America's 'untouchables': the silent power of the caste system

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In the winter of 1959, after leading the Montgomery bus boycott that arose from the arrest of Rosa Parks and before the trials and triumphs to come, Martin Luther King Jr and his wife, Coretta, landed in India, at Palam Airport in New Delhi, to visit the land of Mohandas K Gandhi, the father of nonviolent protest. They were covered in garlands upon arrival, and King told reporters: “To other countries, I may go as a tourist, but to India I come as a pilgrim.”

He had long dreamed of going to India, and they stayed an entire month. King wanted to see for himself the place whose fight for freedom from British rule had inspired his fight for justice in America. He wanted to see the so-called “untouchables”, the lowest caste in the ancient Indian caste system, whom he had read about and had sympathy for, but who had still been left behind after India gained its independence the decade before.

He discovered that people in India had been following the trials of his own oppressed people in the US, and knew of the bus boycott he had led. Wherever he went, the people on the streets of Bombay and Delhi crowded around him for an autograph. At one point in their trip, King and his wife journeyed to the southern tip of the country, to the city of Trivandrum in the state of Kerala, and visited with high-school students whose families had been untouchables. The principal made the introduction.

“Young people,” he said, “I would like to present to you a fellow untouchable from the United States of America.”

King was floored. He had not expected that term to be applied to him. He was, in fact, put off by it at first. He had flown in from another continent, and had dined with the prime minister. He did not see the connection, did not see what the Indian caste system had to do directly with him, did not immediately see why the lowest-caste people in India would view him, an American Negro and a distinguished visitor, as low-caste like themselves, see him as one of them. “For a moment,” he later recalled, “I was a bit shocked and peeved that I would be referred to as an untouchable.”

Then he began to think about the reality of the lives of the people he was fighting for – 20 million people, consigned to the lowest rank in the US for centuries, “still smothering in an airtight cage of poverty,” quarantined in isolated ghettoes, exiled in their own country.

And he said to himself: “Yes, I am an untouchable, and every negro in the United States of America is an untouchable.” In that moment, he realised that the land of the free had imposed a caste system not unlike the caste system of India, and that he had lived under that system all of his life. It was what lay beneath the forces he was fighting in the US.

▲Martin Luther King Jr visiting India in 1959. Photograph: Rangaswamy Satakopan/AP

What Martin Luther King Jr, recognised about his country that day had begun long before the ancestors of our ancestors had taken their first breaths. More than a century and a half before the American Revolution, a human hierarchy had evolved on the contested soil of what would become the United States – a concept of birthright, the temptation of entitled expansion that would set in motion what has been called the world's oldest democracy and, with it, a ranking of human value and usage.

It would twist the minds of men, as greed and self-reverence eclipsed human conscience and allowed the conquering men to take land and human bodies that they convinced themselves they had a right to. If they were to convert this wilderness and civilise it to their liking, they decided, they would need to conquer, enslave or remove the people already on it, and transport those they deemed lesser beings in order to tame and work the land to extract the wealth that lay in the rich soil and shorelines.

To justify their plans, they took pre-existing notions of their own centrality, reinforced by their self-interested interpretation of the Bible, and created a hierarchy of who could do what, who could own what, who was on top and who was on the bottom and who was in between. There emerged a ladder of humanity, global in nature, as the upper-rung people would descend from Europe, with rungs inside that designation – the English Protestants at the very top, as their guns and resources would ultimately prevail in the bloody fight for North America. Everyone else would rank in descending order, on the basis of their proximity to those deemed most superior. The ranking would continue downward until one arrived at the very bottom: African captives transported in order to build the New World and to serve

the victors for all their days, one generation after the next, for 12 generations.

There developed a caste system, based upon what people looked like – an internalised ranking, unspoken, unnamed and unacknowledged by everyday citizens even as they go about their lives adhering to it and acting upon it subconsciously, to this day. Just as the studs and joists and beams that form the infrastructure of a building are not visible to those who live in it, so it is with caste. Its very invisibility is what gives it power and longevity. And though it may move in and out of consciousness, though it may flare and reassert itself in times of upheaval and recede in times of relative calm, it is an ever-present through-line in the country's operation.

