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Philosophical Foundations of Anti-Casteism

Meena Dhanda

Understanding the meaning of caste and the way in which it touches peoples' lives requires openness of mind with an immediacy of attention to the plight of those who suffer caste prejudice and humiliation. The meaning of caste emerges in the context of historical, anthropological, and social scientific research on its multivalent reconfigurations. Undeniably, caste continues to shape the life-worlds of millions of people around the globe.¹

What is caste? As a working definition, I suggest that caste is a category of social belonging, attributed due to birth within a group, itself placed amongst a historically shifting hierarchy of groups, subject to economic, political and status rewards for continued allegiance and losses or penalties for transgression of group boundaries maintained by endogamy (marriage restricted to individuals of the same caste). There are 'personal and social costs of maintaining...an inherently unstable, conflictive situation in a semblance of workable order'. (Berreman 1967, p.68). To the extent that it is unchosen, caste, as a mechanism of discrimination or advantage, is comparable to race because similar types of encumbrances or privileges are associated with both. (Pandey 2013)

Casteism, I propose, is a form of inferiorization, which, whether intentional or in effect, constraints development of human potential. Anti-casteism, is an ideological critique of various mystifications which mask the inequalities of caste-governed lives. Anti-casteism challenges foundational myths used to support the necessity or inescapability of making caste differentiations. It makes apparent the unethical operations of caste. Anti-casteism, though, is of different kinds. The hegemonic form of anti-casteism has been of movements specifically against Untouchability, which is a uniquely stark manifestation of caste. A deeper form of anti-casteism is suggested in the writings of Dr B.R. Ambedkar (1891 – 1956), a neglected thinker of extraordinary breadth and depth of philosophical, social-scientific, political and legal knowledge. I will draw this notion of anti-casteism from his complex understanding of caste as 'graded inequality' (Ambedkar 1979, BAWS, Vol. 5, p.100-116) which we will return to consider.

Internationally, some jurisdictions have recognised the need to institute legal measures to deal with the disabilities connected with caste. In 2013 the UK embarked on a parliamentary process to institute legal protection for those subject to caste discrimination, but the process remains unfinished. A major drawback of the process was the lack of adequate engagement by the wider population outside of caste communities, who form the bulk of silent bystanders, including many of our representatives in parliament. They are silent due to ignorance but also due to the fear of treading on religious sensitivities of immigrant communities. The silence of the bystanders could perhaps be broken by philosophers attending to the ongoing injustice of caste discrimination. As a contribution, in this paper I address some contextual and some philosophical questions: In comparison with anti-racism, what is different about the lack of consensus on instituting legal remedies for caste discrimination?

¹ Before the Aristotelian Society meeting on 9th Dec 2019, where this paper was presented, I gave two related lectures: 'Emergent Vulnerabilities, Feigned Hurt: The twisted strategy of usurping the moral high ground', (University of Nottingham, 7 November, 2018); 'Caste Consciousness: The Necessity of Internal Critique', (University of Kent, 6 March 2019) and a short talk: 'Dr Ambedkar on Religion and Morality' (House of Lords, 7 May, 2019). I am grateful to the participants at all these gatherings for their searching questions and comments. In writing this version I benefitted immensely from thought-provoking comments, corrections and prompts by Guy Longworth, Kevin Magill, Karthick Ram Manoharan, David Mosse, Tanuj Raut, Pritam Singh and Lotika Singha. The shortcomings that remain are mine.

Are the divisions amongst stakeholders due to a) contingent politico-legal factors or b) are there deeper underpinning historical, ideological, cultural contestations? What values can anti-casteism draw on to generate a more universal appeal? Can an understanding of philosophical foundations of anti-casteism help us approach the problem afresh?

Reaching answers to these large questions is a daunting task, which I will attempt by first presenting the context for the contemporary discussion of caste in Britain, followed by briefly explaining what caste means and how it is used, to then show the philosophical contestations on the value of caste in the Indian nationalist debates on the subject and its echoes in contemporary discussion in the U.K. The consideration of foundational values underpinning 'anti-casteism' as a critical force, challenging established practices of caste show that anti-casteism has been a part of the cultural politics of the Indian sub-continent in varied and often incompatible forms. We seek foundations that can ground the best features of collective emancipatory struggles to address the social ills of inferiorization, oppression and discrimination based on caste, however it is named.

What caste means continues to be contested, as we shall see.² However, challenges to the meaning of the term are not always made with fair intentions to seek clarity; sometimes these challenges regarding the meaning of caste are made to deny casteism and caste discrimination that results from it. Certain challengers in the U.K. have, over the last decade, stepped up the pressure on the government against fulfilling its statutory duty to institute legal protection for sufferers of caste discrimination; thereby also to lead people to think of caste divisions as benign and harmless. In contrast, the victims of caste discrimination point at the existence of systematic divisions, which proliferate in multifarious ways, including, in some cases through egregious social enforcement, by relating their own stories in community media. For the victim of discrimination, as the Dalit Solidarity Network report of 2006 from the U.K. so neatly put in its title, there is 'no escape'. Once marked, and with 'no escape', a victim might then choose to use caste as a standpoint from which to voice protest and seek solidarity. (Satyanarayana 2014)

How might we form productive bonds of solidarity counteracting corrosive binds of serial relations? (Sartre 1982) That is a complex question I will not be able to answer in this paper. Here I note that being connected to others and being in solidarity with others are distinct social and ethical relations within the same moral universe. As Sartre explains: 'People are separated by *alterity*, by antagonisms, by their place in the system; but these separations, such as hatred, flight, etc., are also modes of connection.' (Sartre 1982, p. 221). One may remain connected to others with whom one cannot easily form bonds of solidarity on ethically reciprocal terms, and sometimes these connections are of the most pernicious, debilitating, energy-sapping and soul-destroying kinds. For the inhabitants of the caste world these connections oscillate between the foreground and the background, but they never disappear.

