

## *The Ethnicity of Caste*

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### *From Race to Caste to Ethnicity*

It is February, Black History Month. An exhibit has been assembled by the campus' Multicultural and International Student Services Office, and it stands in the downstairs Atrium, inviting attention. I stop to look at what appears to be a somewhat jumbled collection of memorabilia, images, and some short biographies of prominent Black leaders. All nice, but nothing out of the ordinary, I am beginning to think, as I notice suddenly a photograph of the Indian guru Sri Satya Sai Baba set alongside information about Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. The printed narrative accompanying the photograph is entitled "The Dravidians." I read in it that "the term Dravidians describes a large population of blacks, concentrated in various parts of India (mostly in the South)," that these blacks once created "one of the most culturally opulent civilizations in all of Asia," but that they now call themselves Dalit, or the "crushed and broken," having been "plagued and desecrated" by the Hindu faith and the "immoral atrocities of the caste system." Sai Baba, the narrative concludes, is a "Dravidian avatar," whose "teachings are followed by millions around the world."

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The piece is obviously an attempt to draw caste into a larger narrative about racial oppression, while simultaneously celebrating the (presumably) unacknowledged achievements of the oppressed caste group. Far more compelling than the narrative which makes this case, however, is the photograph of Sai Baba, who is perhaps as famous for his Ashram in Puttaparthi, as for his saffron attire and what would be for this context appropriately described as his “Afro.” An inset carries a second photograph, this one of a young, dark-skinned woman, with a cloth wrapped and tucked around her torso in much the same way African women tie their wrappers. Her gaze is defiant—a sharp contrast to Sai Baba’s compassionate demeanour—and her hair unkempt, but it, too, resembles an Afro. So juxtaposed, the two images are meant to serve as metonyms of the distinction and the destitution of “the Dravidians” respectively, while simultaneously establishing the undeniable kinship of India’s lower castes to Africans and so also African Americans: indeed, the kinship of caste to race.

Certainly, such collapsing of caste into race is not a new phenomenon in Indian history. From H. H. Risley’s use of late-nineteenth century European race science in anthropometric research aimed at categorizing and enumerating the castes of India, to Max Müller’s articulation of the Aryan theory of race, to the consequent development of Tamil/Dravidian politics in Tamil Nadu, caste has frequently been redefined and politicized by being drawn into wider discourses about race.<sup>1</sup> But while colonial conceptualizations of

<sup>1</sup> See Peter Robb, ed., *The Concept of Race in South Asia* SOAS Studies in South Asia (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995). As indeed has the discourse about race in the United States drawn on caste at different historical junctures: to advance a pan-Africanist agenda, as in the poster described above, as also to express anti-racist solidarity in the earlier decades of the 20th century and in the context of the Afro-Asian Conference held at Bandung in 1955 (when the interest in Gandhian non-violence drew Black writers’ attention also to the plight of India’s Untouchables). See Sudarshan Kapur, *Raising up a Prophet: The African-American Encounter with Gandhi* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992); Richard Wright, *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1956). In this essay, however, I limit myself to considering the implications of such an alliance for theories of caste, rather than for theories of race.

I am also aware that the term “caste” (or its equivalent) has been used to theorize inequality in colonial Mexico and Latin America, Japan and Rwanda

caste as race were predicated on scientific theories of the latter, often seeking to establish physical links between the castes of India and the races of Europe (even by determining linguistic connections), the present collusion is primarily based on recognizing race and caste as comparable systems of *oppression*. In other words, even though most

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(respectively: John K. Chance and William B. Taylor, "Estate and Class in a Colonial City, Oaxaca in 1792", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 19, 1977, 454–87; George de Voos and Hiroshi Wagatsuma, *Japan's Invisible Race: Caste in Culture and Personality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966); Jacques J. Maquet, *The Premise of Inequality in Ruanda: A Study of Political Relations in a Central African Kingdom* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961)). The use of the term in these contexts has, however, frequently been the subject of intense debate (for instance, see Robert Douglas Cope, *The Limits of Racial Domination: Plebian Society in Colonial Mexico City, 1660–1720* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994); Catherine Newbury, *The Cohesion of Oppression: Clientship and Ethnicity in Rwanda, 1860–1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), and has produced theoretically varied conceptions of caste itself (although in relation to the debates over the WCAR, it is interesting to note that caste is often the term used to draw correlations between racial difference and divisions of labour). Jamieson tells us, for instance, that Spanish colonial *régimen de castas* was a system that categorized people "using a complex mixture of legal status, ethnicity, racial (or physical) categorization, and economic roles" (Ross W. Jamieson, "Bolts of Cloth and Sherds of Pottery: Impressions of Caste in Material Culture of the Seventeenth Century Audiencia of Quito", *The Americas* 60, no. 3, 2004, 431). Patricia Seed avoids use of the term altogether, noting that the central question for the Latin American debate—"how closed must a system be before it is a caste system, and how open before it is a class system?"—"trivialize the discussion of race and class by reducing it to a question of degrees" (Patricia Seed, "The Social Dimensions of Race: Mexico City, 1753", *Hispanic American Historical Review* 62, no. 4, 1982, 602–03). The mere fact that, in Africa, "castes" and "tribes" have given way to "ethnic groups" (now implicated in the Rwandan genocide), and that the concept borrowed in Japan was specifically that of "untouchability," suggest some parallels, but even more densely distinctive histories. Indeed, the specific use of the term "caste" in analyses of African societies once led Claude Meillassoux to ask if there are at all castes in India (Claude Meillassoux, "Are there Castes in India?", *Economy and Society* 2, no. 1, 1973, 89–111). These other "travels" of the term, I would argue therefore, merit either separate investigations or a study focused exclusively on a detailed comparison of the different cases. The present essay references the other applications of caste, race and ethnicity only insofar as they intersect, as the case of the Burakumin in Japan does, with the problem of how to articulate the Indian example of caste with race for the purposes of the WCAR.

Indian observers would question the suggestion that “Dravidians” are racially African (or African-American), many would not reject the poster’s other claim that Dalits, Blacks and people of the “South” in general are similarly disenfranchised, despite their vast cultural differences. That “race” is a socio-cultural construct is by now an axiom of the social sciences, so connections between groups cannot any more be established phenotypically, but they can still be established conceptually, it would seem, paving the way for a resurgent politics of caste.

What specific ideas about race and about caste enable their conceptual conflation in modern Indian political and academic discourses? How is the analytical link between race and caste established, and with what implications? The following essay seeks to explore such issues by examining a contemporary attempt at uniting the two concepts: the debates that preceded the 2001 UN World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR) held in Durban, since the Indian government’s refusal to include caste on the agenda spurred a massive Dalit opposition campaign, and several heated debates about the relationship (or lack thereof) of race to caste. At the heart of the contest is the question of whether or not caste can be re-defined as “racial discrimination based on descent” simply to draw it into the international spotlight.<sup>2</sup> Following from this, my concern is with what Kancha Ilaiah termed the “global mobility” of “caste,” the *means* of its movement from more local to less local contexts, and with the vehicles that transport it across these terrains: aspects of the discourse of race, in conjunction with that of human rights. To some extent, this is an “account of the transplantation, transference, circulation, and commerce” of caste.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, however, this essay is a comment on the oft-heard warning, in theoretical discussions of globalization/transnationalism, against mystifying the “local,” and on the paradox that Stuart Hall names, of marginality as a powerful space, “a space of weak power, but

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Information Service, “Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination concludes 65th session,” 24 August 2004 <http://www.unis.unvienna.org/unis/pressrels/2004/rd985.html> (accessed 2 December 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Edward W. Said, “Traveling Theory”, *Raritan* 1, no. 3, 1982, 41–67.

. . . a space of power nonetheless”.<sup>4</sup> Dalit groups in contemporary India, I argue, by their active interest in forums like the WCAR, certainly are probing just such a context for its possibilities. But they are doing so by appropriating certain ideas about caste and religion that have long been used to mystify the local, make it appear romantic or savage or some combination thereof, quite in the face of current academic proscriptions. “Natives,” we have often been told, “are creatures of the anthropological imagination, “rapidly disappearing” from the ethnographic horizons of even the late 1980s.<sup>5</sup> Ethnographers have long problematized the construction of “natives” as people “somehow incarcerated or confined in [specific] places,” and “by what they know, feel, and believe,” their cultures essentialized, exoticized, totalized.<sup>6</sup> Such critiques have been fully incorporated into the anthropological canon. What, then, are we to make of the fact that those very objectified “natives” are, of their own volition, reclaiming identities that very closely approximate those that ethnographers have put their energies into dismantling? And that they are doing so precisely to resist the conditions of their “incarceration,” both physical and conceptual? Such are also the questions I bring to this essay. My interest, therefore, is less in undoing (once again) local-global/centre-periphery binarisms—since these seem still to frame Dalit strategies—and far more in exploring the “concrete mediations of the two, in specific cases of historical tension and relationship”<sup>7</sup> or how the conversion from one to the other comes about.

To this end, I look to a third descriptor of identity: ethnicity. Glazer and Moynihan wrote in 1975 of ethnicity as “a term still on the move,” and their “sense” of it is as accurate now as it was when they traced, with some puzzlement, the suddenly large relevance of this phenomenon that quite effortlessly overrode (rational)

<sup>4</sup> Stuart Hall, “The Local and the Global”, in *Culture, Globalization and the World System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, ed. Anthony D. King (London: Macmillan, 1991), 34.

<sup>5</sup> Arjun Appadurai, “Putting Hierarchy in Its Place”, *Cultural Anthropology* 3, no. 1, 1988, 39.

<sup>6</sup> Appadurai, “Putting Hierarchy in Its Place”, 41.

<sup>7</sup> James Clifford, “Traveling Cultures”, in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula A. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 101.

class *interest*.<sup>8</sup> The surprise has since vanished, but the presence of several critical commentaries notwithstanding, the question of characterization still remains.<sup>9</sup> My definition of the concept, for the moment, is a simple one. On the one hand ethnicity is “the reach for groundings” within the “post-modern flux of diversity”;<sup>10</sup> on the other it defines “distinctive groups . . . of solidarity,” or strategic alliances demanding recognition, both conceptual and material.<sup>11</sup> My focus is on the cultural ideologies contained within the ethnic

<sup>8</sup> Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan, “Introduction”, to *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience*, ed. Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 1, 7.

<sup>9</sup> The critical literature on theories of ethnicity includes, among others, Marcus Banks, *Ethnicity: Anthropological Constructions* (London: Routledge, 1996); Frederick Barth, “Introduction”, to *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*, ed. Frederick Barth (Boston: Little Brown, 1969), 9–37; Ronald Cohen, “Ethnicity: Problem and focus in Anthropology”, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 7, 1978, 379–403; John L. Comaroff, “Of Totemism and Ethnicity: Consciousness, Practice and the Signs of Inequality”, *Ethnos* 52, 1987, 301–323; Glazer and Moynihan, *Ethnicity*, 1–26; Stanley Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflict and Collective Violence in South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Elizabeth Tonkin, M. McDonald and M. Chapman, ed., *History and Ethnicity* (London: Routledge, 1989); Hans Vermeulen and Cora Cover, ed., *The Anthropology of Ethnicity: Beyond “Ethnic Groups and Boundaries”* (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1994); and Brackette F. Williams, “A Class Act: Anthropology and the Race to Nation across Ethnic Terrain”, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 18, 1989, 401–444. Countless other ethnographies reflect on the concept in culturally and contextually particular ways (for instance, see Roy Richard Grinker, *Houses in the Rainforest: Ethnicity and Inequality among Farmers and Foragers in Central Africa* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994]; Mark Moberg, *Myths of Ethnicity and Nation: Immigration, Work and Identity in the Belize Banana Industry* [Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997]; Newbury, *The Cohesion of Oppression*; Stanley Tambiah, *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986]; Yasuko I. Takezawa, *Breaking the Silence: Redress and Japanese American Ethnicity* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995]; and Vilma Santiago-Irizarry, *Medicalizing Ethnicity: The Construction of Latino Identity in a Psychiatric Setting* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001]).

<sup>10</sup> Hall, “The Local and the Global”, 36, 35.

