

Difference between Race and Caste: an analysis from the perspective of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar

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Abstract:

Background: Both racial and caste discrimination have a common aspect linking their past, present and perhaps future too, that is the notion of inferior and superior, and this gives rise to the confusion regarding race and caste. The Hindu socio-cultural system was traditionally divided into castes that were exclusive, hereditary, and endogamous. The caste system was ranked, unequal and consequentially appeared to have many of the characteristics of “race.” However, a comparison between certain features of Brahmanic-Indian and Western society will show that caste relations are indeed not race relations.

It has often been claimed due to the confusing similarity of the concepts, that Dr. B.R. Ambedkar has drawn upon his theories of caste discrimination and untouchability from the Marxian concept of class struggle. However, that cannot be true due to the societal differences that the concept of class and caste thrive on.

This paper aims to distinguish the concepts of caste, class and race by limiting its scope to the perspective of Dr. Ambedkar and to demonstrate the implications of Ambedkar’s ideologies on the way the notion of caste has evolved in the Indian societal context.

Materials and Methods: In this research article, secondary method of research has been used to collect information. The material has been obtained through extensive study of books, journals, reviews and editorials as well as the internet, on the intended topic. Thereafter, the gathered information has been put together in a comprehensive manner to suit the purpose of this research paper.

Conclusion: It can be positively concluded that caste cannot in any way, be equated with race. Even though the concepts can be confusingly similar, an in-depth understanding of the social structures and the origins of the two concepts make it very clear that they are inherently different at their very core and that is what Dr. B.R. Ambedkar had tried to emphasize upon all along.

Key Words: Caste discrimination; Race; Class struggle, Untouchability; Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.

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I. INTRODUCTION

“A just society is that society in which ascending sense of reverence and descending sense of contempt is dissolved into the creation of a compassionate society.”

— B.R. Ambedkar, Annihilation of Caste

The Covid-19 affected world is going through a “colour revolution”, shaped by “The Black Lives Matter” movement, which reached new heights after the brutal murder of African-American George Floyd by a White police officer, Derek Chauvin. Today, blacks all across the world are being joined by Asians and White democrats and, are rewriting history by bringing down statues of slave traders and racist people eulogised by the colonialists. The India of today is yet to see a full-fledged movement on a similar scale against caste, even though both racial and caste discrimination have a common aspect linking their past, present and perhaps future too, that is the notion of inferior and superior, and this is exactly where the confusion regarding race and caste arises.

India consists of a huge population encompassing many obvious physical variations, including but not limited to light skins to some of the darkest in the world, and a large variety of facial features. Such variations are a result of years of natural selection in tropical and semitropical environments; of genetic drift among small populations; and of migrations and contact between people. The Hindu socio-cultural system was traditionally divided into castes that were exclusive, hereditary, and endogamous. The caste system was ranked, unequal and consequentially, appeared to have many of the characteristics of “race.” However, the difference lies in the fact that the caste system does not have its basis primarily rooted in skin colour, as castes include people of all physical variations. It was also not based on scientific notions of inferiority and superiority. It is true that some early 20th-century European scholars did try to divide Indian and other Asian people into races, but their efforts

were hindered not only by the complexity of physical variations of people in these regions, but also by the developing fields of science.

Castes are basically occupational groups in a complex societal system that confers different values and degrees of purity to different occupations. This system is also the main regulator of marriage and inheritance rights. Some castes were originally small-scale tribal groups who were incorporated into the Hindu kingdoms. It has been observed that there are thousands of castes in India and many different methods of ranking them, including, with the help of cultural features as food taboos and sharing obligations, but none of them arise from skin colour or “race.”¹

The historical concept of race has faced substantial scientific as well as philosophical challenge. Some prominent thinkers deny both the logical coherence of the concept, as also the very existence of races. Both in the past and in the present, determining clear boundaries for races has proven to be tedious and has led to great variations in the number of races that are believed to exist. Therefore, some thinkers have categorised humans into four distinct races (typically white or Caucasian, Black or African, yellow or Asian, and red or Native American), and have downplayed any biological differences within racial groups (for instance, those between Scandinavians and Spaniards within the white or Caucasian race). Other thinkers have classified humans into many more racial categories, such as by arguing that humans indigenous to Europe could be distinguished into Nordic, Alpine, and Mediterranean races.²

Social scientists have been relying upon the notion that race relations are like caste relations. However, a comparison between certain features of Brahmanic-Indian and Western society will show that caste relations are indeed not race relations. Brahmanism and capitalism are two separate forms of social organisation, where castes and class exploitation respectively are inherent in them. Race relations can be best studied as a form of class exploitation; and the assumption that they are caste relations is confusing and misleading.³

II. MATERIAL AND METHODS

In this research article, secondary method of research has been used to collect information. The material has been obtained through extensive study of books, journals, reviews and editorials as well as the internet, on the intended topic. Thereafter, the gathered information has been put together in a comprehensive manner to suit the purpose of this research paper.

