

THE PERSISTENCE OF PREJUDICE: REVIEW OF 'A HISTORY OF PREJUDICE'

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"Nevertheless, Dalit deprivation has had several dimensions historically. It was once located, and is still to be seen, in the Untouchables'(or ex-Untouchables') extremely low ritual status, frequently wretched economic conditions, and (until quite recently) denial of access to common cultural and political resources. It was also to be seen in the sexual exploitation of their women, which the Dalits' alleged impurity and untouchability did nothing to prevent."
(Gyanendra Pandey, 2013)

The author of *A History of Prejudice: Race, Caste, and Difference in India and the United States*, Gyanendra Pandey, tries to bring forth the prejudices that are prevalent in India and America based on caste and race, respectively, and talks about the dimensions of Dalit deprivation. (Pandey, 2013)

The condition of Dalits in India has been distressing. The basic rights of Dalits have been ignored and denied by the governments—and this is not a new phenomenon in India (Kumbhar, 2016) The author, in many instances, tries to uncover these incidents and provide some examples to substantiate his claims. The text also focuses on how the segregation of villages and population exists in India, and how the concept of purity is prevalent in upper-caste households.

The text also highlights how the notion of purity, paradoxically, finds no place when a Dalit woman is sexually abused. (Pandey, 2013)

This response paper aims to summarise the text and build upon arguments based on the text. It also aims to unravel some of the caste based incidents that have happened in India in recent times and link them to the author's text.

Synopsis of the Text

The author, in the introductory chapter, begins with a question regarding the explanation of the term 'Prejudice.' He bifurcates prejudice into two kinds, i.e., vernacular prejudice and universal prejudice. He considers the vernacular prejudice as a form of prejudice which is visible and local in nature. (Pandey, 2013) On the contrary, the universal prejudice is a form of prejudice which is largely invisible because it is ubiquitous in nature; and thus, this form of prejudice is considered to be 'natural'. The author, further, quotes Raymond Williams to describe the notion of 'Modernness' as something which is 'satisfactory or unquestionably desirable.' (Pandey, 2013)

The author tries to relate the miseries of the Dalits and the African-Americans and find a connection between their struggles. He names some white Abolitionists who challenged the policy of apartheid using the idiom of caste, derived from India. He also illustrates how Dalit intellectuals used the terms derived from Anglo-African abolitionists idiom (Pandey, 2013).

Further, the author emphasises on the formation of 'Dalit Panthers', a group of some radical Dalit activists, and relates them to the 'Black Panthers' of America. This claim can be substantiated by the fact that the founders of the Dalit Panthers, including Namdeo Dhasal, categorically state the Black Panthers and Ambedkar as their inspiration.

The author further claims that the Dalit question and their history is of little concern to the students of Indian origin studying in the USA. For this presumption, the author relies on an incident at Johns Hopkins University. The students, generally from upper-caste background, have a conception that caste is a thing of the past and that it is not a part of our history. (Pandey, 2013)

The author tries to convey the resistance that the Dalits have shown against the existing social and political order in their quest for egalitarian and democratic society. The author, by mentioning the population of Dalits, conveys the power that they hold to transform the polity of the nation.

The author, while contrasting the Dalits with the African-Americans, points out that a bourgeois class within the latter has existed since long but no equivalent existed in the former's case. He further states that if there had been any bourgeois class among Dalits, they would not have remained Dalit. The author regards poverty as a factor that has heightened the marginalisation of Dalits, and according to him, the continued use of economic power by the dominant castes has further led to the deprivation of Dalits.

The author mentions that the dominant castes perpetually use violence in order to maintain the status quo in the society (Pandey, 2013).

The author talks about the violence encountered not only in sexual and physical abuses or police brutalities against Dalits but also in how the upper-caste people desert their neighbourhood(s) when a Dalit comes to reside there. This desertion is also found in the protests against affirmative action. Subsequently, the author refers to the time when India attained independence from colonial rule and describes the condition of India at the dawn of independence. He quotes Gunnar Myrdal, a Swedish economist, to rely on the assumption that the early India's polity focused on planned development and adherence to the principles of Egalitarian state (Pandey, 2013).