Caste society offers habitual allegiances. It is a category of social belonging as I suggested in my working definition. Ambedkar argued that habitual conduct with the backing of religion is not easy to change and that salvation will come only if the caste Hindu is 'made to think and is forced to feel that

² The social scientific, anthropological and historical literature on caste is vast. Whilst reference will be made to some of this literature in the paper, it is not possible to synthesise the rich debates within and across disciplines that have engaged scores of scholars for more than a century. Ambedkar 1916; 1936 are good starting points, Roberts 2008 offers a succinct and reliable overview from an anthropological point of view and Mosse 2019 provides an excellent survey and synthesis of recent inter-disciplinary studies linking the anthropological with the economic. Caste is a 'clustered set of social phenomena and effects' and 'the pervasive effects of caste are rendered invisible in ways that may serve selected interests by concealing processes of advantage and discrimination.' (Mosse 2019, p. 3). Philosophers have seriously lagged in paying attention to caste, casteism and anti-casteism; exceptions are Guru and Sarukkai 2012, and in a way Matilal 2002. New studies include Kumar 2015, Manoharan 2017, Mohan and Dwivedi 2019 and Rathore 2017.

he must alter his ways'.³ We need to think through the means of defiance against systemic oppression and stigmatisation of people on the basis of caste, that is, we need to explicate what form anti-casteism should take.

The UK politico-legal context: significant aspects

The publication of the Parekh Report on the *Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* was met with a vitriolic attack in the national press; it was called 'dreadful rubbish'; 'potty and sinister' and 'an assault on national pride' (*Daily Mail*, 10 Oct 2000) because 'any intellectual position that problematizes national identity through the lens of race and ethnicity or promotes positive discrimination' (McLaughlin and Neal 2007, p.924) draws the ire of a highly racialised public sphere. There is a similarity of response to the reports on *Caste in Britain* from some quarters of the British public.

Caste in Britain was a project I led for the UK Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) From September 2013 to February 2014, with a consortium of academics culminating in two research reports. (Dhanda et al 2014a and 2014b). The remit of the project was, first, to review existing socio-legal research on caste and British Equality law, and, second, to conduct two supporting events with the aim of bringing together interdisciplinary expertise and a range of stakeholder views on caste, and caste discrimination in the U.K. In April 2013, both Houses of Parliament voted to enact the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill, Section 97 of which requires government to introduce a statutory prohibition of caste discrimination into British equality law by making caste an aspect of the protected characteristic of 'race' in the Equality Act 2010 (EA 2010).

It is important to clarify here that we were fulfilling the brief of the EHRC to identify stakeholders' and experts' concerns in relation to the *implementation* of the statutory prohibition on caste discrimination in anticipation of the next step of the required secondary legislation making caste 'an aspect of race' in the EA 2010. It was not open to us to discuss *whether* there should be a legislation because that had already been decided by primary legislation. There was, however, no foregone conclusion about what Exceptions must apply to the EA 2010 in relation to caste. For example, would exclusive caste associations be allowed? There was open discussion to be had on such questions. To the stakeholders who attended the EHRC workshop representing 43 different organisations, we presented our considered views on *how* caste might be addressed in equality law, and in the ensuing discussion, we were open to suggestions and modulations. Looking back from the vantage point of the ongoing contestations following the online public consultation on the legislation on caste concluded by the Government Equalities Office in September 2017, it is hard to recall the feeling of satisfaction that we then had in building bridges.

Two months after the close of the consultation, the Conservative MP for Harrow East, Bob Blackman, relayed the reported view of British Hindus 'that having caste as a protected characteristic in equality law is unnecessary and divisive' and urged his right honourable friend to 'take action to remove that provision - which was introduced by the Labour party...' (Hansard 23 Nov 2017) This echoed the view of the National Council of Hindu Temples which had on numerous occasions claimed that caste was an outdated 'colonial Christian' concept, 'discriminatory and prejudicial towards Hindus'. This position draws on the work of the academic Prakash Shah who has also accused us of suffering from 'colonial consciousness' simply for criticising casteism. (Shah 2015a; 2015b).

The **first** aspect of the politico-legal context is the contradictory appeals to Britain's colonial past. On the one hand are the colonial subjects proper, the ex-Untouchables, the Dalits, who have indeed suffered the brunt of the colonizer's rule, who appeal to the government to protect them from caste

³ Ambedkar in a letter to Mr Thakkar, on 14 November 1932. (Ajnat 1993, p.79). For my reflections on Ambedkar's politics of viscerality supporting an argument for harnessing the potential of counter-ritual as protest, see Dhanda 2020.

discrimination; on the other hand are the spokespersons of the Hindus who present themselves in the image of the colonized subject seeking justice, when anti-casteists, many of whom are Dalits, demand legal measures that might lead to scrutiny of the punitive aspects of a hierarchical and hereditary reward bearing system of group allegiances.

The **second** aspect is the difficulty of the definition of caste, which has a bearing on how we might define casteism and thereby, anti-casteism.

The difficulty is expressed by Lord Bhikhu Parekh, who whilst opposing the amendment to EA 2010 to include caste argued: 'Talking about abolishing the caste system is extremely problematic because it could mean getting rid of the category, getting rid of the hierarchy among the categories or getting rid of the principle of heredity which determines the caste. Where do you start?'. (Lord Parekh *Daily Hansard*, 22 April 2013, column 1305) He conceded that untouchability exists in the U.K. in 'small pockets' but concluded that 'once you take away the untouchability bit, there is no evidence of any kind to show that caste discrimination takes place'. (Ibid.)

