

Racialisation and Caste in India

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The history of India is a complex one, with a history of racialisation which has baffled the world. Like many post colonial countries the assumption is that India will have been influenced by the British rule, this essay will look into how these influences have affected the racialisation of India. However, one of the main focuses of this essay examines a system which has been witnessed in India for centuries, the age old caste system. The origins of the caste system are not precise, but we do know that it evolved through the Varna system and that its laws are credited to the ancient Hindu law creator, Manu. The caste system is loosely a social system by which people are divided into different close communities; they are ascribed by your descent and not interchangeable. There are four main castes arranged in a hierarchy and below them is the outcast, named either as untouchable or more commonly known now as the dalits. Of course the caste system is far more perplexing than this with many more castes and sub-castes arising through the generations. Technically the caste system is seen as a backward practice and is illegal but realistically the caste system is still resisting its extinction and in particular is thriving in smaller villages throughout India causing discrimination to thousands of people. Although the caste system is traditionally religious, many argue that the lower castes or dalits are treated as though they are a different species, and in accordance with this essay a different race. This essay aims to show how India is an inherently racist country it will do this by firstly looking into the caste system and show how dalits are treated as a different race by looking into the everyday features of modern Indian society and will argue like many writers on caste that India has a "hidden apartheid". This analysis of the caste system and race will delve into the different structures within Indian society and will look in detail at institutional racism in India and racial violence. This essay will then focus on the contemporary processes of racialisation which are apparent in Indian society; it will focus on two key areas. Firstly, it will look at how the influx of north eastern Indians into Delhi has alarmed the country with its new form of racism. Secondly, the concept of the racialisation of beauty in India will be examined looking in particular at the phenomenon of skin whitening products and how they are in ample use in India with lighter skin being associated with power, success and a better life. The structure of this essay will engage in consideration of key terms and concepts which will be referenced through literature and then discussed further.

Teltumbde (2010:9) announces that 'Karl Marx prophesised that the new mechanized transportation system would catalyse the collapse of the caste. Today, India has the world's second largest railway network and has created, since independence, a sizeable infrastructure for capitalist industry. But all that could not kill caste, which proved more than capable of adjusting to the new reality'. Teltumbde, an expert on the caste system, believes caste to be a parasite on Indian society and that its continuity through history demoralizes the democratic rule of India. For many Indians the caste system is steadily dissolving, in particular throughout the larger cities in India many people believe the system to be outdated and not a reality. Many of the 160 million dalits throughout India reject this statement and this essay aims to show that everyday living for a dalit is a challenge, facing rejection from all angles of society. Looking at how everyday practices for dalits are determined by their caste, their race. The National Human Rights Commission Report on the Prevention and Atrocities against Scheduled Castes in 2004 found that Dalits were denied access to water sources in 48.4% of villages because of segregation & untouchability practices and that 37 percent of Dalits were living below poverty in India. Originally dalits were named untouchable, this is because they were seen as unclean or impure, traditionally the jobs that dalits were seen to do were 'the removal of waste (including human excrement from dry latrines), butchery, the flaying of animal carcasses for their hides, the making of footwear and the tending of funeral pyres- everything, in other words, that had to do with decay, death and the 'unclean' and living 'segregated from the main population, on the fringes of villages and towns, and could not enter 'pure areas' such as temples, schools or even go near public drinking water.' (Teltumbde, 2010: 14). In many rural towns and villages these practices are more than likely still seen clearly today. Many other forms of discrimination take place, in fact the human rights watch abhors the fact that they cannot even 'lay claim to land that is legally theirs' and that 'dalit children are frequently made to sit in the back of classrooms, and communities as a whole are made to perform degrading rituals in the name of caste'. Dalit 'men, women, and children numbering in the tens of millions work as agricultural laborers for a few kilograms of rice or Rs. 15 to Rs. 35 (US\$0.38 to \$0.88) a day' (Human Rights Watch, 1999). The question must be raised then that the dalit community is so segregated that it should be classed as a different race, the dalit people do not have a real chance to be

