

Castes in the Mind

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Habit isn't used to breaking out in feelings.
'Habit', F.M. Shinde (translated by Priya Adarkar)

The summer in my childhood meant a ritual return to my grandparents' house located next to the river Gomti in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Compared to our lonely lives in the city of Delhi, life there carried a complex network of relationships. Remembering ties to collateral cousins, ancestral descendants and their children was a common expectation. And so were the names of *maulvis* (religious scholars), tailors, barbers and butchers. Therefore, it was troubling when after a day of playing outdoors, my aunt tauntingly declared that our muddy, dirty feet 'looked like a *chamarin's* and would not be tolerated in the house'. I had never heard that name before; I did not know who she was or what she looked like; I certainly did not know that it was not a singular woman but a collective of outcasts associated with tanning leather; a name that was resurrected out of thin air from permanent invisibility. Yet something about my aunt's tone convinced me of a potential decline in the self, too dreadful to invite. A threat to much needed love and approval. On washing my hands and feet, I felt deep relief at averting what I assumed to be a dangerous degradation or an irreversible mutation. At the same time, it remains in my mind a memory of humiliation and rejection. A warning that one could be banished from home, become nameless forever, a social pariah. Instead of leaving me secure after the ritual, I felt that my aunt was suggesting that filth was endemic to some (including me) and could not be washed off. Like a birth defect or lack. Without realizing consciously, I had received my first lesson in caste pollution and untouchability in India. Casteist slurs, such as '*chamar*' (masculine) or '*chamarin*' (feminine), are deployed pejoratively and strategically to wound Dalits – or the oppressed castes – in India and elsewhere.

Embedded in the logic of purity-pollution and hereditary transmission, caste in Hindu society is a form of social stratification and domination that seeks to control occupation, social hierarchy, interactions and exclusion of people. It derives its authority from ancient Hindu texts, legitimising the denial of basic human rights such as access to water, freedom to use public roads or to choose an occupation outside the ones assigned by birth. Caste in modern India is not an unquestioned legacy but a pernicious hybridity of oppression. Dalit history chronicles atrocities performed on Dalit bodies through forced labour in tanneries, crematoria and manual scavenging while they are routinely lynched and raped. The term 'Dalit' in Hindi means broken or cracked – a name and a political identity that the 'untouchables' claimed for their communities. It would be easier to say that caste is an irremediable symptom in the Indian mind. On the contrary, caste for most upper caste Indians remains an unformulated nothing – an aggressive negation – especially if their birth guarantees privilege and power.

Freud in his paper, 'Some psychological consequences of the anatomical distinctions between the sexes', viewed women as subjects with primordial lack of a penis who remained unfettered by castration anxiety, something that was constitutive of strength, independence and morality in men. Women, in his view, were inferior to men in moral conscience and judgement. In a strikingly similar logic, Brahmanical ideology posits a fundamental inferiority of birth, and lack of intellect or judgment to lower castes, such that social domination and exploitation of Dalits does not produce shame or guilt in the Indian psyche. Carried out over centuries, caste exploitation of Dalit bodies and minds has radically altered Hindu consciousness. The affective field is marked not by guilt or shame, a domain of reparative introspection in the oppressor, but by humiliation and rage in the oppressed, an

awakening of the old wound as a new arrival. I contend that it is the affective surface of humiliation that might offer a psychic topography of caste.

In his paper, 'Mool Nayak', B.R. Ambedkar, modern India's revolutionary thinker, compared the rigidity of caste segregation to that of a 'tower which had several stories without a ladder or an entrance. One was to die in the storey in which one was born' (Kapoor, 2003). Having observed the Black struggle during his stay at Columbia University (1913-1916), with its ostensibly naturalised racial segregation of Blacks, Ambedkar formulated the two systems of oppression – slavery and untouchability – to underscore the degree of psychological damage that emerges from these systems. He wrote, 'Slavery was never obligatory. But untouchability is obligatory' (Ibid., pp. 5345), concluding that an open and direct form of enslavement is preferred to the theft of consciousness of one's enslavement that is untouchability. For Ambedkar, becoming conscious of one's oppression entailed rejection of the religious interpretations of the theory of birth and karma. For caste Hindus as well as for Dalits, who energetically dissociated from religious roots of caste-based oppression, this was a bold and dangerous step for it means that the disavowed or 'unwelcomed' piece of reality might return to the ego, wishing to be repatriated (Freud, 1927).

To practice psychoanalysis in India – with the possibility of subversion of caste that exists just as tabooed as incest or parricide in the unconscious – demands a commitment to social justice and a recognition that neutrality will not be the only arc to meet our patients at the limit of speech.