I disagree. It is a mischaracterisation to present casteism in the UK as being fundamentally about 'small pockets' of untouchability. My extensive research on Dalit experience and perception shows otherwise. (Dhanda 2009, 2014, 2017a; Dhanda et al 2014b) Besides untouchability, there are stories of caste prejudice, bullying and harassment. (Dhanda 2017b)

Lord Parekh had also asked: 'How do you define caste?' implying correctly that this is no easy undertaking. But it is not necessary or possible to have a precise definition of caste as such for the purposes of legislation - indeed, 'race' is left undefined in the EA 2010. I would argue instead is that all we need to identify caste *discrimination* is the ability to identify patterns of behaviour that would reasonably be perceived and experienced as caste discrimination by the victims of discrimination. What matters is not the precise meaning of the term 'caste' but a working definition to enable the identification of the *pattern* of behaviour that can be identified as casteist. (Dhanda 2015).

The **third** aspect of the politico-legal context is the question of whether caste discrimination exists. We claim that there is evidence of discrimination to warrant the inclusion of caste in the EA 2010, as research shows in various reports and studies cited above. Subtle cases of discrimination, and obvious cases of harassment, have also been known to have occurred due to tensions generated by segregation. (Dhanda 2009, 2013b) Over the years, I have heard respondents in interviews repeatedly use similar phrases to describe their experience of caste *as* prejudice: 'it sticks', 'people are set in their ways', the hold of caste on people's mind is something we have 'to break', it is 'part of psyche', 'in our blood'; 'fundamentally not changed'. It is clear, to those who are prepared to listen, that for some Dalits in the U.K. perceived low-caste status is an ongoing and unsettling experience. It has been one of the motivating factors for religious conversion fuelled by a desire for 'respect' or 'dignity'.

The extent of caste discrimination in the UK has not been established because no one has attempted to do so. Lack of sizeable evidence is cited as a reason not to legislate, but no step has been taken to act on the recommendation of a feasibility study funded by the GEO that the extent of caste discrimination can be quantified by using the instruments of existing surveys 'suitably modified' without incurring significant risks.

The UK government announced its response to the public consultation on 23 July 2018: a decision 'to invite Parliament to repeal the duty' and rely on case law.⁴ A proviso was added that the

⁴ Penny Mordaunt (Minister of Women and Equalities) announced the Government's response to the consultation: 'About 53% of respondents wanted to rely on the existing statutory remedy and repeal the duty, 22% rejected both options (mainly because they wished the Government to proscribe the concept of caste in British law altogether) and about 18% of respondents wanted the duty to be implemented.' (Mordaunt 2018 <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written->

government intended to produce a ‘short guidance’ ‘to be of particular use to any individual who feels they may have suffered discrimination on grounds of caste. It should also help employers, service providers and public authorities who are outside those groups most concerned with caste and who may have little awareness of caste divisions.’

This brings us to the **fourth** and final aspect of the context: a religio-discursive aspect. In this aspect we see the salience of an ‘emergent vulnerability’. By this I mean a constructed state of posing as victims in a counter-accusatory mode by people who claim identification with the group they think is wrongly targeted as discriminators. The allegedly accused become accusers and their ‘vulnerability’ springs up as a reaction to the alleged accusation of discrimination.

It has been claimed by Shah (2018) that ‘The signal was given at high levels that well positioned Hindus would be satisfied with the ending of the legislative duty, while the case law could be retained without attracting opposition. The Government latched on to the plan...’ This tacit agreement seems to have paved the way for proposing the case law option, ‘a judicial extension of the equality law to caste’ and letting slide the legislative duty to add caste to the explication of ‘race’ in the EA2010. Shah is partly right in drawing the conclusion that either of judicially developed law or explicit reference to caste in the EA2010 may be used by litigants. However, he is wrong on a key matter; that in ‘both instances the presumption, and thus the basis for the law, is that Hindus at least, if not other South Asians, are **caste racists**...’. (Shah 2018; emphasis in original)

The term ‘caste racists’ is a novel label introduced by Shah into the debate. The Anti Caste Legislation Committee’s recent report (2019) drawing heavily on Shah’s work, does not repeat this term, but reiterates the central point that with regards to the UK government’s various reports and institutional measures, ‘we might even speak of ‘institutional casteism’ directed at Hindus.’ (ACLC 2019). We have here an example of the inversion of the language of protest introduced by anti-racists. Instead of applying to historically marginalised and oppressed groups, the deniers of caste discrimination have invoked the spectre of a beleaguered religious group (Brahmins/Hindus) allegedly still under the yoke of their erstwhile colonial masters. Can the charge of “institutional casteism’ directed at Hindus’ be a truthful claim?

To answer this question, one might compare the proposed protection against caste discrimination with the legal protection enshrined in the EA2010 against sex discrimination. Can this latter legal provision be re-described as ‘institutional sexism’ directed at men? Should the feminist who spearheaded the change in law be accused of inciting hatred against men? Should the governmental support for these feminists, reluctant as it was, be labelled ‘institutional sexism’? Anti-discrimination legislation challenges historical patriarchy understood as a systematic oppression of women, but it protects both men and women equally. Anti-casteism when enshrined in the anti-discrimination legislation would challenge historical casteism understood as systematic oppression of the so-called ‘lower castes’, but it would protect any caste group (lower or upper) equally.

