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## India's shame

Democracy hasn't eradicated the country's caste system. It has entrenched and modernised it

by Arundhati Roy / November 13, 2014 / [Leave a comment](#)  
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Villagers protest in New Delhi in April against the gang rape of a Dalit girl in nearby Haryana state. © RAVEENDRAN / AFP

My father was a Hindu, a Brahmo. I never met him until I was an adult. I grew up with my mother in a Syrian Christian family in Ayemenem, a small village in communist-ruled Kerala in southwest India. And yet all around me were the fissures and cracks of caste. Ayemenem had its own separate "Paraiyan" church where "Paraiyan" priests preached to an "Untouchable" congregation. Caste was implied in people's names, in the way people referred to each other, in the work they did, in the clothes they wore, in the marriages that were arranged, in the language they spoke. Even so, I never encountered the notion of caste in a single school textbook. It was reading *Annihilation of Caste*, a 1936 lecture by the Indian writer and thinker BR Ambedkar, that alerted me to a gaping hole in our pedagogical universe. Reading him also made it clear why that hole exists and why it will continue to exist until Indian society undergoes radical, revolutionary change.

If you have heard of Malala Yousafzai, who was joint winner of this year's Nobel Peace Prize, but not of Surekha Bhotmange, then do read Ambedkar. Malala was only 15, but had already committed several crimes. She was a girl, she lived in the Swat Valley in Pakistan, she was a BBC blogger, she was in a *New York Times* video and she went to school. Malala wanted to be a doctor; her father wanted her to be a politician. She was a brave child. She (and her father) didn't take heed when the Taliban declared that schools were not meant for girls and threatened to kill her if she did not stop speaking out against them. On 9th October 2012, a gunman took her off her school bus and put a bullet through her head. Malala was flown to England, where, after receiving the best possible medical care, she survived. It was a miracle.

The United States President and Secretary of State sent messages of support and solidarity. Madonna

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### Arundhati Roy

Arundhati Roy is an Indian writer

dedicated a song to her. Angelina Jolie wrote an article about her. Malala was on the cover of *Time*. Within days of the attempted assassination, Gordon Brown, now the United Nations Special Envoy for Global Education, launched an "I am Malala" petition that called on the government of Pakistan to deliver education to every girl child. The US drone strikes in Pakistan continue with their feminist mission to "take out" misogynist, Islamist terrorists.

Surekha Bhotmange was 40 years old and had committed several crimes too. She was a woman—an "Untouchable" Dalit woman—who lived in India, and she wasn't dirt poor. She was more educated than her husband, so she functioned as the head of her family. Ambedkar was her hero. Like him, her family had renounced Hinduism and converted to Buddhism. Surekha's children were educated. Her two sons, Sudhir and Roshan, had been to college. Her daughter, Priyanka, was 17 and finishing high school. Surekha and her husband had bought a little plot of land in the village of Khairlanji in the state of Maharashtra. It was surrounded by farms belonging to castes that considered themselves superior to the Mahar caste that Surekha belonged to. Because she was Dalit and had no right to aspire to a good life, the village *panchayat* (assembly) did not permit her to get an electricity connection or to turn her thatched mud hut into a brick house. The villagers would not allow her family to irrigate their fields with water from the canal, or draw water from the public well. They tried to build a public road through her land, and when she protested, they drove their bullock carts through her fields. They let their cattle loose to feed on her standing crop.

Still Surekha did not back down. She complained to the police, who paid no attention to her. Over the months, the tension in the village built to fever pitch. As a warning, the villagers attacked a relative of hers and left him for dead. She filed another police complaint. This time the police made some arrests, but the accused were released on bail almost immediately. At about six in the evening on the day they were released, 29th September 2006, around 40 incensed villagers, men and women, arrived in tractors and surrounded the Bhotmanges' house. Her husband Bhaiyalal, who was out in the fields, heard the noise and ran home. He hid behind a bush and watched the mob attack his family. He ran to Dusala, the nearest town, and through a relative managed to call the police. (You need contacts to get the police to even pick up the phone.) They never came. The mob dragged Surekha, Priyanka and the two boys, one of them partially blind, out of the house. The boys were ordered to rape their mother and sister; when they refused, their genitals were mutilated, and eventually they were lynched. Surekha and Priyanka were gang raped and beaten to death. The four bodies were dumped in a nearby canal, where they were found the next day.