<sup>11</sup> Talcott Parsons, “Some Theoretical Considerations on the Nature and Trends of Change of Ethnicity”, in *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience*, ed. Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975) 53.

boundary and the impact of these on the changing shape of the boundaries themselves, on tracking how affinities are alternately established and then undone.<sup>12</sup> In his classic pre-civil rights essay on the relationship of caste to race, Gerald Berreman wrote that “[w]ithout denying or belittling the differences,” a comparison of caste and race would yield insights “not only into caste in India, but into a *widespread type of relations between groups*”.<sup>13</sup> That “widespread type of relations between groups”—which is both a “type” with given attributes *and* a process by which relations are constituted—is what I propose the concept of ethnicity best approximates.<sup>14</sup>

The word “ethnicity” is hardly foreign to academic writings on India. Writing also in 1975, Stephen Barnett likened the modern transformations of caste to *ethnicization*.<sup>15</sup> David Washbrook treats religion, regionalism/language, and caste as important sources of “the symbols of ethnicity,” suggesting that the persistence of such politics as well as their “ineffective[ness] in directing the course of modern Indian history” are in different ways marks of Indian modernity.<sup>16</sup> What Washbrook terms “state corporatism”,<sup>17</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty identifies as “modern governmental practices,” but he, too, locates the origins of ethnicity in these.<sup>18</sup> In his introduction to the volume *Caste Today*, C. J. Fuller observes that the process Weber described, whereby status groups can develop into ethnic and then caste groups “is now proceeding in reverse in contemporary India”:

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Barth, “Introduction”, 15.

<sup>13</sup> Gerald D. Berreman, “Caste in India and the United States”, *American Journal of Sociology* 66, no. 2, 1960, 127, emphasis added.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Barth, “Introduction”, 10–17; Grinker, *Houses in the Rainforest*, 13–15; Tonkin, McDonald and Chapman, *History and Ethnicity*, 5–11; Katherine Verdery, “Ethnicity, Nationalism, and State-making. Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: Past and Future”, in *The Anthropology of Ethnicity: Beyond “Ethnic Groups and Boundaries”*, ed. Hans Vermeulen and Cora Cover (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1994), 36.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen A. Barnett, “Approaches to Changes in Caste Ideology in South India”, in *Essays on South Asia*, ed. Burton Stein (Hawaii: University Press of Hawaii, 1975), 158–9.

<sup>16</sup> David Washbrook, “Ethnicity in Contemporary Indian politics”, in *South Asia*, ed. Hamza Alavi and John Harriss (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989), 174.

<sup>17</sup> Washbrook, “Ethnicity in Contemporary Indian politics”, 179.

<sup>18</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

“[c]astes are . . . being historically constructed, or perhaps more aptly being ‘deconstructed,’ as a vertically integrated hierarchy decays into a horizontally disconnected ethnic array”.<sup>19</sup> And finally, for Susan Bayly, the ethnic character of caste lies in its becoming an “urgent moral mandate” in Independent India, “a bond of collective virtues and obligations on the basis of which public-spirited people should take decisive action when they hear the call to arms”.<sup>20</sup> Her reading highlights the tendencies of caste groups to function as pressure groups or lobbies of sorts, emphasizing their propensities “towards rivalry and antagonism”.<sup>21</sup>

Such arguments tend to see ethnicity as a powerful (if somewhat unstable and volatile) re-organizational force, which it no doubt is. Their emphasis on the historical construction of caste, its uneven modern transformations, and in general its *movement* do not, however, account for what seems an equally defining aspect of caste in its modern formations: the tendencies to define the problem of caste in terms of its rigidity, its doctrinally (and therefore historically) given nature, and in general its presumed *stasis*. In other words, the available literature does not incorporate more subjective readings into an understanding of caste as a specific refraction of ethnicity itself.<sup>22</sup> My use of the term “ethnicity” in this context therefore is meant simply to highlight two important and intimately related features of caste in contemporary India: its fluidity, in contrast to its presumed doctrinally-given rigidity, and *therefore* its capacity to strategically deploy established, essentialized notions of itself in a movement that seeks less to undermine caste than to restore dignity to re-claimed caste identities.

I begin by briefly exploring the role of post-independence politics and movements for social reform in enabling critical and increasingly mobile forms of caste politics, indicating the on-going processes by which “caste” has been institutionally made

<sup>19</sup> C. J. Fuller, “Introduction: Caste Today”, in *Caste Today*, ed. C. J. Fuller (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 22, 26.

<sup>20</sup> Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 307.

<sup>21</sup> Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics*, 306.

<sup>22</sup> Comaroff writes that “‘tribe,’ ‘nation’ and ‘race’ are ‘each a particular refraction of ethnicity’” (Comaroff, “Of Totemism and Ethnicity”, 311). I take my cue from his formulation.



and re-made by modern Indian democracy, effectively providing a springboard toward internationalization. In this, I also lay the ground for my reading of caste as a particular formulation of “ethnicity.” The next sections extend this discussion to the events leading up to the WCAR, and then to consider in what new ways caste politics and indeed, the category of caste itself shapes and is shaped by its own recognition of race/ethnicity as dominant (or at least internationally acknowledged) descriptors of social inequity. What arguments are made to take caste to the WCAR, and how do these effectively reformulate the problem of caste and its proposed antidotes? In working through this question, I offer “ethnicity” not as a term to supplant caste nor to override it, but an aid to think through what happens to “caste” as it traverses the global landscapes of modernity; as a means of understanding its paradoxes, and of viewing caste as inherently fluid and performative, a discursive formation as much as a social reality.

### *A Brief History of “Caste”*

Surveying the impact of social and political movements on the Indian caste system in the mid-twentieth century, theorists of caste were beginning to aver that while castes might still exist, the caste *system* was dying. Caste groups, they argued, were moving away from their more traditional relationships of socio-economic interdependence, and toward more competitive models of social interaction. Citing the writings of Edmund Leach and F. G. Bailey, Dumont writes: “If interdependence is replaced by competition, caste is dead. . . There remain groups that one continues to call ‘castes’; but they are set in a different system”.<sup>23</sup> Distinguishing between caste and the caste system, then, is one way to begin speaking about the structural transformation of caste in modern India. For no longer is caste defined in terms of endogamy, heredity and relative rank

<sup>23</sup> Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*, Trans. Mark Sainsbury, Louis Dumont and Basia Gulati (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, [1970] 1998), 227. Dumont clarifies that the competition which becomes a “sign of the transformation of the system” is specifically “between different castes on the politico-economic plane, for competition itself is not unknown in the traditional system” (Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, 227).

(although such identifiers are implied), but as a “political faction” in competition with “other such factions for some common economic or political goal”.<sup>24</sup> Even as the Government of India initiated formal discussions on reservation policies for the “Backward classes” in 1953, what Bailey referred to as caste “categories”—larger groupings which, for all intents and purposes, did not exist except through their constituent subcastes—had begun functioning through the creation of sabhas (caste associations), caste labor unions and welfare societies.<sup>25</sup> Dumont (drawing on Ghurye) described such transformations in terms of the “substantialisation of caste”: bringing about the “transition from a fluid, structural universe in which the emphasis is on interdependence . . . to a universe of impenetrable blocks, self-sufficient, essentially identical and in competition with one-another,” in which “structure seems to yield to *substance*, each caste becoming an individual confronting other individuals”.<sup>26</sup>

What these theorists of caste do not reference by their focus on Indian village society, however, is the fact that the “substantialization of caste” had, by then, over a century of history in the subcontinent, with roots in colonial strategies of enumeration and arrays of related projects to produce systematic, statistical knowledge about the peoples of India. Since these had specific implications for governance and increasingly also for social reform, enumeration and the census played no small role in setting the stage for the substantialization (and politicization) of caste. In privileging the *chaturvarna* system<sup>27</sup> and issues of social precedence and rank over

<sup>24</sup> Edmund Leach, “Introduction: What Should We Mean by Caste”, in *Aspects of Caste in South India, Ceylon and North-West Pakistan*, ed. Edmund Leach (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 6.

<sup>25</sup> F. G. Bailey, “Closed Social Stratification in India”, *European Journal of Sociology* 4, no. 1, 1963, 107–24. See also E. Kathleen Gough, “Caste in a Tanjore Village”, in *Aspects of Caste in South India, Ceylon and North-West Pakistan*, ed. Edmund Leach (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 11–60; Nur Yalman, “The Flexibility of Caste Principles in a Kandyan Community”, in *Aspects of Caste in South India, Ceylon and North-West Pakistan*, ed. Edmund Leach (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 8–112.

<sup>26</sup> Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, 222, 227; emphasis added.

<sup>27</sup> This is the theory, drawn from scriptural sources, that there are four major *varnas* or caste categories: Brahmins (the priestly caste); Kshatriyas (the warrior caste); Vaishyas (the merchant caste); and Sudras (the caste of

functional explanations, the colonial census effectively reinscribed a Brahmanic ideal of caste, thereby ironically “[giving] rise to a competitive politics that began to make caste the basis for political mobilization on a new scale” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>28</sup> Strong anti-Brahmin movements emerged in Madras, Mysore, and Bombay. As early as 1918, the Princely State of Mysore instituted what was to become a precursor to modern Indian affirmative action policies: reservations in colleges and state services for non-Brahmin communities or the “backward classes”.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, by the 1920s, what Eleanor Zelliott calls the “principle of special attention,” was so well established that some caste groups even began educating themselves on how best to answer questions about religious, sectarian, and caste-affiliations.<sup>30</sup> Largely owing to the growing contest over delineations of caste rank, which varied almost as much as caste-relations did amongst the nearly 2.5 million groups listed at the time, caste was eliminated as a category after the 1931 census.<sup>31</sup>

Several decades prior to Indian independence, then, “the caste system” of academic writings was already giving way to a system of another kind, based on the politics of recognition, in which castes increasingly become corporate identities vying with one-another for recognition and resources, all through an emergent discourse about “backwardness.” This transformation was evident even in the manner in which caste society was categorized by the modern Indian State: onto the more traditional *varna-jati* distinctions was mapped a new caste nomenclature, which divided society into Forward

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agriculturalists or labourers). Entirely outside the *chaturvarna* system were the “Untouchables,” who Gandhi would later re-name the “Harijans” or children of god. Although it was near impossible to fit the existing diversity of caste groups into this (effectively fivefold) system, British officials nonetheless relied on it for all-India enumerations, thereby also instituting it as the fundamental structure of Indian caste (Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001], 212–26).

<sup>28</sup> Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 235–36.

<sup>29</sup> Marc Galanter, *Competing Equalities: Law and Backward Classes in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), 27.

<sup>30</sup> Zelliott quoted in Galanter, *Competing Equalities*, 28; Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 49.

<sup>31</sup> Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 243.

Castes (usually Brahmins and other propertied communities) and Backward Classes (BCs), and Scheduled Castes and Schedules Tribes (SCs and STs). The long and complicated history of the evolution of these new categories reflects the complex diversity of caste practices across the country and the difficulties of determining the constitution of “backwardness” at any level beyond the most intimately local.<sup>32</sup> Interestingly, at the national level the new nomenclature developed from the bottom up, with the first groups to be specifically identified being the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. Once both lumped together in a category of “depressed classes,” these groups continued to be described in terms of “untouchability”

<sup>32</sup> Indeed, it bears mentioning that “caste” as it appeared in classic ethnographies had primary significance only in *local* contexts, but continued to coexist with caste in its increasingly substantialized and politicized forms. My claim here is parallel to the one elaborated by C. J. Fuller, who accepts Dumont’s argument that the “the Brahmanic theory of life in the world substantializes things,” but argues that, precisely because substantialization is confined to Brahmanic theories, social order cannot always be conceptualized as a “matter of relations” (Dumont quoted in C. J. Fuller, “The Hindu Pantheon and the legitimation of hierarchy”, *Man* 23, no. 1, 1988, 34). Fuller therefore differentiates Sanskritic from village deities on the grounds that the latter “symbolize the caste system as it exists” in interdependent hierarchies, whereas the former “symbolize a social order in which. . . [such] complementary hierarchical relationships [have] vanished” (Fuller, “The Hindu Pantheon”, 35, 34). This Sanskritic world is primarily a conceptual one, a *theory* of life rather than life itself, and the practice of organizing hierarchical social relations occurs only at the local or village level. At the village level, Peabody characterizes hierarchy as inherently heterogeneous: “possessed [of] multivalent meanings that produced certain ambiguities and contradictions whose tensions became the basis for dissent among various groups with distinctive interests and orientations” (Norbert Peabody, “In Whose Turban does the Lord Reside: The Objectification of Charisma and the Fetishism of Objects in the Hindu Kingdom of Kota”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 33, no. 4, 1991, 752). The ideological differentiation of castes notwithstanding, variations in local practices, nomenclatures, identifications, and the meanings associated with hierarchy meant that commonalities were “neither homogenized nor entirely reducible one to another” (Peabody, “In whose Turban”, 752). Translating these complex local realities of caste into a small handful of categories that were nationally meaningful, then, was very nearly an impossible exercise. It did, however, bring about a politicized form of substantialization that enabled both the transformation of local practice and, paradoxically, its reinforcement. More on these ideas in later sections of this essay.

