

# Resisting Racism and Xenophobia

Global Perspectives on Race,  
Gender, and Human Rights

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## Metaphors of Race and Caste-Based Discriminations against Dalits and Dalit Women in India

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In the seventies, when as a young scholar I first began my research work, my choice of field area raised quite a few eyebrows. “Why Dhobis?” many people asked. At that time I did not realize the implications of that question, not also the fact that after me, no one else from the Department of Anthropology at Delhi University had ever worked within an untouchable community. I realized it quite recently when I was standing outside my house, and my neighbor, who was living on the first floor, was trying to throw the keys upstairs to his wife. Our cleaning lady, who belongs to the sweeper caste and is considered immensely untouchable, offered to throw the key up.

“No, no, you do not touch it,” the woman upstairs reacted rather violently. The cleaning woman stepped back, and her face looked as if she had been slapped. One could see the humiliation as well as the pain. “So they think I am an *achut* [untouchable],” she muttered, but walked away quietly. I do not know how many times she must have faced such humiliation, notwithstanding that it was during the year 2001 in the city of Delhi and in an urban middle-class neighborhood where most of the intelligentsia lives.

In the seventies when I was working among the Dhobis,<sup>1</sup> in a far more traditional neighborhood of Delhi, similar situations had become imprinted in my mind (Channa 1985). I belong to a liberal family, where caste has never been mentioned overtly, and I was not fully conversant with the full extent of the practice of “untouchability,” although as an Indian and a Hindu, I knew that it existed. I did not realize the implication when some of my informants told me that they had tried to open a tea shop but that it did not run. “People would not accept our tea; they kept saying *Dhobi ki chai* [tea of the Dhobi].” At that time I was naïve enough to ask why. But soon the harsh realities of discrimination became clear to me.

The first aspect of discrimination in all areas, urban and rural, is geographical segregation. Everywhere in both village and city, even today, the low castes are segregated and huddled together. The Dhobi, who were part of the old historical city of Delhi and were residing there from the time the Walled City<sup>2</sup> was built, were cramped into small one-room tenements built around a central courtyard and cut off from the main city areas by a narrow entrance that marked the beginning of the Dhobi Katra, as they were referred to. The narrowness of the entrances, coupled with the fact that they were always situated away from the main roads and market areas, made it impossible for any one to wander into them by chance. Such geographical segregation was matched by social segregation as well. In the seventies, the children of the Dhobis had started going to school and even to college, but the stories of their humiliation were manifold.

“The children in our class do not treat us as equals; they call us scheduled caste and avoid us.” The teachers were no different. One mother complained to me as to how her son was repeatedly thrown out of the class by the teacher who kept saying that he could never learn anything because he was a Dhobi.

A young boy once shyly confided in me that he was in love with a Brahmin girl who lived nearby. “It is an impossible dream. A person of my caste cannot even think of marrying a girl of a higher caste. Even my mother would never accept a daughter-in-law who did not know how to iron clothes. Nevertheless I look at her from a distance and love her in my heart.”

In later life, while doing fieldwork in rural areas of Northern India such as Rajasthan (Channa 1995) and Garhwal (Channa 2000), I saw the same phenomenon repeated again and again. Invariably the low castes would be placed in the most inhospitable and infertile part of the village. They would be occupying marshy lands or arid, rocky, unproductive land and would be situated far away from the sources of drinking water. In fact the harshest cruelty to them was in the matter of restricting their access to drinking water. No untouchable was allowed to touch the sources of water directly, and untouchable women would sit near the wells or streams and wait patiently for hours until the high-caste women would fill their empty vessels with water for them. The high-caste women who did so took care at the same time not to touch the polluting, low-caste bodies. In very few places and only where there was a sizable population of low castes, such as in the villages near Agra, populated by the low-caste Chamars (traditional leatherworkers), the untouchables had their own well or source of water.

While I was working in a village in Haryana in the nineties, I came across some water taps, a sign of modernity in village India (Channa 1997). The state had provided these taps for the untouchables in the village, as they were not allowed to draw water from the wells. But I was also told that no untouchable

had the courage to touch these taps and that only women of the high castes were using them. The untouchable women would still sit beside the taps meant for them, waiting for their vessels to be filled. A high-caste person told me that “the government can provide taps for the untouchables, but it can not give them the courage to use them.”