At first, the press reported it as a "morality" murder, suggesting that the villagers were upset because Surekha was having an affair with a relative (the man who had previously been assaulted). Mass protests by Dalit organisations eventually prodded the legal system into taking cognisance of the crime. Citizens' fact-finding committees reported how evidence had been tampered with and fudged. When the lower court finally pronounced a judgement, it sentenced the main perpetrators to death but refused to invoke the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Prevention of Atrocities Act—the judge held that the Khairlanji massacre was a crime spurred by a desire for "revenge." He said there was no evidence of rape and no caste angle to the killing. For a judgement to weaken the legal framework in which it presents a crime, for which it then awards the death sentence, makes it easy for a higher court to eventually reduce, or even commute, the sentence. This is not uncommon practice in India. For a court to sentence people to death, however heinous their crime, can hardly be called just. For a court to acknowledge that caste prejudice continues to be a horrific reality in India would have counted as a gesture towards justice. Instead, the judge simply airbrushed caste out of the picture.

Surekha Bhotmange and her children lived in a market-friendly democracy. So there were no "I am Surekha" petitions from the UN to the Indian government, nor any messages of outrage from heads of state. Which was just as well, because we don't want daisy-cutters dropped on us just because we practise caste.

"To the Untouchables," Ambedkar wrote in 1945, with the sort of nerve that present-day intellectuals in India find hard to summon, "Hinduism is a veritable chamber of horrors." For a writer to have to use terms like "Untouchable," "scheduled caste," "backward class" and "other backward classes" to describe fellow human beings is like living in a chamber of horrors. Since Ambedkar used the word "Untouchable" with a cold rage, and without flinching, so must I. Today, "Untouchable" has been substituted with the Marathi word "Dalit" ("broken people"), which is, in turn, used interchangeably with "scheduled caste." This, as the scholar Rupa Viswanath points out, is incorrect practice, because the term "Dalit" includes Untouchables who have converted to other religions to escape the stigma of caste (like the Paraiyans in my village who had converted to Christianity), whereas "scheduled caste" does not. The official nomenclature of prejudice is a maze that can make everything read like a bigoted bureaucrat's file notings. To try and avoid this, mostly, though not always, I use the word "Untouchable" when I write about the past, and "Dalit" when I write about the present. When I write about Dalits who have converted to other religions, I specifically say Dalit Sikhs, Dalit Muslims or Dalit Christians.

According to the National Crime Records Bureau, a crime is committed against a Dalit by a non-Dalit every 16 minutes; every day, more than four Untouchable women are raped by Touchables; every week, 13 Dalits are murdered and six Dalits are kidnapped. In 2012 alone, the year that a 23-year-old woman was gang raped and murdered in Delhi, 1,574 Dalit women were raped (the rule of thumb is that only 10 per cent of rapes or other crimes against Dalits are ever reported) and 651 Dalits were murdered. That's just the rape and butchery. Not the stripping and parading naked, the forced shit-eating (literally), the seizing of land, the social boycotts, the restriction of access to drinking water. These statistics wouldn't include, say, Bant Singh of Punjab, a Mazhabi Dalit Sikh, who in 2005 had both his arms and a leg cleaved



and human rights activist.

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off for daring to file a case against the men who gang raped his daughter. There are no separate statistics for triple amputees.

"If the fundamental rights are opposed by the community, no law, no parliament, no judiciary can guarantee them in the real sense of the word," said Ambedkar. "What is the use of fundamental rights to the negro in America, to the Jews in Germany and to the Untouchables in India? As Burke said, there is no method found for punishing the multitude."

Ask any village policeman in India what his job is and he'll probably tell you it is to "keep the peace." That is done, most of the time, by upholding the caste system. Dalit aspirations are a breach of the peace.

Other contemporary abominations like apartheid, racism, sexism, economic imperialism and religious fundamentalism have been politically and intellectually challenged at international forums. How is it that the practice of caste in India—one of the most brutal modes of hierarchical social organisation that human society has known—has managed to escape similar scrutiny and censure? Perhaps because it has come to be so fused with Hinduism, and by extension with so much that is seen to be kind and good—mysticism, spiritualism, non-violence, tolerance, vegetarianism, Gandhi, yoga, backpackers, the Beatles—that, at least to outsiders, it seems impossible to pry it loose and try to understand it.