successful they are born and die in poverty, therefore India has had a continual hidden racism towards the dalits. This fact however has been discarded by the Indian government as when an outcry for international recognition of caste as a racist violation of human rights was addressed to the world community went ignored in the world conference against racism in 2001 and again in the review in 2009, both held in Durban. Although in theory a dalits colour is not associated with caste, it can be said that due to the types of labour dalits are usually found working in, they are often identified as darker as or "dirtier" than those of different castes because they are more frequently exposed to the sun. In a country obsessed with light skin tone, it is often suggested that the caste system has affected the ways in which Indians view darker skin, with a stigma of dark skin attached to the lower castes. A thought provoking article from an Indian newspaper sums up the many questions as to why dark skin in India is so frowned upon, asking ' Why is dark literally beyond the pale for so many of us? Is it an atavistic throwback to the supposed superiority of 'white' Aryans vis-a-vis the 'non-white' original inhabitants of the subcontinent? Is it the result of 250 years of white rule under the British? Is a pale skin, as against a deep tan, a testimonial to social rank, segregating those who don't have to toil under the sun from those who do? Is it an amalgam of all these? Whatever the reason 'chitti chamri' (fair skin) is a passport to fawning social acceptance' (Surya, 2009). This essay will go into more detail on these factors when looking at beauty and racialisation in India. Although many Indians snub the belief that the dalit population is classed as a different race, due to the caste systems link with religion, however, it is clear that this rigid caste system is unlike any other form of racism globally and in fact we must ask the question that where else in the world is there such unresolved mass discrimination due to what family a person is born into.

Institutional racism within India

Guruswamy Guruammal, a dalit agricultural woman recalls her story of how the police deal with dalits in rural India 'In December 1997, the police raided my village. The superintendent of police [SP] called me a pallachi, which is a caste name for prostitute. He then opened his pant zip... At 11:00 a.m. the sub-collector came. I told the collector that the SP had opened his zip and used a vulgar word. The next morning the police broke all the doors and arrested all the men in the village... The SP came looking for me. The police started calling me a prostitute and started beating me. The SP dragged me naked on the road for one hundred feet. I was four months pregnant at the time... They brought me to the police station naked. I begged the police officers at the jail to help me. I even told them I was pregnant. They mocked me for making such bold statements to the police the day before. I spent twenty-five days in jail. I miscarried my baby after ten days, nothing has happened to the officers who did this to me' (Human Rights Watch, 1999). This is just one horrific account of the ways in which dalits are treated by their so called protectors, and it is common place in India today. There are many ways in which the culture of India allows for institutional racism, the ways in which dalits are treated in the Indian culture has been ingrained in society for generations and for many it is the norm, with many dalits not knowing their rights or simply afraid of going to the police or even not allowed to enter a police station as in 1999 when 27.6% of villages did not allow dalit entry (Human Rights Watch). India unheard is a project that aims to show the realities of dalit living by video volunteers, one such video is one of school children being separated at meal times, the poignant video shows how the children are forced to sit according to caste and one man shows how this has affected him when he says 'because of this discrimination we feel weak and we wonder why this happens to us'. Within the education system, young dalits are often made to sit at the back of classrooms and mistreated by teachers. The likelihood of dalit children leaving school with good literacy skills are low and often leave school earlier than higher caste children with 'Nearly 90 percent of all the poor Indians and 95 percent of all the illiterate Indians are Dalits, according to figures presented at the International Dalit Conference' (Mayall, 2003, *National Geographic*). This form of institutional racism allows for the cycle of discrimination to continue as the dalit population is unable break the bonds of the caste system without education. Even within religion the dalits are not free from segregation with one woman in a video showing how she prays outside the temple due to her caste and how she longs to see inside, religious leaders often reject dalits as they are seen to be of the supreme caste the brahmins, and there are a number of cases of religious leaders being accused of rape and murder of dalits (India Unheard). For many dalits in these rural areas, the state has failed them with people in positions of authority allowing horrific crimes and everyday discrimination to occur from birth till death, having no one to turn to for support or help. Although the government is officially opposed to caste division and holds in place a number of policies enabling positive discrimination for India's dalits whereby funds are set in place for university places and quotas put in place for dalits in government based work places, we can still see how institutional racism is alive and well in Indian society (INDIA, department of education). In fact the policies put forward by the Indian state over the years has impacted a mere few of the dalit population however 'laws designed to ensure that Dalits enjoy equal rights and protection have seldom been enforced. Instead, police refuse to register complaints about

violations of the law and rarely prosecute those responsible for abuses that range from murder and rape to exploitative labor practices and forced displacement from Dalit lands and homes' (Human Rights Watch, 1999).