III. CASTE VERSUS RACE

It is important to point out some contrasts between caste and race. The system of caste crystallised over several millennia of Indian history, primarily as a perspective which sanctioned pastoral colonisers from the Northwest of the subcontinent to gradually colonise thousands of groups and communities who were previously not organised into castes. The new framework allowed the dominant local groups to organise their local subordinates into a system which consolidated purity, rank and occupation into a single status system. This is drastically different from the concept of whiteness as a criteria of domination in colonial and later independent US.

Then, there comes the issue of purity and pollution, which is seen as the driving source of caste ideology in India, whereas in the US, the polluting status of black Americans is an effect of racialised ranking but not the cause. Additionally, the Indian caste system is structured in the form of infinite caste ranks, and many Indian villages sometimes have more than thirty hierarchically ranked castes (jatis), all keenly aware of who is above them and who is below.

Finally, while the top of the Indian caste system which consists of ‘Brahmins’, is permanent, closed and utterly unquestionable, the bottom which is defined by ‘Dalits’ (Untouchables) is porous, since every Indian caste, including the lowest, has some or the other group that is lower than them. Basically, no group in India, no matter how low, lacks a group beneath them that makes them feel purer. This is very different from the exclusionary concept of race, which is binary (white versus black) and lacks any cosmological basis for one black person to feel racially superior to another black.⁴

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/race-human/Indias-caste-system>

² <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/race/>

³ Cox, Oliver C. “Race and Caste: A Distinction.” *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 50, no. 5, 1945, pp. 360–368. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/2771189. Accessed 17 Apr. 2021.

⁴ <https://thewire.in/books/book-review-isabel-wilkerson-caste-racism-america>

While the tendency to equate race and caste is not at all sustainable, it is all the more difficult to eradicate caste discrimination as compared to racism due to the fact that caste discrimination is sanctioned by religion.⁵

IV. DR. B.R. AMBEDKAR: WAS HIS IDEOLOGY ON CASTE BASED ON MARX'S CONCEPT OF CLASS? ARE CASTE AND CLASS THE SAME?

Karl Marx acquired the ideas of class and class struggle from utopian socialism and the theories of Henri de Saint-Simon, and thereafter made class struggle the central point of social evolution. *"The history of all hitherto existing human society is the history of class struggles."*⁶ According to Marx, the dialectical character of history is expressed in class struggle. With the development of capitalism, class struggle takes a drastic form. Two basic classes, around which other less important classes are grouped, counter each other in the capitalist system: the "bourgeoisie" (owners of means of production), and the "proletariat" (workers).⁷

Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar was born eight years after the death of Karl Marx. Dr. Ambedkar, who wrote 'Buddha or Karl Marx', championed the cause of social justice and annihilation of caste in the Indian society. And he wrote 'Annihilation of Caste' precisely 88 years after Marx's groundbreaking work, 'The Communist Manifesto'. Now if Karl Marx could have time travelled to the 20th century in order to have a one-on-one conversation with Dr. Ambedkar, it would definitely make for a stirring debate. But since that has not happened, various groups have often drawn a common ground between Marxism and Dalit politics espoused by Ambedkar, both of which aim to strike at the roots of exploitation of the oppressed. However, Marx's notions are in no way applicable to the Indian caste system as these are heavily influenced by the societal and geographical differences that are apparent in the Indian society. Karl Marx was a German philosopher who travelled extensively across Germany, France, Belgium, and the United Kingdom, and thus his concepts are based on the social practices of those geographical areas. India, on the other hand, has been deeply shaped by its culture and myriad traditions and hosts different communities with diverse practices. The caste system in India is a product of centuries of evolution based on our geography and history. Karl Marx could not possibly fathom the depth of the societal construct of the caste system in India, having neither ever travelled to India nor studying the Indian society in the first place.

The caste system is a communal exploitative system and it is important to note that it is not a purely economic category. The Marxist theory of class struggle has essentially evolved from the Industrial Revolution in Manchester and Marxism can be said to be essentially a European theory written in an atmosphere devoid of the complexities of the caste system and community ownership⁸. No such revolution has taken place in India or has influenced the thoughts of Dr. Ambedkar on caste, as the cause as well as the atmosphere for his 'Annihilation of Caste' are radically different. It is also important to emphasise on the central role that slavery played in developments leading up to the industrial revolution⁹, which in turn gave birth to Marx's 'Das Kapital', as this is a huge point of difference between class and caste. India never witnessed slavery in that form, even though it had untouchability, which is a concept radically different from that of traditional slavery that existed in the American society. Even the Quran and the 'hadith' (sayings of Muhammad) address slavery extensively, assuming its existence as part of society, as slavery was a mainstay of life in pre-Islamic Arabia and surrounding lands. Again, this has never been the case in the Indian society and its traditions, cultures as well as practices are radically different, and cannot be equated in any way to that of the Islamic or American societies.