To compound the problem, caste, unlike say apartheid, is not colour-coded and therefore not easy to see. Also unlike apartheid, the caste system has buoyant admirers in high places. They argue, quite openly, that caste is a social glue that binds as well as separates people and communities in interesting and, on the whole, positive ways. That it has given Indian society the strength and the flexibility to withstand the many challenges it has had to face. The Indian establishment blanches at the idea that discrimination and violence on the basis of caste can be compared to racism or apartheid. It came down heavily on Dalits who tried to raise caste as an issue at the 2001 World Conference against Racism in Durban, South Africa, insisting that caste was an "internal matter." It showcased theses by well-known sociologists who argued at length that the practice of caste was not the same as racial discrimination, and that caste was not the same as race.

Ambedkar would have agreed with them. However, in the context of the Durban conference, the point Dalit activists were making was that though caste is not the same as race, casteism and racism are indeed comparable. Both are forms of discrimination that target people because of their descent. In solidarity with that sentiment, on 15th January 2014 at a public meeting in Washington DC commemorating the 85th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther King Jr, African Americans signed "The Declaration of Empathy," which called for "an end to the oppression of Dalits in India."

In the current debates about identity and justice, growth and development, for many of the best-known Indian scholars, caste is at best a topic, a subheading, and, quite often, just a footnote. By force-fitting caste into reductive Marxist class analysis, the progressive and left-leaning Indian intelligentsia has made seeing caste even harder. This erasure, this project of unseeing, is sometimes a conscious political act, and sometimes comes from a place of such rarefied privilege that caste has not been stumbled upon, not even in the dark, and therefore it is presumed to have been eradicated, like smallpox.

The origins of caste will continue to be debated by anthropologists for years to come, but its organising principles, based on a hierarchical, sliding scale of entitlements and duties, of purity and pollution, and the ways in which they were, and still are, policed and enforced, are not all that hard to understand. The top of the caste pyramid is considered pure and has plenty of entitlements. The bottom is considered polluted and has no entitlements but plenty of duties. The pollution–purity matrix is correlated to an elaborate system of caste-based, ancestral occupation.

What we call the caste system today is known in Hinduism's founding texts as *varnashrama dharma* or *chaturvarna*, the system of four *varnas*. The approximately 4,000 endogamous castes and sub-castes (*jatis*) in Hindu society, each with its own specified hereditary occupation, are divided into four *varnas*—Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (soldiers), Vaishyas (traders) and Shudras (servants). Outside of these *varnas* are the *avarna* castes, the Ati-Shudras, subhumans, arranged in hierarchies of their own—the Untouchables, the Unseeables, the Unapproachables—whose presence, whose touch, whose very shadow is considered to be polluting by privileged-caste Hindus.

In some communities, to prevent inbreeding, each endogamous caste is divided into exogamous *gotras*. Exogamy is then policed with as much ferocity as endogamy—with beheadings and lynchings that have the approval of the community elders. Each region of India has lovingly perfected its own unique version of caste-based cruelty, based on an unwritten code that is much worse than the old Jim Crow laws in the American south. In addition to being forced to live in segregated settlements, Untouchables were not allowed to use the public roads that privileged castes used, they were not allowed to drink from common wells, they were not allowed into Hindu temples, they were not allowed into privileged-caste schools, they were not permitted to cover their upper bodies, they were only allowed to wear certain kinds of clothes and certain kinds of jewellery. Some castes, like the Mahars, the caste to which Ambedkar belonged, had to tie brooms to their waists to sweep away their polluted footprints; others had to hang spittoons around their necks to collect their polluted saliva. Men of the privileged castes had undisputed rights over the bodies of Untouchable women. Love is polluting. Rape is pure. In many parts of India, much of this continues to this day.

What remains to be said about an imagination, human or divine, that has thought up a social arrangement such as this? As if the *varnashrama dharma* were not enough, there is also the burden of

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karma. Those born into the subordinated castes are supposedly being punished for the bad deeds they have done in their past lives. In effect, they are living out a prison sentence. Acts of insubordination could lead to an enhanced sentence, which would mean another cycle of rebirth as an Untouchable or as a Shudra. So it's best to behave.