A caste system is an artificial construction, a fixed and embedded ranking of human value that sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of others, on the basis of ancestry and often of immutable traits – traits that would be neutral in the abstract, but are ascribed life-and-death meaning in a hierarchy favouring the dominant caste whose forebears designed it. A caste system uses rigid, often arbitrary boundaries to keep the ranked groupings apart, distinct from one another and in their assigned places.

Across time and culture, the caste systems of three very different countries have stood out, each in their own way. The tragically accelerated, chilling and officially vanquished caste system of Nazi Germany. The lingering, millennia-long caste system of India. And the shape-shifting, unspoken, race-based caste pyramid in the US. Each version relied on stigmatising those deemed inferior in order to justify the dehumanisation necessary to keep the lowest-ranked people at the bottom, and to rationalise the protocols of enforcement. A caste system endures because it is often justified as divine will, originating from a sacred text or the presumed laws of nature, reinforced throughout the culture and passed down through the generations.

As we go about our daily lives, caste is the wordless usher in a darkened theatre, the flashlight cast down the aisles, guiding us to our assigned seats for a performance. The hierarchy of caste is not about feelings or morality. It is about power: which groups have it and which do not. It is about resources: which caste is seen as worthy of them, and which are not; who gets to acquire and control them, and who does not. It is about respect, authority and assumptions of competence: who is accorded these, and who is not.

As a means of assigning value to entire swaths of humankind, caste guides each of us, often beyond the reaches of our awareness. It embeds into our bones an unconscious ranking of human characteristics, and sets forth the rules, expectations and stereotypes that have been used to justify brutalities against entire groups within our species. In the American caste system, the signal of rank is what we call race, the division of humans on the basis of their appearance. In the US, race is the primary tool and the visible decoy – the frontman – for caste.

▲Racial segregation at a bus station in North Carolina in 1940. Photograph: PhotoQuest/Getty Images

Race does the heavy lifting for a caste system that demands a means of human division. If we have been trained to see humans in the language of race, then caste is the underlying grammar that we encode as children, as when learning our mother tongue. Caste, like grammar, becomes an invisible guide not only to how we speak, but to how we process information – the autonomic calculations that figure into a sentence without our having to think about it. Many of us have never taken a class in grammar, yet we know in our bones that a transitive verb takes an object, that a subject needs a predicate, and we know without thinking the difference between third-person singular and third-person plural. We might mention "race", referring to people as black or white or Latino or Asian or indigenous, when what lies beneath each label is centuries of history, and the assigning of assumptions and values to physical features in a structure of human hierarchy.

What people look like – or rather, the race they have been assigned, or are perceived to belong to – is the visible cue to their caste. It is the historic flashcard to the public, showing how people are to be treated, where they are expected to live, what kinds of positions they are expected to hold, whether they belong in this section of town or that seat in a boardroom, whether they should be expected to speak with authority on this or that subject, whether they will be administered pain relief in a hospital, whether their neighbourhood is likely to adjoin a toxic waste site or to have contaminated water flowing from their taps, whether they are more or less likely to survive childbirth in the most advanced nation in the world, whether they may be shot by authorities with impunity.

Caste and race are neither synonymous nor mutually exclusive. They can and do coexist in the same culture, and serve to reinforce each other. Caste is the bones, race the skin. Race is what we can see, the physical traits that have been given arbitrary meaning and become shorthand for who a person is. Caste is the powerful infrastructure that holds each group in its place.

Caste is fixed and rigid. Race is fluid and superficial, subject to periodic redefinition to meet the needs of the dominant caste in what is now the US. While the requirements to qualify as white have changed over the centuries, the fact of a

dominant caste has remained constant from its inception – whoever fit the definition of white, at whatever point in history, was granted the legal rights and privileges of the dominant caste. Perhaps more critically and tragically, at the other end of the ladder, the subordinated caste, too, has been fixed from the beginning as the psychological floor beneath which all other castes cannot fall.