(itself variously defined) until long after 1936, when they were scheduled by the British. At that time the castes were listed (i.e. scheduled) “for purposes of giving effect to the provisions for special electoral representation in the Government of India Act, 1935,” and the tribes “to permit a policy of insulating them from exploitative or demoralizing conduct with more sophisticated outsiders”.<sup>33</sup> But if these groups were *relatively* straightforward to identify, the same was not true of the Backward communities, since the term “Backward” had been used variously as a descriptor of educational and economic backwardness (identifying all those in need of special treatment) as well as caste backwardness, to signify an intermediary status between “Forward” communities and “untouchables,” and as a synonym for “untouchables.” Following the listing of the Scheduled communities, Galanter observes, two usages of the term become apparent: the first is broader, including all groups who are educationally and economically backward; the second more specifically the “stratum higher than the untouchables,” but still *not forward*,<sup>34</sup> nowadays referred to—quite confusingly—as the category of *Other Backward Classes* (OBCs).<sup>35</sup> “Backwardness” had very specific meaning in local contexts, but remained “vague and unprecedented” at the national level, with “no definite meaning,” and with no backward class organizations or spokespeople to “attempt to define it or employ it”.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Galanter, *Competing Equalities*, 130, 147.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>35</sup> Readers might note that the twin usages reflect the persistent confusion of *class* with *caste* in the new State language of social classification, which appeared to hold that while caste was certainly an element of social (educational, economic) backwardness, it did not exclusively determine social standing. The confusion is compounded by the phonetic kinship of the words “caste” and “class” and the ease with which the one can be replaced with the other, allowing meanings to slip imperceptibly. The issue of which of these categories is primary remains unresolved, embroiled in political/ideological contestations, even if caste is eventually recognized as a determinant of class, as we shall see.

<sup>36</sup> Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 281; Galanter, *Competing Equalities*, 159. Esteemed Indian anthropologist M. N. Srinivas expressed similar views in a now-famous address to the Anthropology section of the Indian Science Congress: “it is time to give serious thought to establishing ‘neutral’ indices of backwardness,” he said, adding that “the criteria of literacy, landownership, and income in cash or grain should be able to subsume

Not only the nomenclature, but equally the themes and tensions that accompanied it carried over predictably into debates about caste in post-Independence India. Following the provision of Article 340 of the newly-framed Constitution, the President appointed Kaka Kalelkar Chair of the First Backward Classes Commission “to investigate the conditions of the socially and educationally backward and the conditions under which they labour” and to recommend measures for their protection and advancement.<sup>37</sup> The inherent vagueness of “backwardness” combined with the absence of any current census data on caste groups and their social standing meant that the Commission had as loose and unwieldy a reality of caste to categorize as did the British census commissioners before it. The concept of “backwardness,” however defined, was familiar enough by now that the Commission was also deluged by numerous communities claiming backward status.<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, the Commission produced a list of 2,399 backward communities in 1955, recommending that the upcoming 1961 census gather caste-related data, and indeed that women, too, be regarded as the equivalent of a backward community. When Kalkekar submitted the Committee’s report to the President, however, he effectively disavowed its conclusions by suggesting “it would have been better if we could determine the criteria of backwardness on principles other than caste”.<sup>39</sup> In this, he reflected not just his own views, but also those of other members of the Commission who had previously recorded their dissent. The Home Minister would later remark that such emphasis on caste as the Report had would only heighten the “dangers of separatism,” and that although caste was without doubt the bane of Indian society, the official recognition of specific castes would serve only to perpetuate, and not to dismantle, caste as a social institution.<sup>40</sup> The Report was introduced in Parliament,

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all classes of backwardness” (quoted in Galanter, *Competing Equalities*, 175, fn 109).

<sup>37</sup> Constitution of India, Article 340. <http://lawmin.nic.in/coi/coiason29july08.pdf>

<sup>38</sup> Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 283.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Galanter, *Competing Equalities*, 172.

<sup>40</sup> Galanter, *Competing Equalities*, 173. Formerly the Scheduled Castes Federation; the brainchild of Ambedkar, the RPI was formed in 1957 and was the only political party representing Indian Untouchables until the formation of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) some decades later.

but tabled indefinitely. Consequently, in 1961, the Home Ministry delegated the responsibility of evolving criteria on backwardness to individual States, ordering that lists of backward communities be drawn up, and State quotas of reservation be fixed accordingly. Within the next decade, ten States had followed the Ministry's order, and reservations for the educationally and socially "backward" were becoming commonplace.<sup>41</sup>

At the same time as the debate over the issue of reservations was separating and classifying caste groups, caste organizations were drawing these same diverse groups together politically. The late 1960s and 1970s were years of Marxist agitations and Communist Party-led agrarian uprisings all over India, largely in response to the failures of post-independence land reforms to effectively dismantle feudalism. A Marxist group calling itself the Dalit Panthers—clearly inspired by the Black Panther movement in the United States—was one such, convened in Maharashtra in 1972, at the same time as Dalit writers were transforming the literary landscape through "little magazines" movements. While such movements emerged quite independently of one-another, they were each in some measure spurred by the perceived failure of the Republican Party of India to speak to the interests of the "Dalit masses," and the emergence of backward caste "kulaks" and a new class-caste hierarchy in the reorganized agrarian landscape. At least some Dalit Panther ideologues and several Marathi Dalit writers therefore linked the issue of untouchability with that of class, finding natural allies amongst the poor of any religious or caste group: otherwise put, their critique was far more anti-bourgeois than anti-brahmin.<sup>42</sup> By the time that Kanshi Ram established the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP; literally, "Party of the Majority") just over a decade later in Uttar Pradesh, however, the foci of caste-based politics were clearly shifting. On one level, there was still the critique of new class hierarchies among caste groups, this time those that were being produced by State-adopted policies of reservation. The BSP

<sup>41</sup> P. C. Chatterji, "Reservations: Theory and Practice", in *Region, Religion, Caste, Gender and Culture in Contemporary India*, ed. T. V. Satyamurthy (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 293–313.

<sup>42</sup> Oliver Mendelsohn and Marika Viczian, *The Untouchables: Subordination, Poverty and the State in Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 214.

was also instrumental in gradually expanding the term “Dalit” into “Dalit-bahujan,” borrowing terminology from the non-brahmin movements of the 1920s in order to forge a political unity between Dalits, OBCs, and indeed also (religious) minorities.<sup>43</sup> But the rhetoric of Dalit-bahujan social critique was growing ever stronger, and it was focused far less on class than on caste: one BSP slogan claims “Brahmin, Bania, Thakur Chor, Baki sab DS-Four” naming all the upper castes thieves, and all the rest victimized—but now politically organized—Dalits.<sup>44</sup> Even cursory analysis of BSP rhetoric indicates that the Party saw only one battle-line, and it fell between the upper castes and Dalit-bahujans. In fact, the BSP’s critique of class was interestingly framed in terms of caste, representing a near-complete reversal of the Dalit Panthers’ analysis: even though the ruling classes were by now comprised of diverse castes thanks to reservations, Kanshi Ram argued, ruling ideologies were still Brahminical, and it was this Brahmin hegemony, far more than caste structures themselves, that needed to be dismantled.

If wide caste alliances had become important in the early 1970s and all the more so in the 1980s, the BSP’s initial successes were still limited, indicating, among other things, that the idea of a caste-based politics had not yet firmly taken root. Despite the clear role caste had come to play in electoral politics, it appeared that even the most educated among the OBCs did not recognize the possibility or potential of a bahujan electoral constituency.<sup>45</sup> All this would change in 1991, however, when the Janata Party-led National Front’s decision to implement the second Backward Classes Commission’s recommendations produced an unexpectedly dramatic response from upper-caste Hindu youth and was strongly opposed by the

<sup>43</sup> Gail Omvedt, “The Anti-Caste Movement”, in *Region, Religion, Caste, Gender and Culture in Contemporary India*, ed. T. V. Satyamurth (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 343.

<sup>44</sup> Literally translated, the slogan would read: Brahmins, Banias and Thakurs (all representative of the upper-castes in Uttar Pradesh) are thieves, and all the rest belong to DS4, or the Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti (DSSSS), a front organization that was also led by Kanshi Ram prior to the formation of the BSP (Omvedt, “The Anti-Caste Movement”, 346). As such, the slogan is as much about Dalit victimization as it is a call to all backward caste communities to join forces against the upper castes.

<sup>45</sup> Kancha Ilaiah, “BSP and Caste as Ideology”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 19 March 1994, 668–69.



Party's coalition partner, the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party, known for its advocacy of "Hindu nationalism"). The second Backward Classes Commission—better known as the Mandal Commission—was constituted in 1976 by the Janata Party, keeping an electoral promise made in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's infamous Emergency.<sup>46</sup> As early as 1978, and with upper caste discontentment over reservation policies rising in the background, the Commission's Report identified 3,743 "Backward" communities, recommending 27 per cent reservation for OBCs, apart from the constitutionally mandated 22.5 per cent quota for SC/ST communities in government and public sector jobs, and government-supported educational institutions. These recommendations, if implemented, would bring the total percentage of reservations to 49.5 per cent, just under the Supreme Court cap (given in a 1963 ruling) of 50 per cent. But the Janata Party's electoral fortunes were such that the Mandal Report did not play much of a role in the growing debate over caste reservations until 1991, when the announcement of its implementation made Mandal the focus of furious national debate. This was not by any means the first time that reservation policies had been publicly protested. The 1980 Ahmedabad agitations, for instance, had been far more violent and had continued for much longer (nearly three months), bringing professionals and students alike onto the streets. What was perhaps unique about these agitations, what stuck in the mental images of the time, was one aspect of their method: self-immolation, images of which were carried far and wide by the print media, requiring almost no language to convey meaning. Photographs of upper-caste youth dousing themselves with kerosene and then setting themselves alight in public protest of Mandal reservation quotas, and then pictures of burned and charred bodies on hospital stretchers were a daily front-page feature in all the Indian papers, and on several foreign ones as well. Accompanying these images was a storm

<sup>46</sup> Indira Gandhi declared a national Emergency in 1975 following Congress' loss of a crucial by-election in Gujarat and the Allahabad High Court's decision that found her guilty of electoral malpractice in a prior election. The Emergency was ended in 1977, and its impact on activism in India was terrific: most civil liberties organizations have their origins in years just after, also laying the ground for rearticulations of feminist politics, and later Dalit activism as well (see Reddy, *Religious Identity and Political Destiny*).

of rhetoric on the “Mandalization” of India, the brain-drain the country would suffer, and on the absolute devaluation of any idea of “merit.” So fierce was the rhetoric, and so powerful the images, it is no wonder that the word “Dalit,” and with it an entirely new *political* understanding of caste, came into vogue following the Mandal agitations. Mandal did not by itself precipitate such an understanding, but it did give incipient Dalit groups a new sense of urgency, conscientizing the OBC community, and “bahujanising” or welding together, as Kanshi Ram never independently could, SCs, STs, and OBCs into a broad social base. The door was opened, from that point on, to an openly bahujan-based, bahujan-controlled electoral politics.

One final factor in the politicization of caste bears exploring: the rise of Hindu ethnicist politics, specifically as this found public expression and support in the BJP’s Ramjanmabhoomi/ Babri Masjid Campaign. In September 1990, then BJP President L. K. Advani began a *rath yatra* or “pilgrimage on a chariot” visiting not Hindu shrines, but sites at which Hindu temples had been destroyed by Muslim invaders and rulers of various dynasties, sometimes replaced by mosques. His journey was to crisscross Northern India and end at the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, built by the Mughal emperor Babur on what some believe to be the site of a temple marking the birthplace of the much-loved Hindu deity, Rama. The BJP had pledged to replace the existing mosque with another Hindu temple. Violence and controversy followed the rath almost from the outset, and Advani never completed his journey. Nonetheless, the rath yatra did in some senses succeed in its mission of unifying a fractured Hindu community around such themes as historical hurt and political wrongdoing, *even as* tensions between upper and lower castes were playing themselves out dramatically on the streets of New Delhi. The implications of this contradiction were not lost on the Dalit intellectual community: as Kancha Ilaiah would write, in the “Mandal Yuga (era of Mandal). . . [upper caste Hindus] abuse us as meritless creatures, but in their Ramrajya [ideal State] we are defined again as Hindus”.<sup>47</sup> The “Mandal-Masjid years,” as the early

<sup>47</sup> Kancha Ilaiah, “Productive Labour, Consciousness and History”, in *Subaltern Studies IV*, ed. Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 166. Ilaiah repeats much the same idea in a later essay when he suggests that opponents of Mandal reservations “undermine[d]

1990s came to be known, were therefore a period during which Dalit political identity was consolidated, partly as a consequence of a developing Dalit social critique, the urgency of which seemed to be underscored by the rise of Hindu ethnicism.