When India became an independent democracy, the framers of the Indian constitution banned “untouchability” and made its practice a cognizable offense. Almost fifty years down the line, in spite of a fair number of untouchables having become political leaders and holding responsible jobs, their position has undergone little change. They may have gained economically, but the social stigma as well as the “psychocultural assaults” (Smedley 1993; cf. Harrison 1998, 621) remains. Even today, whenever I go to any village in any part of India, with a few regions exempted,<sup>3</sup> I have no difficulty in identifying the Dalits. One can see their poor residential quarters; the lack of resources, such as fertile land and water; the general lack of prosperity; and their shabby appearance as distinct markers of their caste status. Even in the resettlement colonies of the ousted, such as those of the Tehri dam in Uttaranchal in Northern India, the newly formed villages also had the untouchables segregated and given the poorest and the smallest portions of the land. Whenever the state gives land, under land-redistribution schemes, the untouchables almost always get the land that no one else wants.

In the religious sphere, the Hindu pantheon contains many gods and goddesses, hierarchically arranged. The lower-order deities are always seen as being associated with the untouchables. They are also believed to have the same characteristics as the untouchables. Thus, people fear them for being “unpredictable, malevolent, spiteful, dirty and dangerous.” The higher-order deities, belonging to the high castes, are seen as being benevolent, magnanimous, immensely powerful with a generalized all-pervasive sacredness. The lower-order deities, like the untouchables, have control over small portions of the universe, mostly diseases and specific misfortunes such as snake bites and cholera (Parish 1997, 36). The sacred status of the lower-order deities is also much diluted, and they are seen as having more of nuisance value and evil nature. Thus, one comes to the Durkheimian (Durkheim 1965) conclusion that the sacred cosmology of the Hindus metaphorically reflects the social order and that the hierarchy of gods parallels the hierarchy of human beings.

In this chapter, I do not want to go into either the history of untouchability or the textual and scholastic aspects of it. I simply want to show how a system of oppression survives in subtle and covert forms and has its roots deeply entrenched even when apparently uprooted and done away with in legislation and overt social norms. Even when the educated elite and the intelligentsia overtly deny that they are casteist, they are in no way different from

their counterparts of white dominant groups in the West, who deny the fact of racism while, as documented by scholars, the fact of race persists in many different hues (Harrison 1995).

As Chris Shore (1997, 133) has shown in his work on Europe, metaphors used in daily speech are a powerful medium of "subjectification" in the Foucauldian sense, where the people are conditioned almost unconsciously to internalize certain values and beliefs that serve to reproduce those very hierarchies that produce them (Bourdieu 1990). Thus, the metaphors of caste, or *jati* (the Indian term for the numerous endogamous communities into which Indian society is divided), are all in terms of their inherent characteristics, which makes intermixing synonymous with incompatibility. Thus the psychobiological (Miles 1989, 32–40) justification used for the continuity of race is reproduced in caste except that the caste system, having survived over centuries, has perfected the system of self-reproduction in a much more comprehensive manner than even race. Thus, those at the bottom of the ladder have also internalized the values to the extent that they would frown on intermixture, and the caste identities have become synonymous with human identity to the extent that most Indians cannot think of themselves as being apart from their castes. This inherent sense of identity could be one of the reasons why this system has persisted.

A caste group is also a community, and the horizontal solidarity of this community comes in handy as a support group. Traditionally, such support groups were only operative at the social level, but now they have become integrated into the democratic process as much of the work on caste and politics indicates. Thus, caste reproduces itself by adapting to the needs of the new social order and justifies its existence in terms of providing identity and group values and by becoming a positive political force. It is the political potential of caste that has kept it alive and given it a new lease on life in modern India. At the World Conference against Racism,<sup>4</sup> this aspect of caste was most apparent where the label of "untouchability" had united a group politically and coordinated them into action. The term *Dalit* is itself a product of this political consciousness.

Caste further provides the necessary inequalities to keep the political and economic system going, "a strategy to maintain labor discipline," and in this way a parallel has been drawn between caste and race (Milner 1994, 91). Thus, even today most of the demeaning work in Indian cities and villages are done by the untouchables. The monopolistic advantage mentioned by E. R. Leach (1960, 6)<sup>5</sup> is nothing but a way to tie down groups to socially undesirable tasks. The West realized that racism was an aftermath of the abolition of slavery; in India, casteism in its present form may be viewed as being an aftermath of the constitutional abolition of the caste system and the introduction of a secular democratic form of governance. The scholars of the traditional caste system, for example Oliver C. Cox (1944–1945), differentiated between caste and race

by saying that caste was "part of a coherent social system based on inequality" while race was an anomaly in a society built on the concepts of equality. The present-day Indian society is overtly committed to the same principles of equality and human rights as are their Western counterparts. But caste remains in its insidious form in India as race does in the West. Both are operative at the subversive level to maintain morally unacceptable but politically and economically justified forms of inequality.