"There cannot be a more degrading system of social organisation than the caste system," said Ambedkar. "It is the system that deadens, paralyses and cripples the people from helpful activity." The most famous Indian in the world, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, disagreed. He believed that caste represented the genius of Indian society. In 1921, in his Gujarati journal *Navajivan*, he wrote:

*"I believe that if Hindu society has been able to stand, it is because it is founded on the caste system... To destroy the caste system and adopt the western European social system means that Hindus must give up the principle of hereditary occupation which is the soul of the caste system. Hereditary principle is an eternal principle. To change it is to create disorder. I have no use for a Brahmin if I cannot call him a Brahmin for my life. It will be chaos if every day a Brahmin is changed into a Shudra and a Shudra is to be changed into a Brahmin."*

Though Gandhi was an admirer of the caste system, he believed that there should be no hierarchy between castes; that all castes should be considered equal, and that the avarna castes, the Ati-Shudras, should be brought into the varna system. Ambedkar's response to this was that "the outcaste is a by-product of the caste system. There will be outcastes as long as there are castes. Nothing can emancipate the outcaste except the destruction of the caste system."

It has been almost 70 years since the transfer of power in August 1947 between the imperial British government and the government of India. Is caste in the past?

A lot has changed. India has had a Dalit President (KR Narayanan) and even a Dalit Chief Justice. The rise of political parties dominated by Dalits and other subordinated castes is a remarkable and, in some ways, revolutionary, development. Even if the form it has taken is that a small but visible minority—the leadership—lives out the dreams of the vast majority, given our history, the aggressive assertion of Dalit pride in the political arena can only be a good thing. The complaints about corruption and callousness brought against parties like the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) apply to the older political parties on an even larger scale, but charges levelled against the BSP take on a shriller, more insulting tone because its leader is someone like Mayawati—a Dalit, a single woman, and unapologetic about being both. Whatever the BSP's failings may be, its contribution towards building Dalit dignity is an immense political task that ought never to be minimised. The worry is that even as subordinated castes are becoming a force to reckon with in parliamentary democracy, democracy itself is being undermined in serious and structural ways.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, India, which was once at the forefront of the Non-Aligned Movement, repositioned itself as a "natural ally" of the US and Israel. In the 1990s, the Indian government embarked on a process of dramatic economic reforms, opening up a previously protected market to global capital, with natural resources, essential services and national infrastructure which had been developed over 50 years with public money, now turned over to private corporations. Twenty years later, despite a spectacular Gross Domestic Product growth rate (which has recently slowed down), the new economic policies have led to the concentration of wealth in fewer and fewer hands. Today, India's 100 richest people own assets equivalent to one-fourth of its celebrated GDP. In a nation of 1.2bn, more than 800m people live on less than 20 rupees a day. Giant corporations virtually own and run the country. Politicians and political parties have begun to function as subsidiary holdings of big business.

How has this affected traditional caste networks? Some argue that caste has insulated Indian society and prevented it from fragmenting and atomising like western society did after the Industrial Revolution. Others argue the opposite; they say that the unprecedented levels of urbanisation and the creation of a new work environment have shaken up the old order and rendered caste hierarchies irrelevant, if not obsolete. Both claims deserve serious attention. Pardon the somewhat unliterary interlude that follows, but generalisations cannot replace facts.

A recent list of dollar billionaires published by *Forbes* magazine features 55 Indians. The figures, naturally, are based on revealed wealth. Even among these dollar billionaires the distribution of wealth is a steep pyramid in which the cumulative wealth of the top 10 outstrips the 45 below them. Seven out of those top 10 are Vaishyas, all of them CEOs of major corporations with business interests all over the world. Between them they own and operate ports, mines, oilfields, gas fields, shipping companies, pharmaceutical companies, telephone networks, petrochemical plants, aluminium plants, mobile phone networks, television channels, fresh food outlets, high schools, film production companies, stem cell storage systems, electricity supply networks and Special Economic Zones. Of the remaining 45, 19 are Vaishyas too. The rest are for the most part Parsis, Bohras and Khatris (all mercantile castes) and Brahmins. There are no Dalits or Adivasis in this list.