As Shah anticipated (Shah 2018, *The Pioneer*) racially aggravated offences can now be extended to caste. The *Racist and Religious Hate Crime - Prosecution Guidance* <https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/racist-and-religious-hate-crime-prosecution-guidance> now includes mention of caste in its advice on case review, whereby officers are obliged to check: ‘Was there any use of derogatory language towards

[statement/Commons/2018-07-23/HCWS898/.](https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/racist-and-religious-hate-crime-prosecution-guidance)) I think the Government has reached its conclusion based on an analysis that is highly objectionable on methodological, procedural and ethical grounds. The EHRC has also expressed its disappointment thus: ‘The government has missed a crucial opportunity to improve legal clarity and has taken a step back by looking to repeal the duty to include caste as an aspect of race in the Equality Act 2010. This is inconsistent with the UK’s international obligations to provide for separate and distinct protection for caste in our legislation.’ (EHRC 2018).

ethnicity, race, nationality or religion, (including caste, converts and those of no faith)?’ However, the difference in our positions is that Shah speaks on behalf of those who are ‘likely to be the targets of litigation’, whereas, I am concerned for the litigants who need recourse to the law. He fears that in some ways, ‘the case law option is worse’ for the targets because caste can now be interpretatively added widely to racially aggravated offences. I too think that the case law option is worse but for the different reason that there is uncertainty and unclarity associated with its use by the litigants who most need recourse to the law. (Waughray and Dhanda 2016).

Collective hypocrisies, caste privilege and historical antecedents

Reflecting upon what I have heard over the years from the opponents and supporters of the legislation, my hypothesis is that the experience of casteism shapes people differently depending upon their location in the matrix of what we may call ‘collective hypocrisies’. I borrow the acerbic phrase ‘collective hypocrisies’ from Aimé Césaire’s marvellous essay *Discourse on Colonialism* (1972). There is a ‘collective hypocrisy’ in remaining silent about the operation of caste privilege.

The new arrival of ‘the gold digger and the merchant’ (Césaire, 1972, p.10) is announced with triumphalism thus: ‘India will be a global player of considerable political and economic impact. As a result, the need to explicate what it means to be Indian (or what makes Indian culture ‘Indian and not, say, just modern’) will soon become a task for the intelligentsia of India.’ (Balagangadhara 2012, p.1) And further: ‘For the first time in so many hundred years, these cultures will meet each other on the world arena as equals and as competitors.’ (ibid., p.6) The battle over the meaning, value and re-evaluation of caste and the ‘caste system’ was bound to be cashed out a century after Indian nationalists struggled with how to section off the reprehensible (Untouchability) from the ubiquity of caste in the sub-continent.⁵

Misrepresentation of problems happens like this: the person belonging to the so-called upper castes can be imagined as saying that ‘in comparison with the humiliation that I have experienced at the hands of racists, I am not a casteist’. There is a discontinuity in experience that allows a ‘collective hypocrisy’ of caste-is-benign to take hold. For the Dalit, on the other hand there is a continuity of experience of humiliation and hence an insistence that ‘racism and casteism are similar’ as my respondents have said to me. In the diaspora, the spectre of racism either foregrounded or in the background is always there, and against this spectral presence, claims of casteism are presented. This condition has the paradoxical potential both to generate solidarities with the oppressed as well as routes to evasion of responsibility. One is complicit one way or another; all inaction is still action. An inhabitant of a caste world simply ought to know the effects of caste. To those not imbedded in caste communities, ignorance of caste cannot function as an excuse for inaction once they are confronted with the phenomenon of caste discrimination.

I have used the notion of ‘collective hypocrisies’ to challenge the positions taken by the deniers of caste discrimination that speaking of caste is to suffer from a ‘colonial consciousness’. (Shah 2015b) As I have argued before, casteism predates colonialism (Dhanda 2015) yet, anti-colonialism, as affirmation of solidarity with the victims of colonialism must foreground subjective experience of

⁵ I reserve the discussion on the fallacious reasoning in Balagangadhara’s construction of a ‘comparative science of cultures’ and of ‘colonial consciousness’ replete with non sequitur, ad hominem and straw man fallacies, for another occasion. The absurdity of cultures meeting ‘each other’ as if they were individuals, fits with the author’s declaration: ‘I also realized that my individual biography was but the Indian history writ small’. (Balagangadhara 2012, p.141) In his criticism of these views Samir Chopra captures the spirit I endorse: ‘there is now no authentically indigenous or authentic lens that can be brought to bear on the West’. Chopra’s recommendation is ‘to not take refuge in imagined glories of systems understood in the abstract, independent of their actual historical application and manifestations, or indulge in implausible apologia for manifestly real social ills.’ (Chopra 2014) Caste discrimination in our view is a real social ill.

humiliation, stigma, protest, negotiation, and transformation. (Guru 2009) The question is who were the victims and who remain so post-independence? Recent work on the ‘modernity of caste’ and its embeddedness in the market economy in the Indian context shows that caste is not a ‘fading residuum’ of erstwhile ritual social relations, but constantly renewed. (Deshpande 2011; Mosse 2019) In a quantitative analysis based on Indian Human Development Survey data collected in 2004-2005, Desai and Dubey [2011]/(2019) find ‘continued dominance of Brahmins on a variety of markers of social and economic well-being’ (p.478) and ‘access to productive resources particularly education and skills remain closely associated with caste...consolidation’ (p.482), putting a question mark on the narrative that caste is now merely a matter of ethnicity instead of hierarchy. They also show that ‘caste and kin remain at the centre of Indian civic life, with nearly 95 per cent of the female respondents, getting married within their own caste’. (Ibid.) Ethnographic studies also challenge the claim that caste is essentially cultural community: instead it is found that caste is ‘parading as cultural identity, while reproducing social inequality’. (Natarajan 2012, p.27)