## CASTE AND RACE

Many scholars of Indian society have debated the similarity between caste and race in analytical terms, aptly summarized by Louis Dumont (1961). On the face of it, most scholars of the Indian caste system are of the opinion that caste and race are inherently incomparable as they are rooted in two entirely separate ideological systems. One of the moot points of departure is that race is based on morphological differentiation (overt similarity) while caste is based on concepts of inner purity and pollution not overtly linked to morphology. While to a large extent it might be true that the skin color of a Brahmin or a Shudra makes no difference to status, yet metaphorically the notions of appearance are not absent from caste values. Thus, good-looking persons of low caste are often referred to as being "not like Shudras," and a dark-complexioned Brahmin may be disparagingly referred to as being "like a Shudra." However, if appearance does not make a difference to the status accorded, then what about racial classification? Is it morphological? If it were so, would light-skinned Asians such as Imran Khan be considered black (Werbner 1997)? I think most scholars on race would agree that race is not about color at all; otherwise, why would the Irish and the Polish be discriminated against racially? The color that makes the American WASP the whitest of all races is the same that makes the Brahmin the most superior in the Varna hierarchy. Thus, as J. Baker Miller (1978; cf. Crowley and Himmelweit 1992, 19) understands it, the inequalities come first, and the differences follow. Moreover, even though there may not be overt physical differences between persons of different caste groups, a high degree of visibility was imposed on the lower castes by assigning to them a particularly demeaning dress code. In places where the caste system was most oppressive, such as in South India, men were forbidden to wear shoes, clean clothes, and good fabrics, and women were forbidden to wear a bodice and jewelry. Thus genetically nonexistent differences were socially created and imposed culturally. As Robert Deliege (1997, 31) describes, the ability to dress according to their own liking was a primary restorer of the dignity of the Dalits.

The Indian caste system recognizes that color is metaphoric. The term *Varna* literally means "color," but the four Varnas are arranged not according to color of skin but according to *guna* (quality), of which three types are recognized as being associated with three colors: white, red, and black, with *sattvic*, *rajasic*, and *tamasic*, respectively.<sup>6</sup> Does the ideology of race differ significantly from this point of view when some qualities are attributed to people on the basis of their "genetics"?

Even though race is not based on the concepts of ritual purity and pollution, the rigidity with which "purity" of blood is maintained makes it no less sacred than the concepts of caste purity and pollution. The intersection of race and caste lies in the "pollution" passed down to the progeny in case of a tainted marriage. Thus, in both cases, it is the progeny who stand to lose more than the parents who commit the "offense." In both cases, the generational aspect makes the biological a reality. "Mixed" blood is abhorred, as it is symbolic of transgression of rights of the group over its women. In *The Laws of Manu* (Tambiah 1973), the origin of numerous other caste, or *jati*, groups from the original four Varnas, is traced from intermarriage between the Varnas. The more the "mixing," the greater the downward mobility. However, the prescription for upward mobility or the restoration of caste status was the repeated marriage, over the generations, in exactly one's own caste status (202).

Both caste and race are patriarchal in that the males of the group use the women as boundary markers, where the power of the men to keep their women protected from "pollution" is the key to the purity/power of their group and is directly related to dominance. *The Laws of Manu*, the guidebook for maintaining social norms, gives the men of highest status the widest range of access to women. Thus, men of the higher Varnas can have access to women of all Varnas lower than them. It means that the Brahmin can access all women, while the Shudra is confined to women only of his stratum, which also means that since men of the higher Varnas can all access his women folk, he may be left with none, with the most undesirable, or with the ones "passed down."

Since Hindu society traditionally permitted polygyny, a Brahmin could have women of the lower Varnas as his secondary wives or concubines, with their children having consequently fewer rights on the property and status of the father. When the status of the mother was well below that of the father, then the children formed a new *jati*.

S. J. Tambiah (1973) has given the mathematical rules by which new *jatis* were churned out by the key principle of classification, where mixtures give rise to new categories. However, the caste status of the child suffered most when a woman married below her level, for the rules were exactly opposite for her. While a woman of lower caste could have sexual or conjugal relations with men of caste higher than her own, the opposite was socially and morally

abhorrent. Thus, a high-caste woman was confined to be the consort of only men of her own caste. The progeny of a Brahmin woman and a Shudra man was thus the lowest of all mortals, the *chandala*, condemned to live off carrion and perform the duties of burning dead bodies. Without the scriptural sanctions of caste, race also worked in more or less the same fashion, where the overt power of some races allowed their men to have free access to women of the dominated races while at the same time it restricted the access of men of the inferior race to women of the superior race and often with most dire consequences. In all cases, the power is symbolized in the confinement of one's own women and in the exploitation of other women.