Apart from big business, Baniyas (Vaishyas) continue to have a firm hold on small trade in cities and on traditional rural moneylending across the country, which has millions of impoverished peasants and Adivasis, including those who live deep in the forests of central India, caught in a spiralling debt trap. The tribal-dominated states in India's northeast—Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Assam—have, since "independence," witnessed decades of insurgency, militarisation and bloodshed. Through all this, Marwari and Bania traders have settled there, kept a low profile, and consolidated their businesses. They now control almost all the economic activity in the

region.

In the 1931 census, which was the last to include caste as an aspect of the survey, Vaishyas accounted for 2.7 per cent of the population, while the Untouchables accounted for 12.5 per cent. Given their access to better healthcare and more secure futures for their children, the figure for Vaishyas is likely to have decreased rather than increased. Either way, their economic clout in the new economy is extraordinary. In big business and small, in agriculture as well as industry, caste and capitalism have blended into a disquieting, uniquely Indian alloy.

Vaishyas are only doing their divinely ordained duty. The Arthashastra, an ancient Indian political treatise written in around 350BC, says usury is the Vaishya's right. The Manusmriti (circa 150 AD) goes further and suggests a sliding scale of interest rates: 2 per cent per month for Brahmins, 3 per cent for Kshatriyas, 4 per cent for Vaishyas and 5 per cent for Shudras. On an annual basis, the Brahmin was to pay 24 per cent interest and the Shudra and Dalit 60 per cent. Even today, for moneylenders to charge a desperate farmer or landless labourer an annual interest of 60 per cent (or more) for a loan is quite normal. If they cannot pay in cash, they have to pay what is known as "bodily interest," which means they are expected to toil for the moneylender from generation to generation to repay impossible debts. It goes without saying that according to the Manusmriti, the ancient treatise of Hindu law, no one can be forced into the service of anyone belonging to a "lower" caste.

Vaishyas control Indian business. What do the Brahmins—the *bhudevas* (gods on earth)—do? The 1931 census puts their population at 6.4 per cent, but, like the Vaishyas and for similar reasons, that percentage too has probably declined. According to a survey by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), from having a disproportionately high number of representatives in parliament, Brahmins have seen their numbers drop dramatically. Does this mean Brahmins have become less influential?

According to Ambedkar, Brahmins, who were 3 per cent of the population in the Madras presidency in 1948, held 37 per cent of the gazetted posts and 43 per cent of the non-gazetted posts in government jobs. There is no longer a reliable way to keep track of these trends because after 1931 the project of unseeing set in. In the absence of information that ought to be available, we have to make do with what we can find. In a 1990 piece entitled "Brahmin Power," the writer Khushwant Singh said:

"Brahmins form no more than 3.5 per cent of the population of our country... today they hold as much as 70 per cent of government jobs. I presume the figure refers only to gazetted posts. In the senior echelons of the civil service from the rank of deputy secretaries upward, out of 500 there are 310 Brahmins—63 per cent; of the 26 state chief secretaries, 19 are Brahmins; of the 27 governors and lieutenant governors, 13 are Brahmins; of the 16 Supreme Court judges, 9 are Brahmins; of the 330 judges of High Courts, 166 are Brahmins; of 140 ambassadors, 58 are Brahmins; of the total 3,300 Indian Administrative Service officers, 2,376 are Brahmins. They do equally well in electoral posts; of the 508 Lok Sabha members, 190 were Brahmins; of 244 in the Rajya Sabha, 89 are Brahmins. These statistics clearly prove that this 3.5 per cent of Brahmin community of India holds between 36 per cent to 63 per cent of all the plum jobs available in the country. How this has come about I do not know. But I can scarcely believe that it is entirely due to the Brahmin's higher IQ."

The statistics Singh cites are a quarter of a century old now. Some new census-based information would help, but is unlikely to be forthcoming. According to a study by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), 47 per cent of all Supreme Court chief justices between 1950 and 2000 were Brahmins. During the same period, 40 per cent of the associate justices in the high courts and lower courts were Brahmin. The Backward Classes Commission, in a 2007 report, said that 37.17 per cent of the Indian bureaucracy was made up of Brahmins. Most of them occupied the top posts.