The idea of caste society is traced by historians to antiquity, by drawing parallels between the Platonic tripartite division of classes in the *Republic* and the Indian caste system presented in *The Laws of Manu (Manavdharamshastra)*. (McEvelley [2002] 2008; Doniger and Smith 1991) By now it is well known that the term ‘caste’ derives from the Portuguese word ‘casta’ (Bayly 1999, p.106; Guha 2014, p.21) which predates the English word ‘caste’ by more than two centuries. *Casta* is initially ‘a collective noun that referred to a pure blood-line or species’. (Guha 2014, p.22) In the Indian caste system, pollution was more a concern of contamination by ‘impure food or touch’ rather than mixing of blood. Portuguese and later colonial administration in India encountered bounded groups or *Jatis*. They found it expedient to manage these groups for the extraction of labour, tax revenue, or much later for recruitment in the British Indian army. (Guha 2014) Further, invoking caste-ideals mattered not only to the colonial administrators but also to the indigenous (non-Brahmin) ‘self-made dynasts’, needing to use ‘caste as a strategic asset’ for self-advancement. (Bayly 1999, pp. 56-63)

Coming to the colonial period, a hundred years ago when abolition of slavery was taking place across the world, agrarian slavery associated with the Dalit landless in British India was conveniently ignored. As Rupa Viswanath writes in the remarkable book *The Pariah Problem: Caste, Religion and the Social in Modern India*: ‘The Pariah was governed – that is, his servitude was maintained long after abolition – by a practical accommodation between high-caste landlords and state officials’. (Viswanath 2014, p.39) Despite their theological opposition to caste, the Protestant missionaries were also in practice often ‘at pains to accommodate the “caste scruples” of their non-Pariah converts’. (Viswanath 2014, p.45) Their ruse was that they could only concern themselves with the religious aspects of caste, not the civil aspect. Viswanath sees in these accommodations the working of a ‘caste-state nexus’.

It was such non-action against caste-based violations of citizens’ rights, facilitated by the British administration that led an exasperated Ambedkar to claim in a letter: ‘Indeed if the British Rule has achieved anything in India it is to strengthen and reinvigorate Brahmanism which is the inveterate enemy of the Untouchables...’ (Ajnat 1993, p.153) Ambedkar’s anti-colonialism never wearied of reminding the British State to enforce its own laws, for he was deeply convinced that the exercise of rights as equal citizens required the rigorous enforcement of the law.

The relevance of the above retracing of the historical antecedents of our understanding of caste is to show the dubiousness of the claim that the idea of the hierarchical caste system originated in the British colonial period. The purpose is also to rebut the concomitant claim that those of us who

make a case for anti-casteism, some clearly inspired by Babasaheb Ambedkar, are suffering from ‘colonial consciousness’.⁶

There are other varieties of denials of caste hierarchies. These come from scholars who argue that today caste is better represented as a matter of ‘cultural identity’ and ‘community’ rather than inherited status and inequality. (Gupta 2001) I think this view is one-sided and misleading since whilst ‘pure hierarchies’ between bounded groups may have gone, or perhaps never existed, ‘alternative hierarchies’ (Gupta 2001) remain. Ambedkar’s notion of caste as a ‘graded inequality’ in which each group finds another ‘lower’ than itself, captures the necessary accompaniment of inferiorization of an ‘other’ with every assertion of caste pride. Celebrating assertiveness of caste identities because of ‘group solidarities’ they may offer, without taking account of the inbuilt feature of hierarchy, is to overlook the potential of caste identities to generate caste discrimination.

This emphasis on ‘culture’ has, however, also been explained as an adaptation, in modern economic and democratic circumstances, of caste as a form of social differentiation that still serves to keep people in their socio-economic place. (Natrajan 2012) New research has questioned the explanatory value of older binary structuralist models of caste as a ‘holistic’ system, such as the one constructed by Dumont 1972. The impetus for change has come from new scholarship, notably by Dalit economists laying bare the ‘caste-regulated and caste-networked nature of the Indian market economy’. (Mosse 2019, p. 7)

An example of the justification for the ‘caste-network’ can be found in Lord Bhikhu Parekh in a BBC4 radio show in 2003: ‘The evolution of caste here [in Britain] is proceeding along the same lines as caste in India. Caste becomes more like a civic association; a network (of) from where you can get capital, a network where from you can get your clients if you are setting up a business, a network of people who will canvass for you in local or national elections. Full stop. In other words what people are now doing with the caste system, they want to get rid of its unacceptable dimensions like restrictions of marriage or dining. Take full advantage of and (im)mobilise its full potentialities which will stand them in good stead in country and therefore *caste in some form is bound to stay for a long time because people see advantages in it. And I can see that it is a good rational negotiating strategy*’ (emphasis mine, Parekh in Puri 2004).