In India, this kind of situation, perpetrated over the centuries, has led to some communities of low-caste men being reduced to pimping their women as a full-time occupation, such as the *nats* of Rajasthan. Pauline Kolenda (1987) has shown how widows of the *churha* caste are sold off forcibly by their own men.

It has also led to several defensive mechanisms on the part of women of the lower caste to uphold their own honor. Low-caste women in the North Indian region of Haryana told me that they never allowed the young daughter or the daughters-in-law to go out of the house for fetching water or fodder. In this part of the country, it is the task of women to fetch fodder, fuel, and water from some distance from the house.<sup>7</sup> However, while I saw young girls, both married and unmarried of the dominant caste, going everywhere for these tasks, the young women of the low castes observed far greater restrictions in their movements. "The high-caste [men] will protect their own women. Who in the village has courage even to raise their eyes at the women of high castes, but who will protect our daughters? The high-caste men will exploit them at the first opportunity. Therefore we have to take care of our own *izzat* [honor]," I was told by a low-caste woman of middle age. But such precautions used to be meaningless in the times before legislatures were made to protect the interests of the low castes. Even today, such legal protections are sterile if not backed by political clout. By and large, the attitudes of the high-caste men toward the low-caste women has not changed, for they are modeled on certain stereotypes reminiscent of the racial metaphors of black women (Gilman 1985).

Further, the rules of exclusion have always tended to push more and more persons out of the privileged categories, thus always maintaining the exclusive group as a minority. Thus, even the slightest breach of caste norms was enough to push people down the ladder. However, it was more often than not the downgrading of class that led to a downgrading of caste as well (Shyamal 1997). The norms of personal hygiene and food taboos made it impossible for the very poor to stick to these terms. Thus, as Shyamal has recorded, history shows many instances in which because of famine, conquest, or poverty, persons of high caste were forced to eat forbidden foods and perform lowly tasks

for sheer survival. Such persons or groups invariably went down the caste hierarchy. Thus, although scholars of Indian society (e.g., Dumont 1970) are not willing to concede that economic status plays a significant role in caste hierarchy, they are being too idealistic at the ground level, and as shown by M. N. Srinivas (1991) and others, economic status and power play significant roles in determining the hierarchy of castes. Also, the normative order always works in ways to ensure that the top layer is small in number and powerful.

### CASTE, RACE, AND GENDER

Whether caste or race is the basis of oppression, one mode of oppression is the creating of two models of womanhood: one of the dominant group and one of the oppressed. Both work for the domination of women but in different ways. While the high-caste women suffered isolation and immobility, being confined to their homes, the low-caste women suffered from a stereotyping that made them into diametric opposites of the high-caste "goddess," a woman seen as the epitome of chastity and virtue. Hindu society, unlike Christian society, worships its women but only as chaste, nonsexual beings. The highest honor given to a woman is that of a mother, and the most respected category of woman is a widow. Indian men find it difficult to adjust the image of a sexually active woman with one whom they can respect. Thus, all women who rise high in social esteem are either widows of high caste (e.g., Indira Gandhi)—which equates them with ascetics, as they are expected to live a life of renunciation—or women who for some other reasons are living a life of asceticism. A woman of a low caste could never aspire to the model of an ascetic or woman of virtue. In India, the same patriarchy that forbade women of higher castes to expose their bodies or even their faces, that condemned them to remain confined to the space within the house, and that forced them to find glory in renunciation or even death (*sati*) forbade these very practices to the women of the lower castes (Channa 1998).

Thus, the bodies of both high-caste and low-caste women were inscribed with the patriarchal values of the men of high caste. The women of high caste had to preserve their bodies in pure state, reducing its sexuality by fasting and by rigorous physical confinement. The body of a woman was the exclusive property of her husband, and after his death she lost all rights to adorn it or even to keep it with care. She had to reify it by starvation and lack of any kind of decoration. Shaving one's hair desexualized a widow. A high-caste man ensured that even after his death the body of his woman would remain his exclusive property. The most extreme form of it was her glorification by burning her on her husband's funeral pyre. The bodies of low-caste women were

on the other hand treated as common property. The low-caste women such as the Dhobi women were not allowed to wear the nose ring that among the high-caste women in Northern India was a symbol of virginity before marriage and of chastity after marriage. The low-caste women were allowed no such symbol, for they were not seen as being worthy of having any virtue.