Brahmins have also traditionally dominated the media. In 2006, the CSDS did a survey on the social profile of New Delhi's media elite. Of the 315 key decision-makers surveyed from 37 Delhi-based Hindi and English publications and television channels, almost 90 per cent of the decision-makers in the English language print media and 79 per cent in television were found to be "upper caste." Of them, 49 per cent were Brahmins. Not one of the 315 was a Dalit or an Adivasi; only 4 per cent belonged to castes designated as Shudra, and 3 per cent were Muslim (who make up 13.4 per cent of the population).

That's the journalists and the "media personalities." Who owns the big media houses that they work for? Of the four most important English national dailies, three are owned by Vaishyas and one by a Brahmin family concern. The Times Group, the largest mass media company in India, whose holdings include the *Times of India* and the 24-hour news channel Times Now, is owned by the Jain family (Banias). The *Hindustan Times* is owned by the Bhatiyas, who are Marwari Banias; the *Indian Express* by the Goenkas, also Marwari Banias; the *Hindu* is owned by a Brahmin family concern; the *Dainik Jagran*, a Hindi daily, which is the largest selling newspaper in India with a circulation of 55m, is owned by the Gupta family, Banias from Kanpur. *Dainik Bhaskar*, among the most influential Hindi dailies with a circulation of 17.5m, is owned by Agarwals, Banias again. Reliance Industries Ltd (owned by Mukesh Ambani, a Gujarati Bania) has controlling shares in 27 major national and regional TV channels. The Zee TV network, one of the largest national TV news and entertainment networks, is owned by Subhash Chandra, also a Bania. (In southern India, caste manifests itself somewhat differently. For example, the Eenadu Group—which owns newspapers, the largest film city in the world and a dozen TV channels, among other things—is headed by Ramoji Rao of the Kamma peasant caste of Andhra Pradesh, which bucks the trend of Brahmin-Bania ownership of big media. Another major media house, the Sun TV group, is owned by the Marans, who are designated as a "backward" caste, but are politically powerful today.)



After independence, in an effort to right a historic wrong, the Indian government implemented a policy of reservation (positive discrimination) in universities and for jobs in state-run bodies for those who belong to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Reservation is the only opportunity the Scheduled Castes have to break into the mainstream. (Of course, the policy does not apply to Dalits who have converted to other religions but continue to face discrimination.) To be eligible for the reservation policy, a Dalit needs to have completed high school.

According to government data, 71.3 per cent of scheduled caste students never start a university course, which means that even for low-end government jobs, the reservation policy only applies to one in every four Dalits. The minimum qualification for a white-collar job is a degree. According to the 2001 census, only 2.24 per cent of the Dalit population are graduates. The policy of reservation, however minuscule the percentage of the Dalit population it applies to, has nevertheless given Dalits an opportunity to find their way into public services, to become doctors, scholars, writers, judges, policemen and officers of the civil service. Their numbers are small, but the fact that there is some Dalit representation in the echelons of power alters old social equations. It creates situations that were unimaginable even a few decades ago in which, say, a Brahmin clerk may have to serve under a Dalit civil servant. Even this tiny opportunity that Dalits have won for themselves washes up against a wall of privileged-caste hostility.

The National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, for example, reports that in federally-owned public sector enterprises, only 8.4 per cent of the “A grade” officers (pardon the horrible term) belong to the scheduled castes, when the figure should be 15 per cent. The same report has some disturbing statistics about the representation of Dalits and Adivasis in India’s judicial services: among Delhi’s 20 High Court judges, not one belonged to the scheduled castes, and in all other judicial posts, the figure was 1.2 per cent; similar figures were reported from Rajasthan; Gujarat had no Dalit or Adivasi judges; in Tamil Nadu, with its legacy of social justice movements, only four out of 38 High Court judges were Dalit; Kerala, with its Marxist legacy, had one Dalit High Court judge among 25. A study of the prison population would probably reveal an inverse ratio.

Former President KR Narayanan, a Dalit himself, was mocked by the judicial fraternity when he suggested that scheduled castes and tribes, who according to the 2011 census make up 25 per cent of India’s 1.2bn population, should find proportionate representation as judges in the Supreme Court. “Eligible persons from these categories are available and their under-representation or non-representation would not be justifiable,” he said in 1999. “Any reservation in judiciary is a threat to its independence and the rule of law,” was the response of a senior Supreme Court advocate. Another high-profile legal luminary said: “Job quotas are a vexed subject now. I believe the primacy of merit must be maintained.”