Lord Parekh’s affirmation of caste as ‘a good rational negotiating strategy’ is precisely what Ambedkar would call an ‘anti-social’ morality. In its particularism, its exclusivity, its groupism, such an ‘anti-social’ morality undermines the kind of universal morality that Ambedkar sought to institutionalise in the law. Note, also, that besides offering an uncritical affirmation of the value of caste, Lord Parekh has confirmed its longevity in the UK. We must also ask: can a universal morality permit casteism? One might argue that close affiliations, such as, with one’s family or one’s neighbourhood, in their idealised versions are repositories of care. Why then is caste association singled out for censure? One must quickly note that as well as providing care such associations may equally be the sites of grievous harms. Caste associations too have been known to be sites of harm especially when members break norms of endogamy. There is also the peculiar complexity of the ‘sexual economy of caste’: ‘it prohibits all men from viewing all women as potential sexual partners, but also gives upper-caste men the right to enjoy Dalit and lower-caste women.’ (Rao 2009, p.235) Concern with justice for the individual, the driving force of a universal morality, may come into conflict with care-providing associations. What is at stake is wrongly presented as the choice between protecting the individual or the communal, rather, it is the possibility of an ethical social solidarity extended to all which is at stake. On Ambedkar’s view, due to the inbuilt hierarchy in caste

⁶ See Mosse 2020 for extended arguments challenging the provincializing moves of caste discrimination deniers, whilst Dalit rights campaigns seek to ‘de-enclose or universalise caste’.

structures, genuine ethical bonds of social solidarity are impossible within the caste world. His alternative ideal is *Maitri* (friendship), the possibility of which must guide one's praxis to ensure justice for the victims of caste discrimination.

Now let us look at the antecedents of present day anti-casteism in Indian nationalist discourse. It is important to consider these due to the continuities between arguments used today in the UK debate I described above and their ideological inheritance.

Underpinning ideological contestations on caste

A key idea in ideological contestations on caste is the claim made by Indian reformists - old was good, new is distortion. Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) defended the 'original' idea of caste because it gave an individual 'the freedom to express his nature, his prakriti.' (Sharma 2015, p. 111). The link to 'privilege and heredity' was discredited as a 'modern' distortion. Thus, Vivekananda wrote: 'Therefore what I have to tell you, my countrymen, is this: - That India fell because you prevented and abolished caste... Let Jati have its sway; break down every barrier in the way of caste and we shall rise.' (Cited by Sharma 2015, p. 111)

The continuity of this line of reasoning in Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869 -1948) is as unmissable as is the sharp contrast of their views with Babasaheb Ambedkar who, having suffered the yoke of untouchability, located the roots of the 'social ill' of caste in the philosophy of Hinduism. Ambedkar criticised the Bhagwad Gita for providing a philosophical foundation for Chaturvarnaya (the system of four Varnas – Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra) although he also saw parallels in its teachings and those of Buddhism. (Ambedkar 2010) For Ambedkar every part of the old was not good; some of it he characterised as 'counter-revolution' designed to defeat the marvellous revolution ushered by Buddhist ideas of godless equality. He also finds a parallel to this philosophy in Nietzsche. Citing *Anti-Christ*, he tells us of Nietzsche's praise for the law book of Manu: 'It is replete with noble values, it is filled with a feeling of perfection, with a yea to life...' (Nietzsche cited in Ambedkar 2010, p.65). By contrast, Ambedkar thought that 'Manu's is a degraded and degenerate philosophy...far more odious and loathsome than the philosophy of Nietzsche'. (Ibid., p.67).

In the present debate in the UK, the concession of some incidents of Untouchability and some of caste discrimination, but denial of any systemic wrong in the practice of caste echoes the debate between Ambedkar and Gandhi. They differed on the question of combatting casteism: Ambedkar seeking institutional measures to protect the individual, Gandhi relying on personal transformations to negotiate social ills, yet each drawing inspiration for their respective versions of equality and liberty from global intellectual sources. (Dhanda 1993; Kumar 2015; Mohan and Dwivedi 2019)

Echoing Vivekananda, Gandhi wrote:

'I believe that caste has saved Hinduism from disintegration.

But like every other institution it has suffered from excrescences. I consider the four divisions alone to be fundamental, natural, and essential. The innumerable sub-castes are sometimes a convenience, often a hindrance. The sooner there is fusion the better... Social pressure and public opinion can be trusted to deal with the problem. But I am certainly against any attempt at destroying the fundamental divisions. The caste system is not based on inequality, there is no question of inferiority...'

And further:

'I am inclined to think that the law of heredity is an eternal law and any attempt to alter that law must lead us, as it has before led, to utter confusion. I can see very great use in considering a Brahmin to be always a Brahmin throughout his life. If he does not behave

himself like a Brahmin, he will naturally cease to command the respect that is due to the real Brahmin...If Hindus believe, as they must believe, in reincarnation, transmigration, they must know that nature will, without any possibility of mistake, adjust the balance by degrading a Brahmin, if he misbehaves himself, by reincarnating him in a lower division, and translating one who lives the life of a Brahmin in his present incarnation to Brahminhood in his next.’ (Gandhi 1999, CWMG, Vol 22, p. 67-68)

We might note a contradiction in Gandhi’s espousal of the levelling effect of Karma on caste inequality, whilst declaring that the caste system is ‘not based on inequality’. If indeed there was no inequality or ‘inferiority’ built into the system, why would reincarnation lead to placing an errant Brahmin in a ‘lower division’ in the ‘next’ life? Gandhi has inadvertently conceded that the idea of hierarchy is inescapable after all.⁷ To deny that heredity hierarchy is internal to caste identity therefore becomes a hypocrisy.

However, Gandhi would not have denied that caste identity is *used* as a basis for social differentiation and inequality, even as he preached that it should not be. Caste is acquired by birth and sustained by endogamy. For Ambedkar (1916) ‘[a] caste is an enclosed class’ and ‘endogamy is the only characteristic of caste that is peculiar to caste’. The difference in their approach lies in what to do about casteism. For Gandhi, ‘it is not caste that has made us what we are. It was our greed and disregard of essential virtues which enslaved us.’ (Gandhi 1999 CWMG, Vol, 22, p.67). Ambedkar on the other hand, saw Hinduism itself as responsible for ‘a *social psychology*’ which ‘produces an ascending scale of hatred and descending scale of contempt’. (Ambedkar 2010, p.41)

Ambedkar was sceptical of Gandhi’s appeal to conscience. For Ambedkar, ‘The fundamental condition for the growth of the sentiment of fraternity is not preaching that we are children of God or the realization that one’s life is dependent upon others. It is too rational to give rise to a sentiment. The condition of the growth of this sentiment of fraternity lies in sharing in the vital processes of life. It is sharing in the joys and sorrows of birth, death, marriage and food. Those who participate in these come to feel as brothers.’ (Ambedkar 2010, p.56) Fraternity was crucial for democracy for Ambedkar.

