cambridge, 1998, Chapter 4.

<sup>16</sup> GOI, *Committee on Untouchability, Economic and Educational Development of the Scheduled Castes*, GOI, 1969, p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> Lata Murugkar, *Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra*, Popular Books, 1991, 41.

<sup>18</sup> V. T. Rajshekar, *Dalit Movement in Karnataka*, Dalit Sahitya Academy, 1978.

<sup>19</sup> The manifesto is reproduced in Murugkar, *Dalit Panther*, 232-239. Murugkar offers a fine analysis of the political fights over the contents of the manifesto in Chapter 5 of her book.

<sup>20</sup> Abdul Malik Mujahid cites the following figures: In 1977-78, land, agriculture, etc. accounted for 54.71% of the complaints, while harrasment accounted for 45.29%; by 1978-79, 58.88% was for the former and 41.11% was for the latter. A. M. Mujahid, *Conversion to Islam*, Anima, 1989, p. 31.

<sup>21</sup> R. S. Khare, *The Untouchable as Himself*, Cambridge, 1984, p. 4.

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<sup>22</sup> Illustrated Weekly of India (8-14 March 1987).

<sup>23</sup> Barbara Joshi, *Democracy in Search of Equality: Untouchable Politics and Indian Social Change*, Hindustan, 1982, p. 125.

<sup>24</sup> Government of India, *Report of the Backward Classes Commission, First Part, Volume I & II* (Delhi, 1980), pp. 21-22.

<sup>25</sup> Joshi, *Democracy*, p. 68.

<sup>26</sup> For example, P. Sainath, "The Borderlines of Caste," *The Hindu*, 7 April 1999 and his book in process, *The Glass Struggle*.

<sup>27</sup> Brinda Karat, "Remembering the Melavalavu Six," *The Hindu*, 30 June 1999.