Racial violence in India

India has officially rejected cries of dalit organisations repeating that policies have been implemented in particular the 1989 prevention of atrocities act of scheduled tribes and castes, however, we must take into account that racial violence in India towards dalits and others is often unreported. We have seen how the Police forces and local authorities often turn a blind eye to crimes committed towards dalits as they believe in the caste system as it is based on Hinduism. The statistics that are shown do not accommodate for this but still show how crimes committed towards dalits are extreme, purely because they are of low caste and therefore racially motivated is shocking. You don't have to look far in India to see that crime towards dalits is frequent, as recently as this month newspaper headlines for the Times of India have read 'Dalit teen raped, killed in UP' (April, 2012). It was only in the year 2000 that 'Statistics compiled by India's National Crime Records Bureau indicate that, 25,455 crimes were committed against Dalits. Every hour two Dalits are assaulted; every day three Dalit women are raped, two Dalits are murdered, and two Dalit homes are torched' (Mayall, 2003, National Geographic). Teltumbde (2010) in his book on caste atrocities announces that 'according to official statistics, every eighteen minutes a crime is committed in India on a dalit-untouchable' (15), his book on the persistence of caste disproves the myth that caste violence is a myth and demonstrates this by using the case of the Khairlanji murders. The village murders were a dalit family of 4 who were brutally killed and molested in 2006. The murder of the family caused outrage amongst the dalit community but was initially covered up by local authorities, the reason for the murder was over the refusal of the family to give away land that was rightfully theirs in order for a road access to another 'higher caste' families house, the family had suffered repeated threats from villagers and the police had not taken them seriously, often refusing to report them, on the 29th of September 2006 the family was violently murdered, the mother and daughter raped repeatedly all this taking place in front of many villagers all condoning the act (2010:101), the murders were covered up by the police service until an outcry from dalit protestors caused the media to out the local authorities. When writing 'Broken people' for the human rights watch Smita Narula (1999) expressed that sexual violence towards dalit women is frequent in India with 'Dalit girls have been forced to become prostitutes for upper-caste patrons and village priests. Sexual abuse and other forms of violence against women are used by landlords and the police to inflict political "lessons" and crush dissent within the community. According to a Tamil Nadu state government official, the raping of Dalit women exposes the hypocrisy of the caste system as "no one practices untouchability when it comes to sex.'" It is not just dalits though that encounter racial violence on a day to day basis, a new form of racism has become visible in Indian cities in particular Delhi towards the north eastern Indians, many of whom have travelled to Delhi for educational purposes. A recent article for India Today, a newspaper writes that 'The north- eastern people in Delhi and NCR continue to face racial discrimination, racial attack, abuse, rape, molestation and killing. Since 2005, around 96 cases of crime against the north-eastern residents in the Capital have been reported' and goes on to argue that many more are either not taken seriously or not reported due to fear and embarrassment (Irfan, 2012). News programs throughout India have broadcasted the issues of racial violence towards north eastern Indians in cities and one raised the question 'are girls from the north east 'soft targets' in their own country?' (Ndtv: 2011) this is in relation to many sexual assaults that north eastern girls are facing in India. An example of these types of sexual crimes can be shown in an article written on the indigenous portal website, naming the case of 'a 19-year-old female student from the northeast province of Manipur was raped and killed by a 34-year-old neighbour man who broke in her room. A few days later, there was another indecent, a 21-year-old female student from the northeast province of Arunachal Pradesh, was violently molested by a group of male students in Delhi, she almost committed suicide' (Indigenous portal, 2010). It is clear then that racially related violence is not taken seriously in India; this is made more apparent by the fact that in many parts of India institutional racism plays a vibrant role in the police service.

North Eastern Indians and the new form of racism in India

Migrants in Indian cities are often treated distastefully, but the new form of racial discrimination which is evident in India's cities today in particular Delhi is towards the migrants of the north eastern states. North eastern migrants are facing discrimination racially because of their difference in appearance as they their colour and facial features are related to Chinese and look more East Asian and South East Asian in appearance. There are popular jibes that the north eastern population face every day in Delhi (the main one being 'chinky'), one news report on the issue by news x live in 2010 shows how one young man