“Merit” is the weapon of choice for an Indian elite that has dominated a system by allegedly divine authorisation, and denied knowledge—of certain kinds—to the subordinated castes for thousands of years. Now that it is being challenged, there have been passionate privileged-caste protests against the policy of reservation in government jobs and student quotas in universities. The presumption is that “merit” exists in an ahistorical social vacuum and that the advantages that come from privileged-caste social networking and the establishment’s entrenched hostility towards the subordinated castes are not factors that deserve consideration. In truth, “merit” has become a euphemism for nepotism.

In Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU)—which is regarded as a bastion of progressive social scientists and historians—only 3.29 per cent of the faculty is Dalit and 1.44 per cent Adivasi, while the quotas are meant to be 15 per cent and 7.5 per cent respectively. This, despite having supposedly implemented reservation for 27 years. In 2010, when the subject was raised, some of its professors emeritus said that implementing the constitutionally mandated reservation policy would “prevent JNU from remaining one of the premier centres of excellence.” They argued that if reservation was implemented in faculty positions at JNU, “the well-to-do will move to foreign and private universities, and the disadvantaged will no longer be able to get world-class education, which JNU has been so proud to offer them so far.” BN Mallick, a professor of life sciences, was less shy: “Some castes are genetically malnourished and so very little can be achieved in raising them up; and if they are, it would be undoing excellence and merit.” Year after year, privileged-caste students have staged mass protests against reservation across India.

That’s the news from the top. At the other end of New India, the Sachar Committee Report tells us that Dalits and Adivasis still remain at the bottom of the economic pyramid where they always were, below the Muslim community. We know that Dalits and Adivasis make up the majority of the millions of people displaced by mines, dams and other major infrastructure projects. They are the pitifully low-paid farm workers and the contract labourers who work in the urban construction industry. Seventy per cent of Dalits are by and large landless. In states like Punjab, Bihar, Haryana and Kerala, the figure is as high as 90 per cent.

There is one government department in which Dalits are over-represented by a factor of six. Almost 90 per cent of those designated as sweepers—who clean streets, who go down manholes and service the sewage system, who clean toilets and do menial jobs—and employed by the government of India are Dalits. (Even this sector is up for privatisation now, which means private companies will be able to subcontract jobs on a temporary basis to Dalits for less pay and with no guarantee of job security.)

While janitors’ jobs in malls and in corporate offices with swanky toilets that do not involve “manual scavenging” go to non-Dalits, there are (officially) 1.3m people, mostly women, who continue to earn their living by carrying baskets of human shit on their heads as they clean out traditional-style toilets

that use no water. Though it is against the law, the Indian Railways is one of the biggest employers of manual scavengers. Its 14,300 trains transport 25m passengers across 65,000 kilometres every day. Their shit is funnelled straight onto the railway tracks through 172,000 open-discharge toilets. This shit, which must amount to several tonnes a day, is cleaned by hand, without gloves or any protective equipment, exclusively by Dalits. While the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Bill (2012) was cleared by the cabinet and by the Rajya Sabha (the upper house of the Indian parliament) in September 2013, the Indian Railways has ignored it. With deepening poverty and the steady evaporation of government jobs, a section of Dalits has to fiercely guard its "permanent" state employment as hereditary shit-cleaners against predatory interlopers.

A few Dalits have managed to overcome these odds. Their personal stories are extraordinary and inspirational. Some Dalit businessmen and women have come together to form their own institution, the Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DICC), which is praised and patronised by big business and given plenty of play on television and big media because it helps to give the impression that as long as you work hard, capitalism is intrinsically egalitarian.

Time was when a caste Hindu crossing the oceans was said to have lost caste and become polluted. Now, the caste system is up for export. Wherever Hindus go, they take it with them. It exists among the brutalised Tamils in Sri Lanka; it exists among upwardly mobile Indian immigrants in the "Free World," in Europe as well as in the US. For about 10 years, Dalit-led groups in the UK have been lobbying to have caste discrimination recognised by British law as a form of racial discrimination. Caste-Hindu lobbies have managed to scuttle it for the moment. Democracy hasn't eradicated caste. It has entrenched and modernised it.