Fuller has observed that “the strengthening of Hindu communal identity in India today is, at least in part, an extension, rather than a negation of the ethnicization of caste”.<sup>48</sup> I would add that the process of ethnicization is even more circular than he suggests: that the strengthening of Dalit identity is *also* an extension, rather than a negation, of the ethnicization of Hindu identity. Writes Comaroff, “the construction of the collective self . . . depends on its differentiation from the collective other,” and this “Janus-faced nature of ethnic consciousness” means that ethnic groups don’t just experience the world in terms of “we-them relations,” but play a role in producing them.<sup>49</sup> Each new consolidation of identity, in other words, by its very oppositional nature spurs its Others toward consolidation, too. As M. N. Srinivas, following G. S. Ghurye, suggested years before, caste was not about to disappear, but was adapting itself variously in response to prevailing social moods.

### *The Ethnicity of Caste*

This brief (and somewhat simplified) history indicates, if nothing else, that “caste” has been in a constant state of flux for at least

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the Mandalization process” by creating the discursive binary “secularism vs. communalism,” where the ‘secular’ was synonymous with ‘Hindu’ and ‘Brahmin’ (Kancha Ilaiah, “Towards the Dalitisation of the Nation”, in *Wages of Freedom: Fifty Years of the Indian Nation-State*, ed. Partha Chatterjee [New Delhi: Oxford University Press 1998], 283). Dalits were therefore presented with an impossible choice and forced into an uncomfortable alliance with the very Hindus who would reject their demands for recognition in the Mandal debates. Ilaiah’s position is echoed by Dalit newspaper columnist (and Ilaiah-critic) Chandrabhan Prasad, who writes that “when the question of social transformation is being raised, we [Dalits] are being told we must join the ‘secular brigade’ to defeat ‘communal fascism,’ and probably they mean that the social questions can be tackled later” (Chandra Bahn Prasad, “Social Fascism Is Real: Communal Fascism a Mischievous Construct”, *The Daily Pioneer*, 5–11 September 1999, Op-Ed section).

<sup>48</sup> Fuller, “The Hindu Pantheon”, 25.

<sup>49</sup> Comaroff, “Of Totemism and Ethnicity”, 309; see also Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*.

as long as caste has been a factor in governance. Theorists of various persuasions have commonly argued that in pre-British India, communities were inherently “fuzzy,” which is to say that their boundaries were loose, shifting, and permeable, whereas the modern nation-state with its emphasis on enumeration categorized them into discrete types.<sup>50</sup> This is not to say that identities are no longer indeterminate, as they clearly continue to be in daily interactions, but that there develops a specific relationship between the types used in governmental practice, and the character of the identities governed by them. Ian Hacking has termed the process by which this relationship develops “dynamic nominalism,” whereby “a kind of person [comes] into being at the same time as the kind itself was being invented. . . each egging the other on”.<sup>51</sup> As Dipesh Chakrabarty observes, however, administrative categories do not replace more fluid, local identities, but they do “[reside] alongside, and [are] interlaced with, the more fuzzy sense of community” in mutually constitutive relationships.<sup>52</sup> This interaction is complicated by the fact that—as the above history also indicates—the administrative categories “fixed and officialized” successively by the British, Indian lawmakers and politicians, and indeed also caste groups were anything but clear or uncontested, especially in national contexts. Consequently, even the administrative categories of “caste” have been only unevenly stable, and have therefore given rise to a politics of caste that is ironically neither entirely fixed nor entirely officialized.

The fluidity of “caste,” or more precisely its malleability, I mean to suggest, is neither random nor the only mark of ethnic character. To be sure, theorists have long-since characterized ethnicities as interests motivated by “the pragmatics of calculated choice and opportunism”,<sup>53</sup> noting their tendency to expand (assimilate) and contract (differentiate) to “fill the political space available

<sup>50</sup> This, says Dipesh Chakrabarty, is a practice symptomatic of the modernity of the nation-state (Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity*, 83).

<sup>51</sup> Ian Hacking, “Making Up People”, in *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality and the Self in Western Thought*, ed. Thomas C. Heller, M. Sosna and D. E. Wellbery (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 228.

<sup>52</sup> Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity*, 88.

<sup>53</sup> Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds*, 21; also see Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*.

for [their] expression”.<sup>54</sup> But ethnicities are also widely known to be anchored by narratives of primordality, which emphasize stasis, not flux. These “emotionally charged ideas of inheritance, ancestry and descent, place or territory of origin, and the sharing of kinship . . . made realistic and imaginable by mytho-historical charters”<sup>55</sup> suggest that in their imaginings of themselves, ethnic groups tend to accentuate the primordial and the historically *unchanging*. Indeed, as Comaroff has observed, “ethnicity is always has its genesis in specific historical forces,” *but* “it tends to take on the “natural” appearance of an autonomous force. . . capable of determining the course of social life”.<sup>56</sup> In other words, there is a paradox at the heart of this phenomenon called ethnicity: it is a set of relationships and an accompanying ideology that is always refashioning itself according to historical context and need, but its claims are in the process *naturalized*, their ultimate authority given not by immediate historical context and need but, by their very ahistoricity. It is precisely this tendency of groups to stress their own historical transcendence and strategically deploy immutable ideas about themselves that enables an effective—and effectively fluid—politics. This is certainly true of caste in its present manifestations, with the administrative establishment of caste “types” on the basis of “backwardness” contributing in no small measure to the consolidation of narratives about these “types” in terms of their “backwardness.”<sup>57</sup> The fact that such efforts at categorization are inherently reformist means also that “backwardness” cannot remain an objective criterion for long, as we have seen. It inevitably becomes emotionally and politically charged, transforming the discourse on caste reform from a matter of present and practical necessity into an

<sup>54</sup> Donald L. Horowitz, “Ethnic Identity,” in *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience*, ed. Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975) see also Horowitz, “Ethnic Groups in Conflict” (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

<sup>55</sup> Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds*, 20–21.

<sup>56</sup> Comaroff, “Of Totemism and Ethnicity”, 302, 313.

<sup>57</sup> “To wit,” Comaroff continues, “just as working class black Americans do not view their blackness as a function of their class position, but their class position as a function of their blackness, so underclass Hutu in Rwanda or Kgalagadi in Botswana see their status as being ascribed by virtue of their ethnic affiliation and not vice versa” (Comaroff, “Of Totemism and Ethnicity, 312).

overarching narrative about social suffering and oppression, human rights, social justice and more. And so as caste comes to acquire ethnic character in this sense, so also does it come to be equated with *lower* caste, much in the way critics charge “race” as having been equated exclusively with African Americans or other visible minorities. In this, it is quite in keeping with the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of the ethnic as “designating a racial or other group *within a larger system*”.<sup>58</sup>

### *Setting the Stage for Durban*

It would take a much longer work to fully trace and thread together the mechanisms by which caste communities have variously deployed notions of “backwardness,” and to understand the implications of their redefinitions for present-day caste configurations. To be sure, scholars such as Galanter<sup>59</sup>, Inden<sup>60</sup>, Bayly (1999)<sup>61</sup> and Dirks<sup>62</sup> address this issue within their exhaustive accounts of the historical transmutations of “caste,” Inden and Dirks in particular treating caste as a discursive category. By now, however, there is a need to focus on the international commerce of caste: the ease with which it moves into the photo-spreads of *National Geographic* magazine (as in the June 2003 issue), the agendas of international organizations such as Human Rights Watch, and indeed even into insignificant campus displays on histories of discrimination. No doubt caste is still *the* peculiarly Indian social institution it was for British scholars of past centuries, the “very soul of. . .Hinduism”.<sup>63</sup> While such essentialisms are no doubt derived from British colonial discourse, they are also re-deployments of them in modern, post-colonial, global/international contexts.<sup>64</sup> The remainder of this essay, then, is

<sup>58</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), emphasis added.

<sup>59</sup> Galanter, *Competing Equalities*.

<sup>60</sup> Ronald B. Inden, *Imagining India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990)

<sup>61</sup> Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics*.

<sup>62</sup> Dirks, *Castes of Mind*.

<sup>63</sup> Senart [1930] quoted in Inden, *Imagining India*, 57.

<sup>64</sup> It needs to be clarified here that Orientalist discourse serves as a *medium* for the assemblage and circulation of ideas from several other places, as Appadurai, “Putting Hierarchy in Its Place”, has shown. He writes, of Louis

focused on caste at a contemporary moment at which it claims—and is unevenly granted—the international spotlight, *both* by highlighting its peculiarity to India and by underscoring its alignment with other social groupings, most notably race. The context is the Third UN World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (hereafter WCAR) held in Durban in 2001. This is only one site of the global reconfiguration of caste, but an especially important one both in terms of its impact on caste mobilization in India, and in its mobilization of support for the issue of caste outside India. What became of “caste” in the context of what is now dubbed “Durban discourse” is the subject to which I now turn.

The discussions and debates that preceded the WCAR were precipitated less by the excitement of planning for the Conference than by the Indian Government’s position that caste was not a matter to be taken up at the Conference. Since the UN conference was centered on racism, the argument went, as part of the third UN-designated Decade to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination, caste had no logical place on the country’s agenda. At the Regional Preparatory Meeting held in Tehran earlier that year, Attorney General Soli Sorabjee emphasized the distinction between race and caste, thereby rejecting NGO efforts to connect the two forms of social stratification as “misconceived”.<sup>65</sup> The Government of India argued further that since caste discrimination was constitutionally recognized and prohibited, and that since both State and Central governments had taken steps toward its elimination, discussion of the issue was best left out of inter-governmental forums. This position set the tone and determined much of the direction of the debate that ensued. Was caste indeed comparable to race? The Indian Government had an ally in Andre Beteille, a veteran Indian

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Dumont’s theorizing of Indian hierarchy, that this “leads from India in at least four major topological directions: Africa, in regard to its conception of the parts; ancient Arabia, for its conception of religious segmentation and solidarity; ancient Rome, for its conception of jurial order in the absence of a powerful state; and the South Pacific (via Ceylon) for its conception of the power of *taboo* and the ritual implications of specialization” (Appadurai, “Putting Hierarchy in Its Place”, 45).

<sup>65</sup> Soli J. Sorabjee, “Racism, Name Changing and Toilets”, *Times of India*, 4 March 1993.

social anthropologist, who pondered the wisdom of expanding “racism” to other forms of social exclusion. In so doing, he wrote in *The Hindu*, the UN “is bound to give a new lease of life to the old and discredited idea of race current a hundred years ago”.<sup>66</sup> Not only had the “researches of several generations of anthropologists” concluded that racial classifications were biologically untenable, “[e]very social group cannot be regarded as a race simply because we want to protect it from discrimination.” For Beteille, then, equating caste with race was both “scientifically nonsensical” and “politically mischievous,” for such movement away from specificity would surely open the door to other discriminated linguistic or ethnic groups from all parts of the world to claim themselves victims of racism.<sup>67</sup>

Beteille’s article was met with a range of responses, some calling his social scientific approach pedantic, even bordering on the offensive, but most clarifying that indeed, castes are not races (biologically defined), but that *casteism* is surely still comparable to racism. In other words, assuming that “race” does continue to exist as a social reality, the experiences associated with it are virtually indistinguishable from those produced by caste. Both race and caste are forms of *discrimination* linked to *descent*, to anticipate the terminology that allows the concepts to be articulated for/by the UN. Indeed, this is the point that Beteille misses when he insists that “[w]e cannot throw out the concept of race by the front door when it is misused for asserting social superiority and bring it in again through the back door to misuse it in the cause of the oppressed.”<sup>68</sup> Even the UN’s stringing together of such

<sup>66</sup> Andre Beteille, “Race and Caste”, *The Hindu*, 10 March 2001.

<sup>67</sup> Dumont, too, might have been an ally in this conversation, since he, too, several decades before argued against the comparison of caste to race—or, perhaps more accurately, for a comparative sociology that “take[s] into account the values that different societies have, so to speak, chosen for themselves”: in India, the principle of inequality, and in the United States the ideal of egalitarian democracy (Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, 266).