Caste is not a term often applied to the US. It is considered the language of India or feudal Europe. But some anthropologists and scholars of race in the US have made use of the term for decades. Before the modern era, one of the earliest Americans to take up the idea of caste was the antebellum abolitionist and US senator Charles Sumner, as he fought against segregation in the north. “The separation of children in the Public Schools of Boston, on account of color or race,” he wrote, “is in the nature of Caste, and on this account is a violation of Equality.” He quoted a fellow humanitarian: “Caste makes distinctions among creatures where God has made none.”

We cannot fully understand the current upheavals, or almost any turning point in American history, without accounting for the human pyramid that is encrypted into us all. The caste system, and the attempts to defend, uphold or abolish the hierarchy, underlay the American civil war and the civil rights movement a century later, and pervade the politics of the 21st-century US. Just as DNA is the code of instructions for cell development, caste has been the operating system for economic, political and social interaction in the US since the time of its gestation.

In 1944, the Swedish social economist Gunnar Myrdal and a team of the most talented researchers in the country produced a 2,800-page, two-volume work that is still considered perhaps the most comprehensive study of race in the US. It was titled An American Dilemma. Myrdal’s investigation into race led him to the realisation that the most accurate term to describe the workings of US society was not race, but caste – and that perhaps it was the only term that really addressed what seemed a stubbornly fixed ranking of human value.

The anthropologist Ashley Montagu was among the first to argue that race is a human invention – a social construct, not a biological one – and that in seeking to understand the divisions and disparities in the US, we have typically fallen into the quicksand and mythology of race. “When we speak of ‘the race problem in America’,” he wrote in 1942, “what we really mean is the caste system and the problems which that caste system creates in America.”

There was little confusion among some of the leading white supremacists of the previous century as to the connections between India’s caste system and that of the American south, where the purest legal caste system in the US existed. “A record of the desperate efforts of the conquering upper classes in India to preserve the purity of their blood persists to until this very day in their carefully regulated system of castes,” wrote Madison Grant, a popular eugenicist, in his 1916 bestseller, The Passing of the Great Race. “In our Southern States, Jim Crow cars and social discriminations have exactly the same purpose.”

In 1913, Bhimrao Ambedkar, a man born to the bottom of India’s caste system, born an untouchable in the central provinces, arrived in New York City from Bombay. He came to the US to study economics as a graduate student at Columbia, focused on the differences between race, caste and class. Living just blocks from Harlem, he would see first-hand the condition of his counterparts in the US. He completed his

thesis just as the film The Birth of a Nation – the incendiary homage to the Confederate south – premiered in New York in 1915. He would study further in London and return to India to become the foremost leader of the untouchables, and a pre-eminent intellectual who would help draft a new Indian constitution. He would work to dispense with the demeaning term "untouchable". He rejected the term *Harijans*, which had been applied to them by Gandhi, to their minds patronisingly. He embraced the term *Dalits*, meaning "broken people" – which, due to the caste system, they were.

▲A statue of Bhimrao Ambedkar under a flyover in Amritsar, India. Photograph: Narinder Nanu/AFP/Getty Images

It is hard to know what effect his exposure to the American social order had on him personally. But over the years, he paid close attention, as did many Dalits, to the subordinate caste in the US. Indians had long been aware of the plight of enslaved Africans, and of their descendants in the US. Back in the 1870s, after the end of slavery and during the brief window of black advancement known as Reconstruction, an Indian social reformer named Jyotirao Phule found inspiration

in the US abolitionists. He expressed hope "that my countrymen may take their example as their guide".

Many decades later, in the summer of 1946, acting on news that black Americans were petitioning the United Nations for protection as minorities, Ambedkar reached out to the best-known African American intellectual of the day, WEB Du Bois. He told Du Bois that he had been a "student of the Negro problem" from across the oceans, and recognised their common fates.

"There is so much similarity between the position of the Untouchables in India and of the position of the Negroes in America," Ambedkar wrote to Du Bois, "that the study of the latter is not only natural but necessary."