*Chaturvarnam*, the Hindu term for the caste system, reigns unchallenged: the Brahmin largely controls knowledge; the Vaishya dominates trade. The Kshatriyas have seen better days, but they are still, for the most part, rural landowners. The Shudras live in the basement of the Big House and keep intruders at bay. The Adivasis are fighting for their very survival. And the Dalits—well, we've been through all that.

Can caste be annihilated? Not unless we show the courage to rearrange the stars in our firmament. Not unless those who call themselves revolutionary develop a radical critique of Brahminism. Not unless those who understand Brahminism sharpen their critique of capitalism. Until then we will remain the sick men and women of Hindustan, who seem to have no desire to get well.

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### Frank George

November 17, 2014 at 13:44

My dad is from Southern India, while my mother is European and I'm born here in the UK. As a child I recall visiting my dad's birthplace and despite the fact that our social status benefited us greatly, being put off by the clear stratification of society. The lack of rights was just one problem for the lower castes, but the contempt they were treated with was disgusting. The final straw for me, and which resulted in my eschewing my Indian lineage, was when the university students rioted at the prospect of democracy being extended to the poorest. India is the only country ever, where the supposedly educated student folk hit the streets in protest, some even doused themselves in petrol and set themselves alight! The caste system/mythology is the ultimate tool for subversion. The Brahmin Hindu is born in the top strata because of great things they did in a previous life. The untouchables in theirs because of terrible deeds they committed in their previous life. It's a perfect trap and egregious from every angle, and despite several generations of autonomy and self-determination, vested interests use the British Empire's rule of India as an excuse for the corruption and inefficiencies.

**REPLY**

**Tanmay**

November 19, 2014 at 21:39

What Roy -- unsurprisingly -- declines to acknowledge in this essay is that for the first time since 1947, a lower-caste Indian has led his party to an absolute-majority victory in the recent general elections. Narendra Modi is from the Ghanchi -- "oil-presser" caste, also called Teli in Northern India. He currently enjoys a level of popularity across castes and classes comparable only to that of Indira Gandhi -- the Kashmiri Brahmin -- assassinated in 1984. Modi has directly addressed caste and lower-caste empowerment both during the campaign and since being Prime Minister. In a recent speech to honor a pre-Ambedkar Dalit social reformer, Ayyankali, Modi -- fond of alliterations -- passionately spoke of a formula of "Samata + Mamata" -- meaning economic equality plus compassion. He also said almost exactly the following, translated from Hindi "Unless you see that he (the lower caste) is also our brother, unless you have the feeling that the blood in his veins is the same as in yours, we cannot move ahead..." This is what India needs. Modi's focus on sanitation and other basics, such as a bank account for every Indian -- is appropriate. No matter his past -- anyone interested in the empowerment and progress of the lower castes should acknowledge this. As should Roy.

**REPLY**

**arush**

November 22, 2014 at 07:20

India need to take seriously the problem of caste system which is eroding the country's image not only in the country but also worldwide. People like Arundhati Roy and other social workers are a gem for the Indian society. God bless people like you who take their stand for the upliftment of the downtrodden. Thank You for writing this article....Ma'am.. You are truly the Conscience of India... I salute you.

**REPLY**

**Marx P Selvaraj**

December 2, 2014 at 09:55

Thanks. I have been reading you since you began writing essays. You are the real voice of the voiceless Indians. I am very proud of you. Keep it up.

**REPLY**

**Jerald Nathan**

December 2, 2014 at 10:16

Arundhati Mam.. you are one of the gem in India..

**REPLY**

**Bala Ganesan**

December 3, 2014 at 18:50

Excellent and inspirational article. I am sharing this with my friends.

**REPLY**

**gramian**

December 4, 2014 at 10:00

Varnashramam -the root cause of Indian caste system built upon indian hegemonic language system.Sanskrit the power of Bhramainical discourse, colliding with major other languages is riding the power horse. If all rural living regional languages and their dialects are de-linked from Sanskrit and find their own identity there is a possibility of annihilating the caste system.Scheduled caste,dalits and adhivasis are the proto Indian languages speaking people.

**REPLY**

**rama**

December 4, 2014 at 13:40

Most wicked article . Stop the hindu bashing . I am not supporting the castism , bashing the hinduism is not the solution. Why don't you seek reservation @ elementary school including the institutes run by the minority and make education as fundamental right.

**REPLY**

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