<sup>68</sup> Oddly none of the many critiques written at this time make reference to 1960s American discussions of the relationship of caste to race, in the context of an incipient Black Civil Rights movement. Had they known of this literature, Beteille’s critics might also have cited Berreman’s 1960 essay, in which he writes that the presumed difference between race and caste “results from an idealized and unrealistic view of Indian caste [where



terms as “racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance” as “issues at the root of so many conflicts within and between societies”<sup>69</sup> suggests that “race” is far less a biological category than one which extends into the realms of the ethnic and the cultural.<sup>70</sup> The issue, for Dalit activists and intellectuals, is one of prejudice: caste discrimination, they argue, is by now systemic and institutionalized, rests on ethnocentric theories of cultural superiority, results in social segregation, causes sometimes horrific violence and untold forms of social suffering, has specific material consequences, comes attached to notions of purity and pollution—and so for all these reasons, is not only comparable but in fact tantamount to racial discrimination. They argue further that caste, like race, is inherently an economically exploitative system, in which upper caste wealth is amassed by exploiting Dalit labor much as the wealth of the industrialized world was (and still is) produced by exploiting slave, Third World, and immigrant labour. Vijay Prashad writes that the commonality lies “in the way in which these forces of social oppression are related to the economic domain: both [race and caste] are about the denial of the means of production to certain peoples”.<sup>71</sup> Kancha Ilaiah makes an even tighter connection: since “[t]he colonial world benefited from the cheap labour of the adivasis, Dalits, and OBCs, the capitalist west

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it is] viewed as it is supposed to work rather than it does work. . . . The traditional white southerner, asked to describe relations between the races [will provide explanations similar to those] offered for the Indian system by the advantaged” (Berreman, “Caste in India and the United States”, 5).

<sup>69</sup> Mary Robinson, “An Agenda of Hope for Human Rights”, *Times of India*, 13 December 2000.

<sup>70</sup> See also Resolution 2001/11 adopted by the UN Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights at its fifty-third session: “Suggests that the World Conference focus, *inter alia*, on situations of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, related intolerance and ethnic conflict and other patterns of discrimination, such as contemporary forms of slavery, that are based on, *inter alia*, race, colour, social class, minority status, descent, national or ethnic origin or gender, including topics such as: (a) The link between contemporary forms of slavery and racial and other discrimination based on descent” (E/CN.4/SUB.2/RES/2001/11: bullet 12).

<sup>71</sup> Vijay Prashad, “En Route to Durban: Thoughts on Caste and Race”, *Z Net* (Race Watch, 2001). <http://www.zmag.org/prashaddurban.htm> (20 November 2003).

owes a moral responsibility to uplift [the lower castes] as much as the upper castes of India do".<sup>72</sup> The issue of whether *in theory* "caste" is "race" is therefore moot, since it is the experience of caste, the shared structural positioning and the resultant "moral agony," that articulates the two categories. Both are reduced to their oppressions, and located within an economic and social "system" that perpetuates such subjugation.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Kancha Ilaiah, "Durban, Caste, and Indian Democracy", *The Hindu*, 11 June 2001.

<sup>73</sup> Although Gunnar Myrdal was not to my knowledge cited in these discussions, the contemporary debate follows the contours of his 1944 argument in some important ways. For Myrdal, *race* conveyed the appearance of objectivity while masking all its attendant prejudices and rationalizations, much as (reformed) *caste* would later appear in the Indian government's view (See Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, 251–53). For Myrdal, the special value of the term *caste* was that its meaning was already pejorative, able to communicate what other emergent terms like "minority group" were not: permanence, endogamy, rigidity, "drastic restrictions" on freedom (Gunnar Myrdal, with the assistance of Richard Sterner and Arnold Rose, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* [New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1944], 1:674, 667–688). Much the same is true in reverse for contemporary Dalit writers: *race* is the more condemnatory term, or at least the one capable of doing what "caste," grounded in particularity, does not: translate condemnation into social and political action on an international scale, with the aid of the institutional infrastructure built around the need to combat racism. In other words, Myrdal's argument used caste to articulate "the Negro problem" in 1940s America in exactly the way that contemporary Indian writers use race to mobilize opposition to casteism: without, as Dumont has noted and Beteille would later echo, "scientific guarantee," "obscuring comparison" and treating both caste and race in terms of "discrimination,' 'segregation,' etc." (Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, 252). The reversal is of interest because it is not caste, of course, but *race* that is then mobilized through the American civil rights movement and later through the international opposition to South African Apartheid. "Race" that then becomes the standard for comparison and acquires the power of metaphor, not caste. Caste then requires the analogy with race in order to claim a similar visibility, but the matter of making the analogy is by now mediated, as we shall see, by such concepts as "untouchability" and "apartheid," and an array of institutional provisions and processes. Although limitations of space preclude a fuller analysis of the earlier literature and debates on the subject in the American context, it is worth noting here the theories advanced at that time do bear a connection—if somewhat indirect—to the present debates and the means by which contemporary arguments are made.

That Dalit activism should coalesce in this fashion around the WCAR was in some sense not a coincidence. By the time of the Conference, the Dalit movement (loosely termed) is just over a decade old, but it is perhaps the discovery, through that decade, of the limitations of articulating Dalit concerns through the established agendas of women's rights and development, that spurs Dalit intellectuals to search out independent modes of articulation.<sup>74</sup> The controversy stirred by the Mandal Commission Report provided one such opportunity, to be sure, but even here the framework for that debate was defined almost exclusively by the Government, existing laws and constitutional guidelines, and the discourse of affirmative action. Indeed, as the Working Paper on work and descent-based discrimination presented to the UN Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights would later note, "that improvements have taken place cannot be doubted" and the list of actions taken by the Government of India to address caste-based discrimination is long and "impressive."<sup>75</sup> Acknowledging the number of legal provisions either abolishing discriminatory practices or offering protections to disadvantaged communities, but also recognizing the significant lag in attitudinal change and the attendant problems with law enforcement, the focus of the paper and also of Dalit discourse in the post-Mandal era shifts to the "hidden or invisible discrimination that a Dalit would encounter."<sup>76</sup> The dramatic protests by upper caste youth against the implementation of the Mandal recommendations then also served to demonstrate the potential boundaries of caste reform in India, and as such impelled Dalit activists to go a step beyond national consolidation, and look to more International forums and networks for new platforms and sources of support. "Caste," as Shiv

<sup>74</sup> Within these, questions of gender, development, etc. come to be rearticulated, for instance by such organizations as the National Federation for Dalit Women (NFDR), which addresses gender-specific concerns, but now within the framework of Dalit, rather than just feminist, discourse.

<sup>75</sup> United Nations, Goonesekere, Rajendra Kalidas Wimala (hereafter UN/Goonesekere), Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), Commission on Human Rights, Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, 53rd Session, (E/CN.4/Sub.2/2001/16), "Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Indigenous Peoples and Minorities," (14 June 2001), 8.

<sup>76</sup> UN/Goonesekere (E/CN.4/Sub.2/2001/16) 9.

Visvanathan has noted, has long suffered from particularism, or its association in academic and popular discourses as a phenomenon peculiar to the subcontinent.<sup>77</sup> Within that context, too, it was heavily fragmented by the movements and ideologies that had come before: those of poverty/development, gender, and so on. For there to emerge a unified “Dalit discourse” that truly challenged existing epistemological frameworks, there needed to be a conceptual vocabulary that addressed these various other ramifications of caste-realities within India, and that was easily translatable into discourses that enabled a transcendence of the local, even the national.

### *Enter Human Rights*

It is at this juncture that the language of *human rights*, specifically the logic of defining Dalit rights as human rights, becomes the lingua franca of Dalit discourse—interestingly, mirroring trends in international feminist discourses that claim women’s rights as human rights, while simultaneously deviating from feminist paradigms.<sup>78</sup> The National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) was established on 10 December 1998—significantly, World Human Rights Day—with the stated aim of ensuring that “India and the International Community recognize and uphold that Dalit rights are human rights.”<sup>79</sup> The organization adopts an explicitly twofold strategy, focused simultaneously on “the solidarity of Dalits and Dalit movements across the nation and the world,” lobbying all levels of government in India and “statutory bodies of the UN and other international organizations to give top priority to Dalit issues.”<sup>80</sup> This human rights logic then facilitates the convergence of a range of international “organizations, institutions and individuals”

<sup>77</sup> Shiv Visvanathan, “The Race for Caste: Prolegomena to the Durban conference”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 7 July 2001, 2513.

<sup>78</sup> Arvonne S. Fraser, “Becoming Human: The Origins and Development of Women’s Human Rights”, *Human Rights Quarterly* 21, no. 4, 1999, 853–906. Indeed, there’s a whole discourse on the expansion of various rights—women’s, caste, race, even the right to development—into human rights. See Arjun Sengupta, “On the Theory and Practice of the Right to Development”, *Human Rights Quarterly* 24, no. 4, 2002, 837–889 for an analysis of the right to development, for instance.

<sup>79</sup> <http://www.dalits.org/> accessed (3 December 2004).

<sup>80</sup> <http://www.dalits.org/>, accessed (3 December 2004), emphasis added.

working on caste discrimination in isolated fashion, so that the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) is established in 2000 to help continue the work of the NCDHR in India into more global contexts, its motto being to “[work] globally against discrimination based on work and descent.”<sup>81</sup> With it come strengthened alliances with such groups as Amnesty International and especially Human Rights Watch, and therefore also the increasingly common definition of caste in terms of work and descent. By this time, too, the focus of Dalit activism in both national and International contexts is specifically the preparation for the WCAR: while Phase I of the NCDHR was to focus on raising awareness, gaining visibility, and documenting atrocities against Dalits, one of the primary outcomes of Phase II of the Campaign was meant to be strong representation of Dalit issues at the WCAR.<sup>82</sup> That Dalits are human beings and should therefore be the beneficiaries of basic human rights is of course a given. The Campaign and the prospect of the WCAR were not therefore merely about the establishment of this link—that is, on education and networking, although those certainly were important preliminary strategies. Dalit discourse in the wake of the WCAR was necessarily concerned with creating a set of obligations that would be legally binding on the government of India to ensure Dalit rights. The Government of India’s insistence that it had already taken numerous steps toward this goal, and the fact that “improvements [had] taken place”<sup>83</sup> needed to be juxtaposed with the angst of the anti-Mandal agitations. The opposition to the Mandal Commission’s recommendations represented serious impediments to further progress for the Dalit community. Dalit and other academic writings suggest that the opposition to Mandal was a national betrayal of the Dalits,<sup>84</sup> for which the only recourse was

<sup>81</sup> <http://www.idsn.org/> accessed (2 December 2004). The motto and the attendant definition of caste is, I believe however, a relatively recent (post-WCAR) addition, as the organization has developed and focused itself greatly in the years since its formation.

<sup>82</sup> Phase I of the Campaign ended with the Global Conference Against Racism and Caste based Discrimination, held in New Delhi between 1–4 March 2001, some months prior to the WCAR.

<sup>83</sup> UN/Gooneskere (E/CN.4/Sub.2/2001/16), 8.

<sup>84</sup> Ilaiah, “Productive Labour, Consciousness and History”; Ilaiah “Towards the Dalitisation of the Nation”; Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana, “Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender”, *Subaltern Studies IX*,

the disapproval and sanction of the International community. For Dalit activists, then, the internationalization of caste was the means of emphasizing the need for accountability, and the WCAR was the opportunity to create policy ensuring it. Humanitarianism expressed as “human rights,” or human rights as principled stratagem as it were, appeared the fastest, most effective vehicle to move toward that goal.<sup>85</sup>

The Conference, at the risk of stating the obvious, was an undertaking with a clear focus on human rights: Article 1 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD, 1965), provides a definition of “racial discrimination” as essentially antithetical to the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms; the WCAR’s Secretary General was Mary Robinson, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights; both the Programme of Action for the Third Decade to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination (toward the end of which the WCAR was scheduled), and the WCAR’s own final declaration held racism and racial discrimination as “among the most serious violations of human rights in the contemporary world,” which “deny the self evident truth that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”<sup>86</sup> The WCAR further found, in the “faithful implementation of all international human rights norms and obligations, including enactment of laws and political, social and economic policies,” crucial methods to “combat racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.”<sup>87</sup> In sum, not only was racism an explicitly acknowledged human rights concern, but adherence to human rights norms and obligations was proclaimed its most effective antidote. If caste was not synonymous with race, casteism and racism were both comparable forms of

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ed. Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 232–60.

<sup>85</sup> See David Chandler, “The Road to Military Humanitarianism: How Human Rights NGOs Shaped a New Humanitarian Agenda”, *Human Rights Quarterly* 23, no. 3, 2001, 678–700 for a discussion of the transformation of humanitarian universalism to a more interventionist—and so also rights-based—humanitarianism.

<sup>86</sup> UN, ECOSOC, Resolution 1995/59: bullet 1; Report of the WCAR (A/CONF.189/12): 7.