Thus, the moral order of virtuous women and compliant women was legitimized on "claims of tradition," which as Victoria Ana Goddard (2000, 7) points out, are nothing but "the protection of existing hierarchies and values." The metaphors of virtue such as *sati* were reserved only for women of high caste. Thus, while *sati* (women who had actually burnt themselves on the funeral pyre of their husbands) were worshipped for posterity as "goddesses," only the queens and women of ruling families had the privilege of becoming *sati*. If a woman of low caste professed such virtues, she would become the subject of ridicule by both the high castes and the low castes. Thus, the model of a low-caste woman led to creation of a sexual object of forbidden desire. The high-caste women were expected by their own men to be virtuous to the extent of being sexually passive. Even today, most men do not expect their wives to be excessively sexual. Most Indian men maintain double standards by which they look for sexual titillation outside of marriage and quite often secretly, for excessive sexuality is seen as being a base quality befitting men only of the low strata. Even for men of high castes, the desirable standards are of sexual restraint. However, if at all they wanted to satisfy their baser instincts, they were expected to look toward the low-caste women and not to their own wives.

Such sexual metaphors of lewdness and hypersexuality, as applied to persons of low caste, are no different from those applied to persons of the dark races. Thus darkness or blackness becomes a metaphor for inner darkness or moral degradation. Good-looking Dhobi children often came back from school complaining that the teacher had told them that they "did not look like Dhobis." "Does one have to be dark and ugly to look like a Dhobi?" The stereotype for a man of low caste is that he is always dark looking, and that of a woman of low caste is that she is also dark looking but well endowed physically and usually sexually attractive.

Thus, many of the metaphors used in speech employ the labels of the low castes to depict uncouth and nonnormative behavior. Thus, "Do not behave like a Chamar" is a common form of saying "Do not misbehave." A woman dressed in nonacceptable aesthetic standards may be referred to as being dressed like a *bhangan* (sweepress), and a dark and ugly woman is often described as being a *churhi* (very low caste). All terms for low castes are synonymous with abuse much like that deriving from the term *nigger*.

The laws of the land forbid the use of abusive language toward persons of the low caste. Thus, it would be a cognizable offense under the Indian penal

code to call a Chamar a Chamar. But the people of high castes keep the ideological denigration alive by using these terms among themselves and making them synonymous with what they consider the low castes to be.

### POSITIVE DISCRIMINATION AND LABELING

The constitution of India was prepared in 1947, when India became an independent country, and it made special provisions for the hitherto marginalized populations of the country, listing them definitively as scheduled tribes and scheduled castes (Bhagwan Das 1996), with the latter predominantly including those considered untouchable. It was recognized that centuries of oppression would have left them with little resources, both material and psychological, to come up to the level of the rest of the population. The facilities included reservation of seats in institutes of higher education and government jobs. However, very little input was given at the formative period, such as good educational inputs at the primary level. Thus, those who were at the bottom of the class hierarchy had hardly any resources that would bring them up to the level of being capable of claiming reservation for such high-level facilities. While I was doing my fieldwork among the Dhobis in the seventies, a large number of Dhobi children were going to school and even to college. Their main complaint against this form of positive discrimination was that it was discrimination in a different garb. "They label us and then put us in a corner." "Throughout our educational life, we carry the stigma of 'scheduled caste.'" In fact, in the speech of contemporary people, the term *scheduled caste* carries with it the same connotation of disgust and contempt as the words *Dom* and *Chamar* in earlier times. Thus, the label derives its meaning from the people with whom it is associated. As long as the people suffer from discrimination, any word used for them will carry the same derogatory meaning, no matter what the literal meaning of the term is. Thus, Mahatma Gandhi had used the term *harijan* instead of *achut* for the untouchables. Although *harijan* means literally "children of god," after being used for the untouchables, it became a synonym for "untouchable" and was being used as such until the untouchables themselves rejected it, preferring instead the politically charged term *Dalit* (Fernandes 1996), which means "downtrodden."