struggles with discrimination making a moving statement when he says 'give a chance for a person to show his true talents rather than defining us by our 'chinky' features, or yellow skin'. Another young woman says she faced racial taunts and insults daily saying 'we get teased just for what we look like and it's a general opinion in North India that women like us 'chinkies' are easy' meaning that they are sexually available. The report by news x, also highlighted that 'a study conducted in Delhi reveals as many as 86 percent of people from the North East face discrimination in their everyday lives', including discrimination in the work place, from landlords and generally when taking part in daily activities. These accounts show how discrimination for north eastern Indians is obvious and that assumptions made about north eastern women are dangerous. We have seen previously when looking at racially related violence that the north eastern Indian women have been victims of sexually related crimes, most likely due to these notions put forward by some Indians that they are easy and sexually provocative. In fact, the problem in India has provoked the implementation of the north east support centre and helpline (NESCH) which offers a support number to call in dealing with racial discrimination. The web page lists a number of incidents of rape, murder and other statistical evidence of racial bias from crime statistics as well as many editorials on the issue allowing for education on the issue. One such editorial from February 2012, states that 'Delhi is definitely not a safe place for women but more than one third of the crimes against women in the capital of the country are against girls from the North East region and hereby hangs a tale'. Women are hailed at across the streets, 'a college girl, named Marngam, said, she heard indecent and obscene language from time to time when walking on the streets in Delhi, they called her "Chinese Whore "Thai Bar worker", even being physically touched in the streets, and it has become part of daily life, she said she could only try to be patient and accept it' (Indigenous portal, 2010). Madhu Chandra (2011) expresses his concern of this form of racial discrimination will only continue and get worse due to higher levels of migration into the capital of Delhi, believing that from recent migration records in the next five years there could be 5,000,000 north eastern migrants into Delhi. Chandra links the racism towards the north eastern Indians with that of the dalits making the valid point that 'one must also remember that India is a caste-based society. Caste still runs and controls most segments of Indian society. The racial discrimination and sexual violence faced by North East communities, one might suggest, are also reflections of this caste-based society. Patriarchal and caste-based Indian societies often have the impression that young people from the North East are polluting people socially, culturally and religiously. They might be forgetting that North Easterners, despite differences in appearance, dress code, or culture, are also fellow citizens, and a part of Indian society. Such a discriminating mindset violates the inspirational ideal of "Unity in Diversity" in Indian Culture.' We can see from this evidence that the racial discrimination towards the people of the north east in India's cities affects all aspects of life, many of the migrants into Delhi are students and after their studies have difficulty finding work simply due to the way they look. Chandra emphasises this point by adding that 'Youngsters working in unorganised private sectors and business establishment as sales assistants face sexual harassment from employers and senior managers. Sometimes they work extra hours without pay, their salaries are delayed or denied, and they are suspended from their jobs without explanation' (2011). Organisations that help north eastern victims of racial abuse, such as the NESCH have said that they believe not enough is being done by the authorities. A project report done by NESCH on 'North East Migration and Challenges in National Capital: City's silent racial attack on its own countrymen' (2011) found that "Official apathy" and "bias amongst the law enforcing agencies" are the major issues allowing the problem to continue and perhaps worsen.

The racialisation of beauty in contemporary India

In contemporary India, skin whitening procedures are blossoming with the population of India going to extreme lengths to be fairer. This begs the question, are Indians inherently racist towards each other and is darker skin a thing of the past. On every street corner in the bustling cities of India there is an advertisement for skin whitening products, with an increasingly thriving economy, the use of skin whitening products is becoming a normal skin routine in India today. Munshi on her book on the 'modern' Indian woman shows that the beauty industry in India is a huge market saying that 'as global media flows become part of the lexicon of contemporary India' (2001:79). Garner (2009) points out that skin whitening products have been available since the late nineteenth century, India has become a massive consumer of these products, 'by 2007 skin lighteners were worth around \$318 million' and 'Melwani (2008) reports that the country manager for L'Oreal India told the times that half of its market was accounted for by skin whitening creams, and that 60-65% of Indian women were daily users of these products' (2009:124). The media plays a huge role in the importance of having light skin in India with many young successful, good looking Indians in the public eye being very fair, the controversial mini films used to advertise the duly titled Ponds 'white beauty' cream in India included a number of household names the Bollywood actors Saif Khan, Priyanka Chopra, and Neha Dhupia to show that by using the cream you will be successful in becoming more