<sup>87</sup> UN, Report of the WCAR (A/CONF.189/12), 2001, 19

human rights violations, Dalit activists argued, the WCAR should properly be a forum to address both sets of issues. Several of those involved in the debate complained that the UN's very framing of the issue of race was "Eurocentric"<sup>88</sup>: "Since racism is defined from the western paradigm," wrote Prakash Louis, "casteism is 'eliminated' from their purview".<sup>89</sup> This criticism aside, activists focused their energies on articulating caste with race—as institutionalized systems of discrimination and therefore as human rights violations—so as to ensure opportunities for discussion of the issue, if not at the Conference itself then certainly at the NGO Forum that was to assemble outside the conference gates. By this connection, the vague and elusive "hidden or invisible discrimination that a Dalit would encounter" is given shape and form, and indeed ironically rendered internationally visible by its transformation into a "hidden apartheid."

### *Enter Apartheid*

The term "apartheid," of course, carries both specific and generalized meaning. The two prior World Conferences to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination (1978 and 1983, both held in Geneva) had been preoccupied with the regime of apartheid in South Africa, characterizing it as nothing short of a crime against humanity. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to state that the UN's first two decades to Combat Racism were focused overwhelmingly on combating apartheid, although by the time of the second World Conference, and certainly by the end of the second decade (1993), attention was shifting to include the concerns of women, minorities, and indigenous populations as well. As such, the two prior Conferences played a sizeable role in mobilizing opposition to apartheid and in shaping international policies against racism and instruments designed to eradicate it, most significantly ICERD, which van Boven notes is "not only by itself and under its own terms a significant document," but "became by and large the model for devising in 1966 the implementation machinery for

<sup>88</sup> Ambrose Pinto, "Caste is a Variety of Race", *The Hindu*, 30 March 2001.

<sup>89</sup> Prakash Louis, *Casteism is more Horrendous than Racism: Durban and Dalit Discourse* (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 2001), 46.

the International Covenants on Human Rights.”<sup>90</sup> Otherwise put, the UN’s mobilization of international opposition to apartheid in South Africa served also as a catalyst—in van Boven’s words, an “ice-breaker”—for the development of instruments and mechanisms of implementation with wide-ranging implications for struggles against other forms of discrimination in other parts of the globe. Many commentators have noted the obvious significance of holding the WCAR in Durban, now in *post-apartheid* South Africa. This gesture, as with UN efforts of past decades, ties apartheid specifically to its place of origin. By this time, however, and precisely because the regime in South Africa was so long a consuming focus of the International community, “apartheid” also comes to carry a more universal meaning: characterized as a “criminal policy and practice and as a crime against humanity,” the term undoubtedly provokes “general condemnation,” and indeed begins to define a “common platform of struggle” against racism and racial discrimination that is no longer limited to South Africa.<sup>91</sup> In other words, “apartheid” becomes shorthand for the most egregious instances of systemic and overt racism that necessarily and automatically elicit (or should elicit) severe international condemnation.

It is in this globalized context, then, that the reading of caste as India’s “hidden apartheid” needs to be placed. For this is by no

<sup>90</sup> United Nations, Theodor van Boven (hereafter UN/van Boven), Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), Commission on Human Rights, 55th Session (E/CN.4/1999/WG.1/BP.7) section 4(d): “United Nations Strategies to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination: Past Experiences and Present Perspectives” (26 February 1999). <http://www.unhchr.ch/Huridocda/Huridoca.nsf/0/f5361232f18f18a3802567a600353646?OpenDocument> (accessed 3 December 2004).

<sup>91</sup> A background paper prepared by Mr Theodor van Boven (member of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, in accordance with paragraph 51 of Commission resolution 1998/26) implies that apartheid was a consuming focus precisely because it was an obvious and identifiable violation, a “criminal policy and practice and as a crime against humanity” that easily provoked “general condemnation” and as such also provided a “common platform of struggle against racism and racial discrimination” (UN/Van Boven (E/CN.4/1999/WG.1/BP.7): section 3(c); for a scholarly analysis of the definition of apartheid as a crime against humanity, see Margaret McAuliffe deGuzman, “The Road from Rome: The Developing Law of Crimes against Humanity”, *Human Rights Quarterly* 22, no. 2, 2000, 335–403).



means the first time caste has been defined as a form of apartheid to an international audience. V. T. Rajshekar's well-known booklet entitled *Apartheid in India* was published in 1979 (Bangalore: Dalit Action Committee) and reissued in 1987 as *Dalit: The Black Untouchables of India* for "sympathetic foreigners, researchers who are interested in obtaining a correct picture of India".<sup>92</sup> Appearance does not distinguish caste groups, Rajshekar writes, making much the same case as contemporary Dalit writers: "The contrast between a black and a white [is] quite obvious. And yet the prejudices in this country are as terrible as in the USA".<sup>93</sup> But the very fact that this document was produced in the wake of India's participation in the International Anti-Apartheid year, which was focused quite specifically on opposition to South African policies, suggests that the comparison was somewhat premature. It would take the dismantling of South African apartheid, and all the policies, procedures, organizations and global platforms that that process generated, to fully transform "apartheid" from a descriptive term grounded in South African realities into a universalizable metaphor for racial discrimination. It would require, in Sassen's words, "that a vast array of highly specialized functions be carried out, that infrastructures be secured, that legislative environments be made and kept hospitable," and also, as she argues following David Harvey, "capital fixity. . . vast concentrations of very material and not so mobile facilities and infrastructures"<sup>94</sup> for "apartheid" to gain motility.<sup>95</sup> So, only in the post-apartheid era does "apartheid" come to fully evoke a kind of universal abhorrence that *caste* (still) does not. Even the Indian journal *Seminar* titles its issue on the debates over caste and the WCAR "Exclusion," with the "X" dramatically enlarged on the cover: a wry comment on the barring of Dalits from a conference that, in effect, celebrates South African

<sup>92</sup> V. T. Rajshekar, *Dalit: The Black Untouchables of India* (Ottawa: Clarity Press, 1987 [1979]), 37.

<sup>93</sup> Rajshekar, *Dalit*, 39.

<sup>94</sup> Saskia Sassen, "Spatialities and Temporalities of the Global: Elements for a Theorization", *Public Culture* 12, no. 1, 2000, 215–232.

<sup>95</sup> Indeed, Sassen's point is the contrast between "the dynamic of both mobility and fixity" in analyses of economic globalization, as also their *pre-supposition* of one-another, raising questions "that defy the explanatory power of unified theories of hypermobility and time-space compression" (Sassen, "Spatialities and Temporalities of the Global", 2000: 216).

victory against apartheid.<sup>96</sup> Gestures such as these symbolically and metaphorically unite Dalit experiences with those of Africans and African Americans; the vocabulary of race/racism, by its common tropes, enables the universalization of caste. Local context may then be drawn in as necessary—for instance in the comparison of the Indian government’s stance to the one-time resistance of the South African government to treating apartheid as anything but an internal matter<sup>97</sup>—but the overarching narrative remains non-specific and generalizable.

“The goal is not identity but affinity,” writes Visvanathan,

There were several models of sleight of hand. The Kurds had used internet to create a virtual community. The Chiappas in Mexico had mastered internet and created an international politics through websites. But politically, India preferred public forums, international meetings to websites. One needed to capture not an internet of nations but affiliate to a discursive space. Race was the most universal language of condemnation. Race moved mountains like the UN, the foundations and the corporations. If caste were defined as ‘race in India,’ one retained local turfs but could use international forums to embarrass the official Indian image. A moralistic, moralising state could be caught flatfooted in international forums.<sup>98</sup>

Hardt and Negri note that “the entire UN conceptual structure is predicated on the recognition and legitimation of the sovereignty of individual states. . . [but] this process is effective only insofar as it transfers sovereign right to a real *supranational* center”.<sup>99</sup> Taking caste

<sup>96</sup> *Seminar* 508, Exclusion: A Symposium on Caste, Race and the Dalit Question, December 2001. <http://www.india-seminar.com/2001/508.htm> (16 November 2003). Gopal Guru, “Spectre of Exclusion” (Paper presented at a symposium on “The Agenda of Transformation: Inclusion in Nepali Democracy,” organized by Social Science Baha, Birendra International Convention Centre, Kathmandu, Nepal, 24–26 April 2003). [http://www.himalassociation.org/baha/baha\\_conf\\_gopalguru.htm](http://www.himalassociation.org/baha/baha_conf_gopalguru.htm) accessed (19 December 2003). has named “exclusion” the conceptual link that unites South Asian lower caste experiences, overcoming the “difficulty of unfamiliar specificities.” It is much the same theoretical position that enables the joining of caste and apartheid.

<sup>97</sup> Smita Narula, “Caste Away”, *Times of India*, 9 March 2001 Shuba Singh, “Cast-iron Discrimination”, *Times of India*, 20 August 2001.

<sup>98</sup> Visvanathan, “The Race for Caste”, 2513.

<sup>99</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 5.

to Durban was not only to accept this paradox, but to deliberately transfer sovereignty from the individual nation-state (India, in this instance) to a supranational body like the UN, to self-consciously view the nation-state not as guarantor but, as Hans Kelsen once did, as an “insurmountable obstacle to the realization of the idea of right”.<sup>100</sup> Taking caste to Durban was therefore to enact a politics of embarrassment on an international stage. This much is perhaps obvious enough. There are, however, two underlying narratives about caste that emerge around the WCAR that speak to the simultaneity of its expansion and contraction, the retention of “local turfs” as well as the reaching outwards in the search for discursive affinity. The first is developed and promoted by a loose group of international human rights advocates and NGOs, some working independently and others in consultation with the UN Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights.<sup>101</sup> Their core argument is that examples of “the caste system” or caste-like social hierarchies are to be found not only in India, but in many parts of the world (Africa and Japan, in particular), and that as such, caste bears concrete structural relationship to race. The second narrative, articulated largely by Indian Dalit activists, is not antithetical to the first, but does qualify it to the extent of arguing that while Indian caste is surely comparable to other forms of social stratification in the world, it is by far the *worst*, most egregious example of discrimination to be found anywhere in the world. Both positions are represented in the debates over Durban, and it is to their respective reconstitutions of “caste” to which I now turn.

### *The Character(s) of Caste*

International advocates of human rights, inhabitants of the same conceptual universe as the UN, place the problem of caste, too, “squarely within the old framework of international right defined by pacts and treaties”.<sup>102</sup> To this end, they are also concerned with the documentation of caste-related discrimination,

<sup>100</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 5.

<sup>101</sup> The sub-commission is part of the UN’s Economic and Social Council, otherwise known as ECOSOC, and is also the body through which NGOs were represented at the WCAR.

<sup>102</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 5.

violence, and abuse, but the ultimate goal is the creation of more or better policies, coupled with their scrupulous enforcement. As such, human rights advocates enter the discussion on caste from within the framework established by the International Covenants on Human Rights, and such other instruments as ICERD. This is critical because caste is not directly mentioned in any of these documents, and so a case needs to be made for its inclusion. In that context, caste is (re-)defined as a form of discrimination based on “work *and* descent,” based on ICERD’s specific prohibition of discrimination based on descent, and CERD’s clarification “that the term “descent” mentioned in Article 1 of the Convention does not solely refer to race [... and] that the situation of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes falls within the scope of the Convention.”<sup>103</sup> Similar affirmations made with respect to groups in Japan<sup>104</sup> and Bangladesh<sup>105</sup> then appear to pave the way for a much broader argument: that examples of work and descent-based discrimination can be found in many parts of the world, not only in South Asia, but that their most “notable” manifestations are “in caste- (or tribe-) based distinctions.”<sup>106</sup>

Human Rights Watch elaborates on this position in its report *Caste Discrimination: A Global Concern*, prepared specifically for the WCAR, its arguments represented widely by HRW Senior Researcher Smita Narula in the Indian press.<sup>107</sup> The report

<sup>103</sup> United Nations, Committee On The Elimination Of Racial Discrimination, 49th Session (CERD/C/304/Add.13): “Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination: India.” (17 September 1996). <http://www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/0/30d3c5041b55e561c12563e000500d33> (accessed 3 December 2004).

<sup>104</sup> United Nations, Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD). 58th Session (CERD/C/58/Misc.17/Rev.3): “Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination: Japan” (20 March 2001).

<sup>105</sup> United Nations, Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 58th Session (CERD/C/58/Misc.26/Rev.3): “Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination: Bangladesh,” (22 March 2001).

<sup>106</sup> UN/Goonsekere (E/CN.4/Sub.2/2001/16): 4.

