

Why Affluent Indians Speak Up about Race but stay Silent about Caste

June 11, 2020



Protesters in Los Angeles in the US and in Delhi in 2017. | Frederic J Brown, Sajjad Hussain/AFP

The death of the African American citizen George Floyd on 25 May 2020 in Minneapolis at the hands of police has sparked off countrywide protests in the United States. Both Black and White citizens have taken to the streets to protest against the entrenched racism in public structures and prevailing attitudes of the American people. Police brutality and racism in America are being condemned globally, particularly from South East Asia and the Middle East, whose citizens have also suffered through racism and discriminatory immigration policies at the hands of the US administration and its people.

Given South Asian solidarity with the African-American demand for political and social equality, Indians are amongst the first to speak against the racism that has now proven to be endemic in the US. However, the same Indians who abhor racism and protest racial discrimination in the US, choose to remain silent about caste and its practice in India and abroad. This is a virulent reality that is much closer to home and has been documented as a two-thousand-year-old form of discrimination practiced against Dalits (a term which means 'oppressed' or broken and has been self-appropriated by lower castes in India). It is practiced even today in the form of untouchability and remains uncontested by these apparently 'woke' Indians who publicly question race.

That is because there are two types of Indians who have tried to express solidarity with the African-American cause. The first are the bourgeois, diasporic upper castes who stand to gain directly from the abolition of racism by getting sought after jobs in the U.S. from which they have been excluded because of systemic racism. They only question racism and not casteism because they speak from a position of upper-caste privilege which can only play a limited role abroad when confronted with

racism. The second are Dalits who have historically drawn strength from the African-American struggle through organizations like Dalit Panthers inspired by the Black Panthers; the solidarity between B.R. Ambedkar and W.E.B. DuBois; slogans such as #DalitLivesMatter and Dalit literature which is protest literature like African-American literature with which it has had a productive relationship.

To White Americans who are asking why the slogan #AllLivesMatter is not preferable to #BlackLivesMatter, it must be pointed out that by subsuming black lives under all lives, the systemic discrimination against Blacks and the social construction of 'race' is made invisible. This invisibility produces, as the civil rights advocate and legal scholar Michelle Alexander asserts in her book *The New Jim Crow*, a "color blindness", which prevents us from seeing certain acts, such as a policeman pressing down on the throat of an African-American, as effects of racist ideology. This is similar to the acts of upper caste Indians who wish to rewrite history from the perspective of the upper-caste and view the inclusion of caste politics in mainstream history as muddying or polluting of the hegemonic Indian image abroad. It results in, as the social psychologist Yashpal Jogdand stresses, a "caste-blindness", which is the product of a deliberate refusal to see the role of caste in an individual's professional and personal success or failure.

'Black Reason' is what the philosopher Achille Mbembe calls a set of practices "whose goal was to produce the Black Man as a racial subject and site of savage exteriority". He argues that racism has the "power to distort the real and to fix affect". Individual failures in society are attributed to Blacks and Dalits being naturally stupid, ugly and brutish, as opposed to their being subjected to centuries of racial discrimination. They are made to feel inferior in every way possible because of these failures. This is what the psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon referred to as the "psycho-affective" predicament of the Black and Dalit who has to look at himself or herself through the White man's or the upper caste's eyes. It would be insidious to see this failure as individual for it is deliberately caused through the structural implementation of race which ensures that the African American or Dalit cannot succeed.

The particular problem of upper castes speaking against race while not speaking against caste is due to a host of factors. The Dalit has often been represented as abject, as an object of disgust, or at most pity, in upper caste literature and media. Hence, the Dalit's thoughts and consciousness have been harshly under-represented for an upper caste audience who is not moved to protest at the repeated, horrifying torture, rapes and deaths of Dalits that occur across the country routinely. On 13 January 2020, a 19-year-old Dalit woman was hanged from a tree in Gujarat after her rape and murder by three men. On 16 February 2020, two Dalit youths were physically tortured in a village in Rajasthan on the petty and unverified account of stealing. On 25 May, a case was reported of 13-year-old minor Dalit girl who had been gang raped by three men of her village and had consequently become pregnant. On 31 May, a 17-year-old boy called Vikas Jatav was shot dead by upper caste men because he dared to enter a temple as a Dalit. On June 7, a 20-year-old man called Viraj Jagtap was lynched by upper caste men because as a Dalit he fell in love with an upper caste woman. These gruesome cases are barely discussed in the national media and are far from inciting national outrage and attracting the attention of international media. Despite being filmed by onlookers, the perpetrators of the crime often get away because of a penal and judicial system that does not incriminate those who commit crimes against lower castes.

What stands apart is the rare case of Rohith Vemula, a Dalit scholar who was harassed by his university and forced to commit suicide. His death sparked off student protests all over the country. His death was seen as lost potential because he left a suicide note and his death came at a moment of productive contagion: increased campus protests and the rising consciousness of Dalit students. Notwithstanding this case, the kind of public outrage that George Floyd's death received is unimaginable for Dalit deaths in India. This is because the Dalit life has been made to appear as

superfluous (excessive and unnecessary) to the imagination of an upper caste Indian society. The Dalit's life is not viewed as valuable, and this is a direct result of casteist ideology.

Caste discrimination is still not recognized as an internationally occurring phenomenon. Intellectuals who are Dalit from B.R. Ambedkar in the last century to Suraj Yengde, Yashica Dutt and Thenmozi Soundararajan in the present day have helped to make caste an international issue and enabled it to be understood in racial terms. Achille Mbembe asserts that "race does not exist as a physical, anthropological, or genetic fact". It is crucial to understand that *caste is as much of a social construct as race*. Caste has the scriptural backing of religious texts such as *Manu-Smriti* (The Laws of Manu) and *Bhagavad-Gita*, which make it appear as a holy, divine concept of Hinduism which must be followed. This ensures that the Dalit is stranded in the cycle of discrimination for perpetuity. The fact that average upper-caste Indians speak up about racism but not about caste shows their duplicity, hypocrisy and armchair activism for believing in a concept that should be discarded. The upper castes in India and abroad have deliberately blinded themselves to the question of caste so as to retain their own sense of superiority. This is what is challenged through Dalit literature and politics which shows the hypocrisy of upper castes who are only motivated by self-interest and not any genuine sense of activism for transformation.