beautiful and in doing so will find love. Reddy (2007) looks into the influences of 'Femina', India's most widely circulated English language magazine by looking at the globalization of India and how this has affected modern India in terms of beauty. Femina prides itself of being typically Indian, that it reflects the current Indian woman, promoting the traditional Indian look however, like many magazines throughout India, it fails to show traditional colour and instead promotes lighter skin. Reddy refers to an advertisement for Hindustan Lever (the Unilever branch in India) which 'paradoxically claims that achieving fairness is less a matter of production and more a matter of making visible the 'hidden' fairness that Indian women already have. Fair & Lovely 'gets gently absorbed and supplements your body's natural supply of fairness vitamin in your skin' (2009:72). An Indian documentary channel 101 east, developed a programme on the phenomenon of skin lightening, raising the questions of why India is so obsessed with being pale and raising the question are skin whitening products really fair and lovely or 'unfair and ugly' (101 east, 2010). Dr Anjali Monteiro of the Tata institute of social sciences puts forward her opinion that these products marginalize other forms of appearance and women who are not fair are made to suffer and feel inferior. According to 101east dusky or darker women are seen as sexually provocative, unlike the fairer more "wholesome" girls and when it comes to advertisements Pralhad Kakkar an advertising film director appearing in the documentary goes on to say that all of his clients specify that actors and actresses in their advertisements should be fair in fact the documentary later goes on to say that the negative roles in films and advertisements are almost always given to a darker skinned actor or actress. Advertisements for skin whitening products are particularly alarming with most of them showing women, who after using the products have a greater job, or gained a husband and in general having a life bettering experience. Does this not promote the concept that whiter women have better lives, and maybe even promotes the idea that when a person is darker skinned they are not employable, suitable for marriage and all in all not a valuable person. Perhaps the most intuitive way by which we can really see how deep the issue has delved into Indian culture is, is in the matrimonial advertisements. Looking at a number of popular matrimonial websites in 2012, almost all of the advertisements either state that they are a fair female or that they are looking for one, for example 'seeks proposals from fair, educated girl' or 'groom wanted for a pretty, very fair, 32 yr old daughter', colour and caste stand side by side in these advertisements and are both looked for in high doses. It is not just women that have become fanatical about skin lightening but men too, with the Indian cosmetic company Emami launching 'fair and handsome' in 2005, endorsing bollywood hero Shahrukh Khan to promote it, statistics show that the product has been hugely successful with a rise of 43% yearly (101east). It is important to emphasise that the desire for fair skin in India has always been a prominent one, with the caste system mentioned earlier playing an influential role in how India sees race today. Traditionally in India, fair skin is linked with power, success and aristocracy, at the top of the caste hierarchy, darker skin was associated with the untouchables and lower castes that were out in the sun working in menial labour. Of course we should not brush aside the influences of British colonial rule on the subcontinent, with many people believing many of the social principles of the period of British power still remain today, in particular equating fair skin with supremacy and achievement. Raising the debate of whether or not the concept of beauty has everything to do with relationships of power and Garner (2009) evokes this when making the statement 'there are different explanations within each culture as to exactly why a lighter complexion is so desirable that people use toxic chemicals to achieve this goal, the main role must go to the legacy of western domination of the rest of the world for centuries'. It is clear that the collaboration of colonial rule and the association of dalits as having darker skin has resulted in a culture which rejects a darker skinned population.

It is clear then from the points made that racialisation in India is unlike anywhere else in the world, its complex forms of racism can date back to a system which has been ingrained in India for generations. Due to this and the fact that the caste system has developed through Hinduism, it is important to understand that it has withstood opposition and lives on in India and is most likely to stay for many more years. The majority of Indians believe in the caste system and because of this, an intense form of racism has been visible in India, the discrimination of the dalits. Many people in India including the government dispel the fact that it is a form of racism and instead believe the caste system to be merely a social hierarchy. We can see from the evidence displayed in this essay however, that the ongoing discrimination allows for no other description. The dalits often live in fear for their lives if they do not live under the strict untouchable rules, they are repeatedly mistreated and there is no government or religious institution that fights their corner. Of course we must recognise that the Indian government have acknowledged it is wrong but they have not answered the cries of so many, there are a mere few opportunities in the government system with quotas supposedly providing jobs, but the extreme poverty dalits face often mean there is no case to get there. The legal system also fails the Dalits as it lets horrendous crimes upon them slip through the net, we have seen how the corrupt police system has no limits when rejecting the dalits. Amongst this form of racism lies the fact that India is not welcoming to migrants with the influx of north eastern Indians to Delhi showing that

anyone that looks different in India falls victim to an array of physical and verbal abuse. The inheritance of the belief that the paler you are the better you are in India has allowed for a multibillion dollar market in skin whitening products throughout India, giving us a clear answer that Indians are racist through and through, of course this has spilled through the history of India and resulted from years of colonial rule but mostly from the long-standing caste system. In India if you are darker skinned you face discrimination, the assumption in India is that the fairer your skin the better your life will become. All these factors lead to one clear view that there are many ways in which India is racist stemming from years of ideology, but what is perhaps most interesting is that the Indian nation is racist to their own people.

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