<sup>107</sup> <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/globalcaste/> (accessed 1 December 2003). It bears mentioning that very similar ideas, facts, and arguments are written into the Declaration of the Asia-Pacific NGO Forum, held just prior to the Asian Preparatory Meeting for the WCAR in Tehran, on

essentially treats discrimination based on work and descent as synonymous with caste discrimination, grouping the Indian Dalits, Sri Lankan Rodiya, Japanese Burakumin, Nigerian Osu and Igbo, Senegalese Wolof, and several other African tribes in a report on “the prevalence and global dimensions” of “[d]iscriminatory, cruel, inhuman and degrading” practices that are each “justified on the basis of caste”.<sup>108</sup> HRW’s narrative then goes on to use CERD’s broadened definition of “descent” to argue that caste, “as a form of descent-based discrimination, falls within the definition of racial discrimination under article 1 of the ICERD”: in other words, for the discursive affinity of caste to race. Indeed, HRW appears to alternate its use of both “race” and “caste” to describe the same discriminated groups, all in an effort to make a case for the inclusion of the latter at the WCAR talks. “Castes” are endogamous groups, their occupations determined by heredity; “[c]aste denotes a system of rigid social stratification into ranked groups defined by descent and occupation” the report notes.<sup>109</sup> It follows, then, that other racial or ethnic groups that are similarly structured could reasonably be described as “castes.” Interestingly, although perhaps not surprisingly, the report emphasizes birth over faith, characterizing caste as a fundamentally *social* institution, with no basis in religion (even though the description of caste in India begins still with the *chaturvarna* system, and by extension Hindu scripture). This disassociation of “caste” from religion allows HRW to then argue for its universality, indeed also to tie it to “race” much in the style of early structuralist social science writing.<sup>110</sup>

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17–18 February 2001 and into the NGO Statement to that meeting (see <http://wcar.alrc.net/mainfile.php/Documents/45> and [http://www.hrw.org/campaigns/caste/tehran\\_declaration.htm](http://www.hrw.org/campaigns/caste/tehran_declaration.htm) (1 December 2003) respectively and also Narula 1999, Human Rights Watch [report authored by Narula] 2001).

<sup>108</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Caste Discrimination: A Global Concern”, 2001. <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/globalcaste/> (accessed 3 December 2004).

<sup>109</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Introduction”.

<sup>110</sup> Indeed the Human Rights documents in widest circulation do not appear to draw directly on this body of scholarship (some of it produced in the context of the American Civil Rights movement, much of it still influential) that made very similar cases for the concordance of “race” and “caste” (or

If this discursive strategy speaks to the expansion of caste almost into something other than itself, the next still finds the essence of South Asia in certain caste practices, identified through the concept of “untouchability.” The HRW report tells us that untouchability is “the imposition of social disabilities on persons by reason of birth into a particular caste”,<sup>111</sup> and the word is tellingly used *only* in descriptions of South Asian communities. It is perhaps worth recalling here that, at least for bureaucratic purposes, the category of “untouchables” was formally broken down in late 1930s, when the “depressed”/Backward classes were scheduled (producing lists of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes). This redefinition and then breakdown of the Backward Classes was, even at that time, reflective of the difficulty of defining Scheduled Castes as a group outside the caste system, since in some parts of India they were regarded as Sudras (albeit “unclean” ones), but in other parts not.<sup>112</sup> “Untouchability” named a set of issues faced by more than one caste group, but at the same time a category of “Untouchables” would have created an entirely new caste identity, either by excluding some existing groups and including others, or by bringing disparate communities together on the basis of shared social stigma. Such debates did not (could not), however, prevent the de facto creation of just such an identity, to which the present “Untouchables” bears more than passing likeness: it is a political alliance of disparate groups on the basis of shared social stigma. Precisely, because it is such an alliance, its significance is not primarily local, but regional, national, and international, its import greater as it moves outwards from local contexts. In both literal and non-literal ways, “untouchable” becomes the English translation of “Dalit,” or the concept that gives even the word “Dalit” its international salability. For the ideologies

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for the existence of castes outside of India), albeit there deploying caste in service of black civil rights struggles, whereas this essay is concerned with the reverse (see Berreman, “Caste in India and the United States”; Oliver Cromwell Cox, *Caste, Class and Race* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1948]; A. V. S. de Reuck and Julie Knight, eds., *Ciba Foundation Symposium on Caste and Race: Comparative Approaches*, [London: J. & A. Churchill, 1967]; de Voos and Wagatsuma, *Japan's Invisible Race: Caste in Culture and Personality*; and Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*).

<sup>111</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Caste Discrimination”, Background.

<sup>112</sup> Galanter, *Competing Equalities*, 145.

of purity/pollution that “untouchability” references are universally recognizable indices of human suffering—or, even more specifically, of the strangeness and arbitrariness of that which produces such profound human suffering. “Untouchability” becomes a metonym for the injustices that continue to exist in the world, and evokes emotions ranging from sadness to distress, moral indignation to outrage and outright rage—so also finding discursive affinity with race expressed as *racism*. In the same way as apartheid was once defined, so also do Dalit activists now declare untouchability a “crime against humanity.”<sup>113</sup> In this sense, the phenomenon of “untouchability” is both peculiarly South Asian and not. “Untouchability” tethers caste to its place of origin, while enabling its participation in a global economy of ideas and emotions; indeed, transforming its very specificity into its most fluid global currency.

Dalit activists and intellectuals preparing themselves for the WCAR would, at first blush, appear to adopt a tack similar to that of the International Human Rights NGOs. The Dalit Caucus at the WCAR decided that “untouchability” was their primary concern, and they did not appear opposed to wider alliances with caste-like groups in Japan or Africa.<sup>114</sup> The Final Declaration of the Global Conference Against Racism and Caste-based Discrimination (a preparatory meet for the WCAR held in New Delhi in 2001) made its case for including caste on the WCAR agenda precisely by treating it as “a basis for the segregation and oppression of peoples in terms of their descent and occupation” therefore characterizing it as “a form of apartheid.” Here, again, caste was de-linked from religious practice, since it was defined as “a distinct form of racism affecting victims equally irrespective of religion.”<sup>115</sup> In other

<sup>113</sup> WCAR Asia-Pacific NGO Declaration Tehran/Kathmandu, section on “Caste and Racism,” point 28. <http://wcar.alrc.net/mainfile.php/Documents/45/> (1 December 2003).

<sup>114</sup> Ilaiah, “Durban, Caste, and Indian Democracy”. The Dalit caucus was 160 members-strong, was led by the NCDHR, and included such nationally known figures as Mohini Giri, Vasanti Devi (former VC of Manonmaniam Sundaranar University), R.M. Pal (PUCL), Paul Divakar, Ruth Manorama, Jyoti Raj, Martin Macwan. The caucus was also joined by activists from Nepal, Japan, Srilanka and Senegal.

<sup>115</sup> *Final Declaration of the Global Conference Against Racism and Caste-based Discrimination* (New Delhi, 1–4 March 2001). [http://www.hrw.org/campaigns/caste/final\\_declaration.htm](http://www.hrw.org/campaigns/caste/final_declaration.htm) (accessed 1 December 2003)

words, “caste” was broadened, loosened from its sites of origin. The problem with most Western understandings of caste, suggests Prakash Louis, is precisely its particularity: unlike apartheid and indigenous issues, which “caught the imagination of the western media, intellectuals, activists, and socio-political leaders, caste and caste discrimination was an Indian phenomenon or at the most a South Asian phenomenon, [and therefore] never found favour in the international bodies”.<sup>116</sup> The discourse on race and racism, Louis charges, has been monopolized by the West, therefore preempting any consideration of caste as race, and quite conspiratorially keeping casteism from the attention of the world.<sup>117</sup> Caste suffers greatly from its overdetermined cultural specificity. In the very next sentence of his narrative, however, Louis remarks wryly that a form of discrimination “more appalling and dreadful” than anything the world has seen “is practised in . . . caste-ridden society”.<sup>118</sup> Indeed, the comparative frame of his argument is established by the declaration in the title to his volume, that “*Casteism is more Horrendous than Racism.*” Louis is not alone in making such an argument. Comparing the racism directed against Indians in South Africa at the time of Gandhi’s early non-violent agitations there, Kancha Ilaiah writes:

They [Indian Nationalist leaders] never realized that similar, *in fact more horrendous*, intolerance was practiced in India because of caste. They never thought that the pain they suffered was much less than the pain the Indian lower castes suffered. . . . The Indian upper caste elite who suffered racism abroad had a liberative channel from that treatment when they came back home, but for the lower castes there was no such liberation at all. It was/is a long drawn out suffering without much hope.<sup>119</sup>

Not only does Ilaiah repeat Louis’ words, but he also points to a narrative about caste that underlies their common position, and this one about timelessness, the continued and unchanging existence of caste as a brutal system of oppression over “thousands of years.” “It

<sup>116</sup> Louis, *Casteism is more Horrendous than Racism*, 45.

<sup>117</sup> Interestingly, both the Government of India and the “West” appear charged with a conspiracy to keep caste out of the international spotlight, and both by emphasizing its particularity: the Government, in its treatment of caste as an “internal matter” and the “West” by understanding caste as an essentially South Asian cultural phenomenon.

<sup>118</sup> Louis, *Casteism is more Horrendous than Racism*, 46.

<sup>119</sup> Ilaiah, “Durban, Caste, and Indian Democracy”, emphasis added.



is a historical fact that the caste system is at least 3,000 years old,” affirms Louis, “and discrimination and barbarity toward Dalits are equally an age-old phenomenon”.<sup>120</sup> Catalogues of contemporary instances of caste brutality are then presented as evidence of the ahistoricity of caste rigidity, which is by itself implicitly offered as further proof that caste is the greater horror, compared to racism.<sup>121</sup> In other words, if caste can be lifted from its local context somewhat to enable pan-Asian or other global alliances, it retains distinction still as a “more horrendous” phenomenon than racism itself.

Curiously, that very distinction then becomes both a comment on and an indication of the socio-cultural particularity of caste. Louis, who cites the Global Conference statement that disassociates caste and religion, earlier in his own writing also establishes the origins of caste in Hindu religious texts, specifically the *Manusmriti* (7–8)—interestingly, yet another scriptural source canonized by Orientalist scholars, now unavoidably central to any discussion of the origins and character of caste in India. In his well-known polemic, *Why I am not a Hindu*, as also in his writings on Gautama Buddha, Kancha Ilaiah, too, specifically locates caste in a nexus of religio-cultural practices and beliefs that are upheld and perpetuated by “Brahminical” upper castes, identified as a group who use Hindu doctrine and ritual to justify their superiority over the Dalits.<sup>122</sup> Martin Macwan, convener of the NCDHR, identifies “dalits” through specific, Indian scenarios, both religious and not—the occupation of scavenging, the *devadasi* system of temple prostitution, poverty—and as a group, “irrespective of the faith that they may profess, suffer from discrimination arising out of a caste mind as a national character and practice”.<sup>123</sup> The National Federation of Dalit

<sup>120</sup> Louis, *Casteism is more Horrendous than Racism*, 21–22.

<sup>121</sup> For example, Louis, *Casteism is more Horrendous than Racism*, 25.

<sup>122</sup> The essential difference between Hindu/Brahmin culture and Dalit culture, Ilaiah writes, is given in a commonly used Dalitbahun (Telugu) saying: “*maadi panipaata samscruti* (Ours is a culture of work and songs), *valladi chaduvu sandhya samscruti* (theirs is a culture of learning and worship),” simultaneously identifying Indian upper castes and their oppression of the Dalits with the practice of religion (Kancha Ilaiah, *Why I am not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture, and Political Economy* [Calcutta: Samya, 1996], 168).

<sup>123</sup> Martin Macwan, “(Un)Touchable in Durban,” *Seminar* 508, 2001. <http://www.india-seminar.com/2001/508.htm>.

Women, too, cites “the perpetuation of forced prostitution in the name of religion through the devadasi system” as evidence of the specific impact of caste discrimination on Dalit women.<sup>124</sup> In sum, connections between caste and religion may be emphasized more or less, elucidated at greater or lesser length depending on audience and context, each such movement subtly altering the given essence of caste. Meanings may be variously deployed, in other words, but caste never re-defines itself out of existence; it retains always its tether to Hinduism and so also to India.

It bears noting here that “Hinduism” identified in Dalit and other similar writings (through the devadasi system, doctrine, scripture and ritual, the definition of Hinduism as the religion of the Brahmins/upper castes, etc.) is one itself, which accords significance in early twentieth century colonial writings on India: as Ronald Inden demonstrates, Hinduism was, like caste, “another [essential] pillar in the construct of India,” and, in the view of Christian Europeans at the time, quite without history.<sup>125</sup> Explaining the existence of caste *and* caste oppression on such authority, then, effectively lifts caste from history, refashions it in terms of its timelessness and primordality, embraces what Appadurai in another context has called “metonymic freezing”; insists that “[n]atives, people confined to and by the places to which they belong”<sup>126</sup> *have indeed existed*, and worse, have been ignored. Once more, caste becomes the “central symbol of India” and the rigidly organizing principle of Indian society: “India’s essential institution”<sup>127</sup>, this time by the design of Indian Dalits themselves. Here, again, the reduction of caste to two essential elements—religion and hierarchy, both of which are understood as inherently oppressive—becomes simultaneously the means of localizing “caste” and enabling its global travel. The only (subtle) difference now is that the global passages of caste do not so much rationalize colonial authority and therefore initiate

<sup>124</sup> Cited in Kalpana Kannabiran, “Caste, the Academy and Dalit Women”, in *The Hindu*, 20 June 2001; see also International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN/National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW), “Dalit Women in India”, submission to UN Committee on Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination, 2001, 2.