Siya, a female patient in her late thirties, cries very, very softly. She has a ritual, a habit. When nearing tears, she sets up a 'tear toilet' with the tissue box next to her chair and the bin close to her feet. Each time a tear appears, she vigorously wipes her eyes, prods her nose and takes a shot at the bin. I am pained to imagine her brisk hands erasing the tear drop right at the moment of its birth. It becomes clear to me that she doesn't let her tears become a sensation, a wet trail of emotion. Instead, she prods her nose and eyes to remove what might be disgusting excretions of the body. After she leaves, I notice tissues littered outside the bin. Often, I am disgusted to pick them up. Some days I wonder if I am feeling humiliated as well. It strikes me as unusual. This is repeated over several years in therapy. One day, she expresses disgust at her father's authoritative expectation from women in the household. Many memories surface. She elaborates one particularly difficult and repetitive occurrence with her father who after bathing leaves his used underwear to be washed by someone else; that is by women. On occasions when Siya is next in turn to bathe, the mother expects the daughter to wash father's underwear. There is no room for refusal; she finds it reducing and humiliating as though she is shown her place in the family. At this moment, she begins to cry, wiping vigorously the tears that appear as she takes a shot at the bin. A few crumpled used tissues fall outside. I know in my heart that it is a crucial moment. I think about how to make the unspeakable speakable. I say, 'I have a faint idea of what that might feel like. You let me know what it is like to be reduced when you leave used tissues for me to pick up after you leave.' Scandalised, she says, 'I never meant to. Do I really do that?' A moment later, in a bid to rescue herself she adds, 'I thought you had someone to clean your room!'

In enacting a deeply personal experience, a 'dirty secret', of contact with the anal sadistic universe of the father (and mother), we began speaking in humiliation, a language of hatred of a colonizing and eroticised object. I was a toilet-breast – needed, not loved – to dump split off aggression, keeping the feeding-breast aspects safe and separate (Meltzer, 1967; Lemma, 2014). I also recognised that, rooted in the encounter, was the breakdown of split off anxiety, revealing fantasies of soiling, polluting and poisoning played between genders and between castes. What is it like to be needed, as a toilet, and not loved? Besides a reconstruction of the intrapsychic life, what social structures or identities will

be unearthed in the anatomy of humiliation? Given that this exchange happened between a caste Hindu woman patient and a caste Muslim therapist, it might be analytically useful to understand one particular dynamic of the historicity of Hindu-Muslim relationships, with the former as the master and the latter minoritised in the Indian social or political imagination. I would argue that such analysis will be incomplete if it avoids or overlooks caste as the phantom scourging at the heart of the Indian unconscious.

The fantasy of the patient that I must have someone to clean my room is hardly a provocative knock on the private life of the therapist – let's say the presence of an oedipal third with whom I enjoy intimacy or closeness to rival. On the contrary, it is a ghostly return of caste in the depths of unconscious life and one's complicity in silent reduction, rejection and annihilation of the other (Guru, 2011). The patient defends against our radical difference by exnominating caste. To have 'someone to clean' reveals the assumption that she and I are the same in our disgust towards bodily pollution or worse, disgust for the figure of the cleaner (often a Dalit, a Muslim or a refugee) – the nameless shadow that emerges from urban ghettos to service the upper castes and upper classes. The cleaner stands in for the therapist in an explosive transference moment. On another level, in her fantasy, it is assumed that I too disavow my messy, shitty parts (the father) that are handled by someone less privileged; and that I would be a neutral or uncritical actor (the mother), now unperturbed by devaluation perpetuated by the caste machinery.

When we reflect on the significance of recognition of the other in co-created moments of mutuality, we hope for moments between two minds who survive the submission-domination complementarity. Mutual recognition implies transformations born in encounters with the other's difference, that is self as the other's other. The other survives destruction in service of a true discovery, of a like subject who is distinct and separate (Benjamin, 2017). Caste relations, on the other hand, reveal an area of 'surplus recognition', that is, a social cost that someone in the society has to bear for someone else's elevation (Guru, 2011). In the Indian context, Dalits and Muslims are habitually reduced to the level of nature through comparison with animals or, at a structural level, to a commodity. When lynched purely on suspicion of cow slaughter their worth is deemed less than an animal. By assigning a repulsive meaning to some lives, and their labour, caste in the mind both stages and excludes from memory experiences of reduction and rejection. It is through enactments of 'innocent' habits – a play within a play – that caste returns to the clinic as an unthinkable catastrophe to be felt as a rolling tear on one's face and that of the other.

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