Gandhi on the other hand was of the view (in 1920) that ‘Interdrinking, interdining, intermarrying...are not essential for the promotion of the spirit of democracy.’ (Gandhi 1999 CWMG, Vol 22, p.68). A decade later (in 1933) Gandhi continued to hold: ‘The caste system, in my opinion, has a scientific basis. Reason does not revolt against it...To abolish caste is to demolish Hinduism. There is nothing to fight against the *Varnashrama*. I do not believe the caste system to be odious and vicious dogma. It has its limitations and defects, but there is nothing sinful about it.’ (From Gandhi’s *Harijan*, 1933, cited by Rathore 2017, p.182)

Given such an extreme divergence in their underlying beliefs, it was no surprise that they clashed on practical measures, especially when negotiating solutions with the colonial state for the protection of Dalits (then known as the Depressed Classes). In 1932, Gandhi fasted against Ambedkar’s demand for separate electorates for the Untouchables. Ambedkar protested this emotional blackmail.

Foundational Values: Universal Morality, Inclusivity, Intellectual Humility

⁷ In his essay ‘Caste, *Karma* and the Gita’, Bimal Krishna Matilal (2002, pp.136-144) discusses the ‘paradoxicality of caste and *karma*’ and shows the presence of ‘internal criticism’ within the tradition about the ‘prevalence of the heredity-based caste hierarchies’ ‘from time immemorial’. (Matilal 2002, p.143)

To adopt anti-casteism as a value we need first to distinguish between the religious anti-casteist and the modern anti-casteist. From the brief portrayals in the last section we can perhaps tentatively suggest that Swami Vivekanda and Gandhi are the religious anti-casteists. A tendency I have not considered (due to space) are the Jat Pat Todak Mandal at whose invitation Ambedkar wrote the majestic lecture *Annihilation of Caste*. They would represent the conservative anti-casteists.⁸ Ambedkar himself is an exemplar of the modern anti-casteist. I have indicated my sympathy for modern anti-casteism and will link foundational norms to it. Appreciating the scope of Ambedkar's anti-casteism requires coming to grips with the complex idea of caste as 'graded inequality'.

'In the system of graded inequality there are the highest (the Brahmins). Below the highest are the higher (the Kshatriyas). Below the higher are those who are high (Vaishya). Below the high are the low (Shudra) and below the low are those who are lower (the Untouchables). All have a grievance against the highest and would like to bring about their down fall. But they will not combine. The higher is anxious to get rid of the highest but does not wish to combine with the high, the low and the lower lest they should reach his level and be his equal...In the system of graded inequality there is no such class as completely unprivileged class except the one which is at the base of the social pyramid. The privileges of the rest are graded. Even the low is a privileged class as compared with the lower. Each class being privileged, every class is interested in maintaining the social system.' (Ambedkar 1979, BAWS, Vol. 5, p101-2)

The reign of caste on the psyche of the inhabitants of the caste world has been maintained by systems of penalties for transgression of caste norms. The inhabitants of the caste world cannot easily free themselves from the discriminations of caste, sometimes due to their own complicity in the system. However, anti-caste movements over decades have made breakthroughs, including in the UK, with exemplary commitment. The campaign for legal protection against caste discrimination through the instrument of the EA2010 is an example. At the heart of the challenge to the exceptionalism of caste is the necessity to uphold universal morality: 'A society which rests upon the supremacy of one group over another irrespective of its rational or proportionate claims inevitably leads to conflict. The only way to put a stop to conflict is to have common rules of morality which are sacred to all.' (Ambedkar 1957, p.325).

In the posthumously published, *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, Ambedkar writes that Dhamma is first and foremost morality. Religion on the other hand, especially when ritualistically followed, he takes to task for the hypocrisies it generated and the inertia it induced. He challenged the supposedly unchanging and supposedly infallible command of Religion with a capital R: 'Every religion preaches morality but morality is not the root of religion. It is a wagon attached to it. It is attached and detached as the occasion arises' (Ambedkar 1957, p.322). In contrast 'Morality is Dhamma and Dhamma is Morality'. Dhamma is social, essentially so. In Dhamma the need for morality does not arise from the 'sanction of God' but directly from the need for man to love man. 'The purpose of Religion is to explain the origin of the world. The purpose of Dhamma is to reconstruct the world.' (Ibid.)

Rather than the rituals and sacrifices embedded in Religions, Ambedkar considers morality itself as sacred. The reason he gives for making morality itself sacred is that there is a social need to protect what he calls 'the best'. The best, however, he does not equate with the fittest. The best may be the weak, the ones who need protection. Therefore, Morality as Dhamma, must impose restraints on the fittest to stop them from infringing on the rights of the weak. This is where the law comes in

⁸ Christophe Jaffrelot (2003, p.185-213) discusses the trajectory of several 'low caste movements in North India' including Arya Samaj and Adi-Hindu, which were anti-casteist in a limited way, not posing a radical challenge to the caste system. See also Juergensmeyer 1982.

too. Ambedkar speaks against the ‘anti-social’ morality of ‘thieves’ ‘businessmen’ and ‘fellow castemen’, because their morality is ‘marked by isolation and exclusiveness.’ It is a morality that protects narrow ‘group interests’ and that is what distorts this morality, making it ‘anti-social’ for Ambedkar.