<sup>125</sup> Inden, *Imagining India*, 86.

<sup>126</sup> Appadurai, “Putting Hierarchy in Its Place”, 36, 39.

<sup>127</sup> Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 3; Inden, *Imagining India*, 85.

reform as they deploy the authority of international (supranational, some would say neo-colonial) institutions to pressure reform into existence.

### *A Globally Mobile Caste*

Ilaiah has remarked that the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights has, thanks to Durban, become a “globally mobile” organization, with (one assumes) tongue-in-cheek reference to upward mobility.<sup>128</sup> We may perhaps infer that “caste” has undergone a similar transformation. My argument, however, has not been either in support of or opposed to local-global dialectics, so often the subject of critique in the literature on transnationalism/globalization. It is neither a critique of the “piety of the particular” nor of the generalized universal, “[denuded] of most of its social thickness”.<sup>129</sup> My concern has been with the movement of caste between these discursive poles, its apparently paradoxical retention of local turfs in the search for discursive affinities. Racism, Chakrabarty writes, “is thought of as something that the white people do to us. What Indians do to one another is variously described as *communalism*, *regionalism*, and *casteism*, but never as *racism*. . . [F]or me, the popular word racism has the advantage of not making India look peculiar”.<sup>130</sup> Certainly, this is an aspect of the motivation to articulate casteism with racism, since the quest for a universal, non-specific paradigm only naturally leads Dalit activists to the imbricated discourses of race and Human Rights. But this journey has by no means erased the cultural particularism of “Dalit discourse,” which can be characterized still as a movement “between system and lifeworld,” Dalit suffering and scholarly analysis, which by its motion throws into doubt where the “[A]rchimedean point of discursive exchange” falls.<sup>131</sup> What the passing nature of Chakrabarty’s comment elides are the *particular* details with which universal arguments are made, or the insight that *knowledge is*

<sup>128</sup> Ilaiah Kancha, “Towards a Constructive ‘Globalization’”, interview by Uma Maheshwari, *Seminar* 508, 2001.

<sup>129</sup> Bruce Robbins, “Comparative Cosmopolitanism”, *Social Text* 31, no. 32, 1992, 174; Sassen, “Spatialities and Temporalities of the Global”, 216.

<sup>130</sup> Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity*, 82.

<sup>131</sup> Visvanathan, “The Race for Caste”, 2515.

*situated*. Here, the “miniaturizing precision of “locality,” with its associations of presence and uniqueness, empirical concreteness, complete experience, accessible subjectivity” becomes the very means of transcendence, the method by which caste becomes “Dalit,” or “a collective subject-in-action”.<sup>132</sup> The reconstitutions of caste in the context of the WCAR effectively cordon off the “local”—and the local is a conceptual space even if it is identified with a locality—as a protected territory of essential difference, compartmentalize it.<sup>133</sup> Just as this move once facilitated the articulation of Indian nationalist ideology, so also does the “more horrendous” Indian experience of caste become a vehicle to traverse more global landscapes. Conceiving of caste (and Hinduism) in India as timeless, oppressive, and rigid enables the transformation of caste. Quite simply, caste needs stasis in order to achieve mobility, the local to reach the global, particularity in order to stake its claims to universal resources.

In this, the specific details of its movement, the simultaneity of its expansion and contraction, caste comes to resemble an entity sociologists have always told us caste is not, and that is ethnicity.

<sup>132</sup> Robbins, “Comparative Cosmopolitanism”, 176. Such deliberate fashioning of “a collective subject-in-action” does not by any means erase the fact of inter-caste conflict at the regional level, nor does it presume that wider alliances by their existence entirely resolve local issues. Competition amongst Dalit castes is common (between Malas and Madigas in Andhra Pradesh, for instance, Cakkilliards, Paraiyahs and Pallars in Tamil Nadu, or Mahars and Matangs in Maharashtra), and is often over resources or belonging in categories of compensatory reform. The point is that the “collective subject-in-action” is neither a permanent configuration, nor is it a monolith superceding all other collectives. This goes to the character of caste as ethnicity, I would argue, as it speaks to the use of political strategy and the formation of alliances as needed. Wherever such alliances are formed or such conflicts occur, however, contemporary claims tend to be made in primordial terms, so caste defines 3000 years of Indian history, and part of the Pallar-Thevar conflict in Tamil Nadu is framed in terms of the former group’s claim to warrior/royal ancestry. My argument is that the fluidity of caste alliances (at whatever level) is made possible precisely through the identification of such static points of reference.

<sup>133</sup> Partha Chatterjee has suggested that something similar happens to the space of the “home” (and indeed “woman”) in Indian nationalist discourse, precisely to be able to make the claim to self-rule. See “Colonialism, Nationalism and Colonized Women: The Contest in India,” *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 4, 1989, 622–33.

To be sure, caste may still continue to exist in its more “traditional” form, as an endogamous, hereditary, hierarchical (and so also oppressive) social institution, but when that traditional form, unevenly reformed and “substantialized” over the past hundred years, becomes a vehicle for “global mobility,” caste comes to acquire ethnic character. That there exists a link between globalization and ethnic conflict is by now of course well near an article of faith in social science discourses; “ethnicity” seems very much a product of what Appadurai describes as the “disjunctive” global movements of cultures, capital, people, and technologies.<sup>134</sup> In these writings, ethnicity often appears a negative force, one that leads to cultural homogenization, and violence and conflict of the most brutal kinds. As a result, much less gets said about ethnicity as that which enables the cultural flows of people and concepts and capital (except in superficially celebratory discussions of “ethnic diversity”)—or about ethnicity, to borrow Spivak’s words from another context, as a “provisional field and a provisional traffic of essences”.<sup>135</sup> And yet, insofar as caste becomes “boundary-oriented [but culturally, *not ritualistically*, so], holistic, primordialist”,<sup>136</sup> it functions as an effective platform for political claims-making, much in the way that other corporate groups do, both nationally and internationally. It goes without saying perhaps that without this platform, “caste” would have continued to remain an institution with only the most intimately local significance.

Let me emphasize finally that my purpose in making this analogy is not to argue for the primacy of “ethnicity” as a category of analysis over any others. Rather, it is to suggest an analytic modification to Chakrabarty’s comment quoted above: for me, the popular word *ethnicity* has the advantage of not making India look peculiar, while simultaneously taking into account the tendencies of Dalit discourse to highlight locality, uniqueness, concreteness. It is to

<sup>134</sup> Arjun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy”, *Public Culture* 2, no. 2, 1990, 21; see also Amy Chua, “Two Faces of Globalization: A World on the Edge”, *The Wilson Quarterly* 26, no. 4, 2002, 62–77.

<sup>135</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak”, by Sara Danius and Stefan Jonsson, *boundary* 2, vol. 20, no. 2, 1993, 36.

<sup>136</sup> Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference”, 20.

collapse the local with the global while recognizing their polarity, to reiterate Appadurai's observation that "ideas the claim to represent the "essences" of particular places reflect the temporary localization [and the global is by now also a location in its own right] of ideas from many places".<sup>137</sup> And then it is to point to the irony of having discrete essences work *against* the "incarceration" of the "natives" when they are put into global play, and of the transformation of caste into something other than itself precisely at a moment when it insists it has never been transformed.

### *Curtain, or the Ascendance of Descent*

A few words, in conclusion, about caste after Durban. Although the issue (and the furore) in the months preceding the WCAR was over the analogy of caste to race, the term "descent"—used to make the analogy, and to enable the recognition of caste as an international category *like* race—appears now to have supplanted race itself. At its 61st session (held in 2002), the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination adopted a recommendation which, in effect, makes descent-based discrimination inseparable from its manifestation as caste: General Recommendation XXIX "strongly condemns descent-based discrimination, such as discrimination on the basis of caste and analogous systems of inherited status, as a violation of the (international) Convention (on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination)."<sup>138</sup> In this, again, "race" and human rights are the vehicles that eventually deliver caste into the hands of descent. Specifically taking note of this text, the first of two expanded working papers on the subject of discrimination based on work and descent (requested by and submitted to the Sub-

<sup>137</sup> Appadurai, "Putting Hierarchy in Its Place", 46.

<sup>138</sup> United Nations, Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), 61st Session (CERD/C/61/Misc.29/Rev.1): "General Recommendation XXIX on Descent-based Discrimination" (22 August 2002) <http://www.imadr.org/geneva/2002/CERD.descent.general.recommendation.html> (accessed 3 December 2004). Each reference in this document to caste is to "caste and analogous systems of inherited status," establishing caste as the yardstick by which all other analogies should be made, the exemplar of descent-based discrimination itself.

Commission on the Promotion Protection of Human Rights) states that

[w]hile there is no doubt that social institutions in respect of which the term “caste” is applicable fall under the term “descent,” and that therefore discrimination arising from such social institutions falls under the definition of “racial discrimination”, the term “descent” is wider and can encompass other situations, as discussed in the present paper. . . . The main purpose of this paper is to identify communities, *other than those traditionally referred to as “castes” in the South Asian context*, in which discrimination based on work and descent continues to be experienced in practice.<sup>139</sup>

The recognition that the “the meaning and application of the term ‘caste’ is highly contested” and the insistence that “the term ‘descent’ is wider and can encompass other situations” appear to take into account the furore over caste at the WCAR, and to resist equating caste with anything other than itself. This said, neither this paper nor the second expanded paper submitted to the Sub-Commission in 2004 hesitate to use “caste” as a proxy for “descent” throughout, finding castes and caste discrimination throughout the world, from Bangladesh and Burkina Faso to Micronesia and Senegal.<sup>140</sup> Caste could be on par with race, the paper seems to suggest, but it more appropriately belongs with descent—and so does caste widen into descent even as descent is consolidated

<sup>139</sup> United Nations, Eide, Asbjørn and Yozo Yokota (hereafter UN/Eide and Yokota), Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), Commission on Human Rights, Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, 55th Session (E/CN.4/Sub.2/2003/24): “Discrimination-based on Work and Descent.” (26 June 2003), emphasis added.

<sup>140</sup> The three working papers submitted on this topic to the UN Subcommittee were UN/Goonesekere E/CN.4/Sub.2/2001/16 (2001); UN/Eide and Yokota E/CN.4/Sub.2/2003/24 (2003) and United Nations, Eide, Asbjørn and Yozo Yokota, Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), Commission on Human Rights, Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, 56th Session (E/CN.4/Sub.2/2004/31): “Prevention of Discrimination” (5 July 2004).

Curiously, the final working paper does not identify castes in Pakistan, where it accepts the Government’s position that “the reference to ‘caste’ was included in the Constitution for purposes of guaranteeing equal treatment to members of the Hindu community” (p. 11). This ties caste once again to Hinduism, even though it appears a virtually a-religious phenomenon in the reportage on other countries.

in terms of caste. Following the paper's recommendations, the UN Sub-Commission, in 2004, appointed Yozo Yokota and Chin-Sung Chung as Special Rapporteurs with the task of "preparing a comprehensive study on discrimination based on work and descent" and finalizing "a draft set of principles and guidelines for the effective elimination of discrimination based on work and descent."<sup>141</sup> Descent lifts caste from any specific cultural mooring, but the analogy implicitly remains, and the work of identifying and eliminating *caste-like* systems of discrimination continues apace.

In these processes of continual (but not random) expansion and contraction, interestingly, India remains a prime point of reference, but this time as exemplar: it is a country where national responses to discrimination are best developed, and as such is "an important context for the examination of best practices in affirmative action, as well as of obstacles to its effectiveness."<sup>142</sup> This is not exactly the Dalit view of India, which emphasizes timeless rigidity over change and insists that the most egregious violations occur here. Rather, it is an international view of the Indian state, of its achievements and its limitations—of the "local" in all its paradoxical complexity—with which Dalit politics, having gone global, will now have to contend even as the Government of India complies with requests from the Rapporteurs for more and yet more information.

<sup>141</sup> United Nations, Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), Commission on Human Rights, Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, 56th Session, Sub-Commission Resolution (E/CN.4/Sub.2/2004/L.8): "Discrimination based on Work and Descent" (12 August 2004).

<sup>142</sup> UN/Eide and Yokota, 2004:21.