The manner in which the privileges granted to the untouchables are dispensed to them makes it more a practice synonymous with the *daan* that was given to them traditionally. The concept of *daan* carries with it not only a power differential of the giver and the receiver in the idiom of caste but also the stigma of purity and impurity. Thus, in traditional *daan*, the high-caste giver divests himself or herself of impurity through the gift given to the low caste

(Raheja 1989), who absorbs it within his own already impure state. The benefits given to the low castes under various schemes of the government have taken on almost the same symbolism of *daan*, where the authorities, most of them high caste, give away these privileges not as a matter of right to the low caste but in the idiom of *daan*. Low castes at the receiving end are made to feel inferior, with the giver being morally superior. This is manifest in the condescending attitude of most government officials and even school and college authorities in their dealing with the lower castes. Thus, most untouchables said that they were made to "feel like beggars."

Moreover, even when they occupy prestigious positions, they are stigmatized, and various labels are used for them. For example, the term *quota doctors* is widely prevalent for those who have entered the medical profession through the reservation quotas.

Thus, speech, as Michel Foucault (1980) puts it, is a powerful medium of discourse. As long as the discourse of inequality based on caste remains, all forms verbal reformation in referring to the low castes will only be recast in the idiom of contempt and ridicule. The power of the elite to convert speech into oppression is proportional only to the extent of the oppression. Thus, the term *Dalit* has now become synonymous with the emergent power of the low castes in the political arena. It is also a symbol of their protest against oppression. When people want to turn the discourse toward the power acquisition by the untouchables, they use the term *Dalit*. This also symbolizes the emergence of an untouchable selfhood. This is the first term the untouchables have evolved for themselves in contrast to the earlier process of being labeled from above. It is thus symbolic of their developing consciousness.

### DALIT WOMEN AND SELFHOOD

The discourse on Dalit women has often referred to their being doubly discriminated against and highly marginalized. For example, according to the Charter of Dalit Human Rights—put forward by the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights in India, an organization fighting for the abolition of untouchability—states "We recognize that Dalit women have three-fold discrimination. They are discriminated against because they are women (gender), because they are Dalits (caste), and because they are Dalit women by their own men folk (gender and caste)" (Asian Human Rights Commission 1999). I find this sort of rhetorical labeling objectionable in the sense that it takes away from the Dalit women any agency and selfhood that they may possess. If we describe them as being thrice oppressed, then we are making them only objects of our *daan* or pity and not taking cognizance of their strengths and muting whatever voices they may have.



In my work on the untouchables, I have found that the women in these communities have more agency and are stronger than their counterparts in the higher castes. One of the major theoretical premises in the debates on gender inequality has been the public-private dichotomy—introduced by M. Rosaldo (1974), extensively used by other scholars, but critiqued by recent scholars as being “ethnocentric”—and the need felt to dispense with such rigid dichotomies in favor of anthropologically constructed situational conceptualizations (Goddard 2000, 17).

The untouchables had traditionally been entrusted with most of the services and productive activities, such as scavenging, sweeping, washing of clothes, pottery, iron smithy, cutting hair, and so forth. All these activities were performed as household enterprises, with the women participating equally. In some cases, such as in the case of the scavengers, there may have been no division of labor, and in others, such as that among the Dhobi and barbers, there may have been a division of labor but not one involving a separation of men or women from the arena of work. The work was performed on the domestic front and treated as a domestic service, even by the high castes receiving the service. The productive unit was always the household (Channa 1985, 1989). Thus, kinship relations were predominant in the work situation, and the women worked along with the men in what may be called a “household-based work situation.” The women’s space often extended beyond the four walls of the house, when they were required to go out for their work. Thus, Dhobi women would stand at the street corners ironing clothes, would visit the household to deliver washed clothes, and would go the banks of the river to help their men thrash out the clothes in the river water. The women also had the control of the household economy, which was not significantly different from the productive economy. They bought all the requirements for washing clothes, which was their livelihood, along with their subsistence requirements.

Most important, the relationship between husband and wife and between men and women in general was far more symmetrical than the ones found among the high castes. Lower-caste men and women were bound by feelings of “shared oppression” (Lorde 1992, 50), sentiments not felt by men of higher castes. The men of the dominant group had models for both their own women and their “other” women that were not shared by the men of the marginalized groups. I have never come across any man from the low castes who believed that his woman was morally degraded or sexually unrestrained. On the contrary, most men treated their wives as equals, and the relationship was symmetrical to the extent that a low-caste man would not be averse to helping his wife out with domestic work. The women treated the men as equals, and I often heard a Dhobi woman address her husband with the familiar *tu* instead of the respectful *aap*, used by high-caste women. Such sharing of roles has been

reported by other scholars who have worked among the lower castes (Searle-Chatterjee 1981).