How do we comprehend the universal morality that Ambedkar wants us to recognise? Where can we find the standpoint from which to examine claims of value? A key requirement, for Ambedkar, is our willingness to subject received opinion to critical scrutiny. In accordance with the teachings of the great Buddha, Ambedkar challenges the belief in the infallibility of received thought the infallibility of the Vedas. As a votary of rational thinking, of demonstrable proofs and of flawless arguments, he was of the view that all credible thinking must track the truth. Thus, he writes that for the Buddha: ‘nothing was infallible and nothing could be final. Everything must be open to re-examination and reconsideration whenever grounds for re-examination and reconsideration arise. Man must know the truth and real truth. To him freedom of thought was the most essential thing. And he was sure that freedom of thought was the only way to the discovery of truth’ (Ambedkar 1957, p.89). For Ambedkar, the jurist, institutional arrangements too must facilitate the discovery and protection of the truth.

Sadly, the balancing acts of power games cloud judgment, sully the truth and compromise freedom of thought. But non-contemporaneously, we can find truth-seekers and freedom-lovers, for example, ‘under a comparatively peaceful and ‘cosmopolitan Muslim rule’ before the Enlightenment of the Western world. An extraordinary exemplar is Sufi Dārā Shukoh (1615-1659), Akbar’s great grandson, who assembled Varanasi scholars to translate the Upanishads into Persian in 1656. His attitude to the past is described by Jonardon Ganeri (2014) as not deference but as motivated ‘to collaborate in a new search for truth’. That is the direction of inclusivity and intellectual humility that could underpin a durable anti-casteism, provided the works of the excluded, the Dalit scholars, thinkers, activists, seers, reformers, campaigners, artists, writers, filmmakers – truth-seekers as well as myth-makers – are also assembled.⁹

Making Sense of Anti-Casteism: Towards Equality, Freedom and Fraternity

Bernard Williams writes in *Truth and Truthfulness* that ‘With history as with some everyday narrative, every statement in it can be true and it can still tell the wrong story’. (Williams 2002, p.244). We have told mini-narratives but making sense of it on a larger scale ‘will be a matter of interpretation, and the interpretation is up to us. The past will not make sense unless we make sense of it’ (ibid.) We have told our stories of caste in a common, though not shared, space where others are telling their own stories. ‘When different stories, with different demands of what makes sense, are told at the same time and in knowledge of one another, they are not insulated from one another, or if they are, this will not be a mere consequence of the relativist account. It will be a political fact, which is constituted by there being two publics that do not speak to each other in ways that make enough shared sense’. (Williams 2002, p.261) People try to make sense of the world ‘in terms that help them to survive in it’ (ibid., p.268), but is it not that which generates collective hypocrisies?

What shape can anti-casteism take in the scenario I have described? Must one temper the goals of a campaign to accommodate anti-racists who are not anti-casteists? This seems to presuppose that we must answer the question of who ‘we’ are with whom we are trying to ‘make sense’ of our world.

⁹ I am grateful to Karthick Ram Manoharan for the observation that Shukoh is ‘a good example of a patronizing tolerance that promotes dialogue between elites’ which prompted me to add the caveat about including the excluded.

Ambedkar has a word of advice: 'it is not enough if men act in a way which agrees with the acts of others. Parallel activity, even if similar, is not sufficient to bind men into a society'. (Ambedkar [1936] 2014, p.244). He gives the example of participation in Hindu festivals: though celebrated by a majority, they did not facilitate common activity across castes and therefore failed to generate a feeling of 'society'. Without being animated by the same feelings there is no society. By implication the same would apply to anti-casteism: without being animated by the same feelings of protest, in a common struggle, there is no guarantee of solidarity.

Ambedkar was a courageous, at times even insolent, internal critic of caste. Without his kind of fearless internal criticism, we would have dogma; when we cannot distinguish between the domain where truth matters and the domain where fantasy, desire, imagination is rightly allowed a free reign. The sphere of the sacred itself risks being lost when existing hierarchies determine what is or is not sacred.

Anti-casteism has equality as a goal. But equality of what? Not the de-fanged equality that Gandhi offered as a defender of *Varnashramadharma*. 'I think we have to realize the dignity of labour. If a barber or a shoemaker attends a college, he ought not to abandon the profession of barber or shoemaker' (Gandhi 1916, cited by Kumar 2015). That was Gandhi's way of equalizing the value of all labour, for 'one was equal only when one stayed within the rules, histories, and limits of the hand' (Kumar 2015: p.101)

Whereas, the insurgent Ambedkar wrote: 'My final words of advice to you are educate, agitate, and organize; have faith in yourself. With justice on our side, I do not see how we can lose our battle. ...It is battle for the reclamation of the human personality.' (Ambedkar 1942 cited in Jaffrelot 2005)

Finally, with fraternity (Maitri/friendship) as an ideal, we must ask: with whom must I identify? For there is a choice, always. Which version of tradition must I immerse myself in? The choice will appear as a genuine choice only after the 'given' identifications (with this or that caste loyalty; with this or that nationality; with this or that history) is dislodged. Then we shall have the opportunity to move out of our serial collectivities to form groups of solidarity regardless of birth-ascribed status.

In a pragmatic spirit, in pursuit of achievable practical goals (such as the institution of legal protection against caste discrimination in the UK) amongst other things, anti-casteism exposes the lie that the caste system is benign and seamlessly self-perpetuating, when it is everywhere enforced through penalties for transgression of caste norms and with the complicity of the privileged castes.

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