Talking about the caste system in India, the author considers it an apparent obstacle and regards it a factor responsible for fortification of contempt against the manual workers. The author further states that this contempt is not only limited to the persons performing the act of manual scavenging but also to the other members of his/her caste. This feeling of disgust against a particular section of people hampers the feeling of fraternity among the citizens. Considering this situation of suspicion and disgust against a community, the author mentions a statement by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the notable Dalit rights activist, who while replying to Gandhiji said that, "Gandhiji, I have no homeland" to emphasise on the fact that the dominant castes would never accept Dalits as the fellow citizens of India. (Pandey, 2013)

The author concludes the introductory chapter, from where the excerpt has been taken, by explaining the significance that the law holds in a life of a marginalised person and he uses an example of Mangoo, a cab driver, to subsist his claims.

To conclude, the author quotes Walter Benjamin, who argues that the environment in which we live, the state of caste discrimination, is a rule and not an exception. (Pandey, 2013)

Response to the Text

The author of the text, while being empathetic to the struggles of the Dalits in India, aims to convey his analysis of the practice of casteism in India. He talks about various dimensions of Dalit deprivation and his text includes various reports and examples, which he used in order to subsist his claims. (Pandey, 2013) To a large extent, I am in consonance with what the author has conveyed in his text.

To commence with, the author has tried to link the struggles and social movements of Dalits with those of the African-Americans. I argue in favour of this assumption as we have various instances to show that the struggles and movements of the above mentioned groups overlap. The Dalits, in the case of India, and African-Americans, in the case of the USA, have both been marginalized and stigmatized for a long period of time (Pandey, 2013). These groups have been segregated from the mainland and had to live in ghettos or at the outskirts of the villages. These areas have largely been neglected and were placed on the peripheries of power structures (Yengde, 2019).

In a report by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 1996, the organisation notes that “Although various constitutional and legal provisions exist in order to protect Dalits, yet the impunity of the dominant castes leads to the limited effect of these provisions.” (HRW, 1999) Also, the social movements led by various social reformers of India were influenced by the white abolitionists of the USA and likewise, various white abolitionists were too influenced by the works of caste-defiers in India (Pandey, 2013).

This practice of use of violence has led to the society not getting transformed and the status quo is maintained (Pandey, 2013). Again, various incidents have happened that depict the application of violence to maintain the status quo in the society. In every eighteen to twenty minutes, a case of caste-based violence is reported; many such cases remain unreported (Winter, 2016). Vikas Jatav, a 17-year-old Dalit boy, wasn't allowed to enter a temple in Bijnor and on insisting to enter the premises of the temple, he was shot dead by the upper-caste men. The practice of witch-hunting, helps not only to establish power over other citizens but also helps in gaining control over the use of resources by the upper-castes and thus, maintaining the status quo in the society (Gurung&Arya, 2020).

In the concluding chapter, 'The persistence of Prejudice', the author emphasises on the fact that prejudice based on caste still persists in India (Pandey, 2013). Dalits are often reminded of their status in society as outlined in many holy scriptures. The ruling caste groups torment, rape, and murder them as a means to assert their superiority over them.

The survival of these social problems in our society is due to our continued adherence to the conservative principles espoused in many religious scriptures. We regard the sanctity of some beliefs as more vital than an individual's life.

In the same chapter, the author claims that income is not the only determinant to be a middle-class in India. One of the most widely known incidents is of an Indian Police Service (IPS) officer, a native of Rajasthan, who was not allowed to sit on a mare and pass through the upper-caste village during his wedding. The reason behind illustrating this example is to convey the fact that income or the class of the individual holds a secondary place in describing a person's position in society, the primary factor being the caste background (Pandey, 2013).