### THE NARRATIVES OF CONTESTED SPACE

Labels such as *dominated*, *subjugated*, and *marginalized*, in my opinion, tell only half the story. They create pictures in our minds of shapeless, huddled, muted figures. I believe that too much emphasis on exploitation is a view from the top. Looking from the bottom up, one sees a different picture. There is dissent, resentment, as well as counternarratives that run in directions contrary to the ones created from the top. At the World Conference against Racism (WCAR), the Dalits demonstrated that “the oppressed are not totally powerless. They always discover spaces to assert themselves, they always have more ‘power’ than what is ascribed to them by the oppressors” (Franco and Parmar 1996, 83). They also refuted once and for all the debate as to whether they themselves are party to their own oppression, a debate carried on by many scholars on the caste system.

The most significant aspect that came forth in view of the political action of the Dalits was their capacity for organization and positive action. It is well known that the categories of “untouchable” or “scheduled caste” were creations of different regimes, the former by the British and the latter by the Indian government. Before that, for centuries Dalits had no common identity and were just hierarchized, scattered communities isolated in their oppression and suffering, not identifying with others in similar plight. More than anything else, this may have been one of the prime reasons why they did not rebel against their situation. The labeling, even the one external to them, has definitely given them a political identity by which to assert themselves. Today, as the Dalits, they are a powerful community, one large enough to act as a pressure group in a democracy.

During the conference in Durban, their leaders told me that they had been preparing themselves for this event for three years. Even at the venue they demonstrated extraordinary discipline and eagerness to make the maximum impact. Even while the delegates were waiting outside to enter for participation in the opening ceremony, a man dressed in colorful traditional attire began a song and dance while drummers took up the beat. The effect was that as desired: everyone turned around to take a look. This high-visibility and dramatic visual impact in the forms of jackets, headbands, and drumming made the Dalits a highly recognizable and visible part of the proceedings. This, from a sociological as well as a symbolic point of view, was an announcement by the Dalits that they were now both visible and audible. From a people who had



borne the burden of silence and invisibility for centuries, it was a great achievement. The presence of Dalit women in large numbers at the conference and their prominent leadership of the proceedings support my argument that the space granted to Dalit women in their own community far exceeds that occupied by women of higher castes. The men and women who represented the Dalits at the conference were perhaps not representative of all Dalit communities in India. It was heartening to see poor and uneducated Dalits being escorted to the venue by their more-educated and better-placed counterparts. The Dalit leaders had certainly made an effort not to limit themselves to the more privileged members of their communities. The representation was certainly symbolic of the emerging Dalit power in India.

#### ACHIEVEMENTS AT THE WCAR

Although paragraphs 84–88 of the NGO Forum Declaration are a true description of the indignities faced by the Dalits in contemporary times, and even though the declaration has taken a clear stand in recognizing caste as a form of discrimination (para. 52), it is disheartening to note that the official declaration of the WCAR makes no separate mention of the Dalits and does not recognize caste as a form of discrimination that is still persistent. Except for a general recognition covering all forms of discrimination, such as that in paragraphs 10, 26, and 28, which mainly deal with the violation of human rights, and particularly that of paragraph 28, which mentions the words *group*, *collectivity*, and *community*, there is nothing significant to support the Dalit cause in this document.

The official state representatives at the conference were probably influenced by the Indian government's staunch stand against the inclusion of the Dalits in the WCAR declaration and the mention of caste as a form of discrimination still existing in India.

It is true that the Indian government has, from the time of the framing of the Indian constitution, disowned the idea of caste and that all Indians have constitutionally granted equal rights. It is also true that to make up for centuries of oppression, a number of benefits under positive discriminatory practices have been granted. But as I have argued in this chapter and as has been recognized by the NGO Forum Declaration, it is not the state but civil society that perpetuates the atrocities, and the state maintains its approval of such by its silence. The state's refusal to recognize the continued oppression of Dalits is a pointer toward its lack of real commitment to the cause of the Dalits.

There is also an intellectualist and possibly patriotic point of view of Indian scholars that objects to the West's justification of colonization on the ba-

sis of the "uncivilized" practices such as caste. Andre Beteille (1983) and others like him have been bitter critics of what they consider to be the colonial attitude toward Indian society. But while I would fully agree with this point of view, I am also of the opinion that the Indian intellectual should not lose sight of the ground-level realities. They should join hands with like-minded Western scholars and expose the similarities in the forms of discriminations such as race and caste. I would also fully agree with Beteille that Indian society is no better or worse than Western society and that both have equal degrees of discrimination as well as egalitarian ideologies. As he has written, "Surely, in the early years of this century the hierarchical symbols of the British Raj in India were just as extravagant as those of caste" (53).