Du Bois wrote back to Ambedkar to say that he was, indeed, familiar with him, and that he had "every sympathy with the Untouchables of India". It had been Du Bois who seemed to have spoken for the marginalised in both countries as he identified the double consciousness of their existence. And it was Du Bois who, decades before, had invoked an Indian concept in channelling the "bitter cry" of his people in the US: "Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house?"

I began investigating the American caste system after nearly two decades of examining the history of the Jim Crow south, the legal caste system that grew out of enslavement and lasted into the early 70s, within the lifespans of many present-day Americans. I discovered that I was not writing about geography and relocation, but about the American caste system – an artificial hierarchy in which most everything that you could and could not do was based upon what you looked like, and which manifested itself north and south. I had been writing about a stigmatised people – 6 million of them – who were seeking freedom from the caste system in the south, only to discover that the hierarchy followed them wherever they went, much in the way that the shadow of caste (as I would soon discover) follows Indians in their own global diaspora.

The American caste system began in the years after the arrival of the first Africans to the Colony of Virginia in the summer of 1619, as the colony sought to refine the distinctions of who could be enslaved for life and who could not. Over time, colonial laws granted English and Irish indentured servants greater privileges than the Africans who worked alongside them, and the Europeans were fused into a new identity – that of being categorised as white, the polar opposite of black. The historian Kenneth M Stampp called this assigning of race a "caste system, which divided those whose appearance enabled them to claim pure Caucasian ancestry from those whose appearance indicated that some or all of their forebears were Negroes". Members of the Caucasian caste, as he called it, "believed in 'white supremacy', and maintained a high degree of caste solidarity to secure it".

While I was in the midst of my research, word of my inquiries spread to some Indian scholars of caste based in the US. They invited me to speak at an inaugural conference on caste and race at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, the town where WEB Du Bois was born and where his papers are kept.

There, I told the audience that I had written a 600-page book about the Jim Crow era in the American south – the time of naked white supremacy – but that the word "racism" did not appear anywhere in the narrative. I told them that, after spending 15 years studying the topic and hearing the testimony of the survivors of the era, I

had realised that the term was insufficient. “Caste” was the more accurate term, and I set out to them the reasons why. They were both stunned and heartened. The plates of Indian food kindly set before me at the reception thereafter sat cold due to the press of questions and the sharing that went on into the night.

At a closing ceremony, the hosts presented to me a bronze-coloured bust of the patron saint of the low-born of India, Bhimrao Ambedkar, the Dalit leader who had written to Du Bois all those decades before.

It felt like an initiation into a caste to which I had somehow always belonged. Over and over, they shared stories of what they had endured, and I responded in personal recognition, as if even to anticipate some particular turn or outcome. To their astonishment, I began to be able to tell who was high-born and who was low-born among the Indian people there, not from what they looked like, as one might in the US, but on the basis of the universal human response to hierarchy – in the case of an upper-caste person, an inescapable certitude in bearing, demeanour, behaviour and a visible expectation of centrality.

On the way home, I was snapped back into my own world when airport security flagged my suitcase for inspection. The TSA worker happened to be an African American who looked to be in his early 20s. He strapped on latex gloves to begin his work. He dug through my suitcase and excavated a small box, unwrapped the folds of paper and held in his palm the bust of Ambedkar that I had been given.

“This is what came up in the X-ray,” he said. It was heavy like a paperweight. He turned it upside down and inspected it from all sides, his gaze lingering at the bottom of it. He seemed concerned that something might be inside.

“I’ll have to swipe it,” he warned me. He came back after some time and declared it OK, and I could continue with it on my journey. He looked at the bespectacled face, with its receding hairline and steadfast expression, and seemed to wonder why I would be carrying what looked like a totem from another culture.

“So who is this?” he asked.

“Oh,” I said, “this is the Martin Luther King of India.”

“Pretty cool,” he said, satisfied now, and seeming a little proud.

He then wrapped Ambedkar back up as if he were King himself, and set him back gently into the suitcase.

Caste: The Lies That Divide Us is published by Allen Lane on 4 August

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