In the concluding chapter, the author asserts that conversion out of the demeaning Hindu community is one of the paths for Dalits to merge themselves into mainstream society. He substantiated his claims using the examples of Babasaheb's conversion, along with more than 3.5 lakh followers, to Buddhism in 1956. The author also quoted what Periyar said during his struggle against the caste Hindus. In Periyar's opinion, the disease of being Shudras is like cancer. He insisted on adopting Islam considering it the only way to cure this disease and walk as worthy individuals in the society (Pandey, 2013). This is the point, conversion as a means to attain social mobility, where I would like to express my dissatisfaction with the author. In my opinion, just converting from a religion that preaches untouchability and other caste-based discrimination to one that is comparatively more liberal and offers extended equality to the Dalits

is a fallacious act. Converting from one's religion does not ensure an equal and higher position in society which is still caste based. In order to substantiate my argument, I would like to take the example of the Dalits, who converted to Christianity in Tamil Nadu. A wall has been erected across the Catholic cemetery, separating various areas for the burial of Dalit Christians. In response to this act of the Catholic Church, Father Vincent Chinnadurai, the chairman of the Tamil Nadu state Commission for Minorities, said, "The burial ground is owned by private individuals, so we are not able to do anything about this. Even the local bishop is not going to the cemetery to perform rituals" (Natarajan, 2010).

Now, in order to further justify my argument, I would show how the Dalit Sikhs are discriminated against in Sikhism, which is believed to be based on the principles of equality and fraternity (Singh, 2021). The caste hierarchy in Sikhism is complex. Jat Sikhs, who are believed to be of Shudra origin in Hindu society, are at the apex of the social structure in Sikhism. They are followed by the Khatri Sikhs. Then come the Ramgarhia and Ahluwalia Sikhs. At the bottom of the ladder come the Dalit Sikhs, who are further divided along different caste lines (Mcleod, 2000). There is another dimension to the social hierarchy in Sikh society, and this makes it even more complex. In addition to caste distinctions, a unique distinction exists between the *Sahajdari* and *Keshdhari* Sikhs. The *Keshdhari* Sikhs are considered superior to the *Sahajdhari* Sikhs. But when it comes to *Keshdhari* Dalit Sikh and *Sahajdhari* Jat Sikh, the former, even though he is *Keshdhari* but a Dalit, holds a lower place in the hierarchy (Ram, 2007). In Punjab, Dalit Sikhs experience societal boycotts.

This problem is certainly not recent to Sikh society; it has existed since the dawn of the twentieth century (Ram, 2004). This disparity in social status is further exacerbated by the landlessness of Dalit Sikhs, who hold merely 2.3% of Punjab's agricultural land (Singh, 2021).

Considering the two cases of converted Dalits mentioned above, I assert that conversion from one religion to another does not do much to make the caste identity of Dalits irrelevant in a widely caste-based society. By converting their religion, their gods might change but their social status still remains the same.

Conclusion

The way the author has written this text, while illustrating the various struggles the Dalits of India face. The text outlines various issues and challenges that remain as they were at the dawn of independence (Pandey, 2013).

By mentioning various dimensions of Dalit deprivation, the author has successfully acknowledged the discrimination that those belonging to an oppressed caste face. The Dalits even today have to face endless atrocities. A total of 50,291 cases of caste-based atrocities, against Scheduled Castes, were registered in 2020, according to the National Crime Records Bureau (Dhrubo, 2021). As the author, in Chapter 7, has stated, prejudice still persists in India. The author has also depicted how students of Indian origin seem disinterested in studying the concept of caste.

They regard it as a thing of the past and thus, feel disconnected to it (Pandey, 2013). This ignorance of caste is in itself a way to show solidarity with the oppressors.

Thus, we, as the citizens of the world's largest democracy, should identify the caste-based discrimination and work against it and aim to make India a true egalitarian state.

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