At the WCAR, the point to be driven home was not that caste is a unique form of discrimination to be found only in India but that there were enough similarities and intersections between caste and race for them to be taken up at the same platform.

#### NOTES

1. The low castes are also designated as being service castes, as they traditionally provide many services to the higher castes. The Dhobis are the caste assigned to the washing of clothes. However, their work does not involve only the cleaning of clothes but the ritual absorption of pollution from these dirty clothes, especially from the clothes of menstruating women and those of women postdelivery. The ritually impure status of this caste group thus derives from the association with bodily impurities. The women of this group cut nails and assist in childbirth, again highly impure activities.
2. The Walled City of Delhi was built by the Moghul emperor Shah Jehan in the sixteenth century. It was enclosed by seven gates and a running wall. Some parts of the wall and the gates still remain. The city of New Delhi is adjunct to this old city, both of which form contemporary Delhi. The old city is now a hub of commercial activity, but some of the traditional aura remains, as do some of the old structures. The Dhobi Khatras, however, are almost gone, and most of the Dhobis settled in new parts of the city.
3. Although in every part of India that is Hindu people practice untouchability in some form or the other, the harshness of segregation varies from place to place, being least noticeable in regions such as Bengal and Punjab and most conspicuous in the southern and western parts.
4. The World Conference against Racism, held in Durban in September 2001, where the Dalit had made their presence felt as a pressure group.
5. Some scholars of the caste system have seen the traditional occupations such as those providing monopolistic advantages to the groups, as those who are assigned to these tasks are the only ones who can do them. In times of economic change, such monopoly may have its advantage, as described by Owen Lynch (1969) in his study of the Jatavs of Agra, who became rich when shoe making became an industry and high castes

would have nothing to do with this polluting occupation. However, in later periods, with the development of the leather industry, many high-caste businessmen entered it, but the actual processing of leather is still done by the low castes. I have studied a similar situation for the Dhobis and the laundry business (see Channa 1985).

6. The *sattvic* qualities associated with the color white represent purity and involve the taboo of eating forbidden or stale foods, drinking liquor, engaging in violence, and so forth; it epitomizes restraint. The *rajasic* qualities, associated with the color red, represent a rich lifestyle; eating meat (that of approved qualities), drinking liquor, gambling, and living an ostentatious lifestyle are permitted. The *tamasic* qualities are represented by the color black and represent a degraded lifestyle that permits eating stale and impure foods, carrion, and forbidden meats; drinking liquor; and living in poverty and filth. Usually, the Brahmins are enjoined to live a *sattvic* life; the Kshatriyas, a *rajasic* life; and the Shudras, a *tamasic* life. The fourth category of the *vashyas* falls somewhere between the *sattvic* and the *rajasic*. Its members usually live a rich life, wearing ornaments and possessing wealth but eating vegetarian food and not drinking liquor.

7. Even today, few villages in India have a piped water supply. It is the task of women to walk to the nearest natural source of water, such as a well or stream, and fetch water for drinking and domestic use. Men never fetch water in any part of the country.

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## Margins of Democracy: Aboriginal Australians and Inequality

J. Maria Pedersen

I am an Australian Aboriginal woman from the remote Kimberley region of Western Australia, and I am confronted daily with the legacy of all that colonization implies. As a woman and a mother, I am challenged by perceptions that seek to diminish my capacity to contribute to society. As an Aboriginal woman and a single parent, I am even further challenged to overcome these "additional conditions" that have the potential to seriously disadvantage my family.

Living in remote areas such as the Kimberley region has a tendency to encourage an acceptance of the constraints of oppression. The tyranny of distance creates socially, economically, and politically isolated communities that often do not recognize discrimination as being a divisive and destructive entity. I believed that the World Conference against Racism would be a means to break the culture of silence, to seek allies in the struggle for recognition of human rights for all people, and to establish proactive networks in the fight against global marginalization.

There is an increasing number of our strong women who see our roles as improving the future for our children and breaking down some of the barriers that potentially impinge on the lives that our children and grandchildren will lead. Like many Aboriginal Australians, I was not born a citizen of my country but became one as a consequence of the 1944 Native Citizenship Act. It must be understood that if one's parents were "citizens," this did not automatically confer citizenship to children. My father obtained his citizenship in 1948 and applied for my sisters and me to be added to his citizenship papers in 1964. I am constantly reminded of the inequalities and inequities in our society, as I have personally experienced the direct effects and practices of racism.

I am one of many women who are attempting to challenge the oppressive social constructs that continue into the twenty-first century, to have our