Thus it has been rightly observed by N. Muthumohan and D. Raja in their 'Continuing the Dialogue' that: *"The historical context of Ambedkar in the 20th century is fundamentally different from that of Marx in the 19th century."*¹⁰

Ambedkar denounced the element of violence in the Marxist concept and also criticised Marxists for turning a blind eye to the realities of caste. Unlike Marxists, Dr. Ambedkar pays special attention to religion. *"To ignore religion is to ignore a live wire."* he has said. *"As for Marxism itself, Ambedkar was both attracted and alienated by it,"* scholar Gail Omvedt says summing up the contentious relation Ambedkar had with Marxism.¹¹

⁵ https://brill.com/view/journals/coso/1/2/article-p115_1.xml

⁶ Marx, Karl, 1818-1883. *The Communist Manifesto*. London ; Chicago, Ill. :Pluto Press, 1996.

⁷ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Marxism/Class-struggle>

⁸ Marx and Ambedkar: *Continuing the Dialogue*; N. Muthumohan, D. Raja, New Century Book House

⁹ Williams, Eric: *Capitalism and slavery*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944.

¹⁰ *Continuing the Dialogue*; N. Muthumohan, D. Raja, New Century Book House

¹¹ <https://www.thehindu.com/books/books-reviews/marx-and-ambedkar-continuing-the-dialogue-review-common-ground/article24532904.ece>

V. HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF DR. B.R. AMBEDKAR'S SOCIO-CULTURAL THOUGHTS

While drafting the Constitution of India, Dr. Ambedkar acknowledged the threats to the democratic and egalitarian ethos that he wanted to infuse within the nation. Therefore, for him, the Constitution was not only a means to provide rights to the citizens, but was also meant to act as a barrier to keep these threats from establishing any form of dictatorship. He has been recognised as a thinker aware of larger changes taking place in Western academia in the early twentieth century. Franz Boas' ideas about race, via Alexander Goldenweiser heavily influenced Ambedkar's political thought.

The first half of the 20th century saw an abandonment of positivist theories that identified social sciences as a continuation of natural sciences, that is, positivism explained through natural laws that would fit in any given society despite distinctive contexts or cultures. This type of thinking informed notions of racial superiority across the globe. At the turn of the 20th century, prominent scholars at Columbia University such as John Dewey and Franz Boas began to challenge these notions.¹²

While Ambedkar was at Columbia University, he familiarised himself with notions that rejected the rigidity of racial hierarchies. Ambedkar followed in the footsteps of Boas, who rejected the idea that untouchables' place in society was determined by their alleged racial inferiority. On the contrary, Dr. Ambedkar emphasised upon the importance of culture, consisting of the environment, psychology and language; and adopted this mode of thinking to bring forth the idea that untouchability was neither fixed nor hereditary. It was a cultural problem that ought to be fought and eradicated.

For Boas, '*Historical events appear to have been much more potent in leading races to civilization than their innate faculty, and it follows that achievements of race do not without further proof warrant assumption that one race is more highly gifted than another*'.¹³ In other words, human difference is essentially cultural rather than racial. Franz Boas was of the opinion that a nation was not '*defined by its descent but by its language and customs*'.¹⁴ Regardless of their descent, anyone could adapt and learn other cultures. This was a common phenomenon in Europe, just like '*Germanized Slavs and French have become German in their culture, as the Frenchified Germans have become French, the Russianized ones Russian; so have the German Jews become Germans*'. Thus, Boas denied any link between race and nation; and substituted race with culture as the key factor in formation of communities.

Ambedkar's ideas were based on caste, which is dependant on nation and culture, unlike in Marxism. Ambedkar, just like Boas, adopted a fluid conception of culture and rejected the idea that untouchables were racially inferior to the rest of the population. In contrast to Boas, Dr. Ambedkar stressed on the psychological aspect in construction of identities, such as caste. It seems that he was influenced by John Dewey and Alexander Goldenweiser in this aspect.

Indian immigrants in places like the USA or UK, barely face caste discrimination as within the framework of the Indian society. There is the question of skin colour (race) in foreign settings, however the question of belonging to a lower caste would not typically exist. This is an important indicator of the fact that caste is heavily influenced by the society and environment in which it thrives. In a certain piece, Boas has observed that, '*American-born descendants of immigrants differ in type from their foreign-born parents*'.¹⁵ Such differences have been attributed to the 'influence of American environment'. Dr. Ambedkar has rejected the racial difference of untouchables along similar lines as Boas refuted the racial inferiority of Jews. Similarly, Indian immigrants in foreign settings, after a few generations, blend within that environment and are unaffected

¹² The legacy of Dewey's ideas on Ambedkar has been studied by several authors including Arun P. Mukherjee, 'B.R. Ambedkar, John Dewey, and the meaning of democracy', in *New literary history*, Vol. 40, no. 2 (2009), pp.345-370; Christophe Jaffrelot, *Dr. Ambedkar and untouchability: Analysing and fighting caste* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005); Meera Nanda, *Prophets facing backward: Postmodern critiques of science and Hindu nationalism in India* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003) and Scott R Stroud, 'Pragmatism and the pursuit of social justice in India: Bhimrao Ambedkar and the rhetoric of religious reorientation', in *Rhetoric Society quarterly*, Vol. 46, no. 1 (2016), pp. 4-27.

¹³ Franz Boas, *The Mind of Primitive Man* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1944), p. 16.

¹⁴ Stocking, George W. "Franz Boas and the Culture Concept in Historical Perspective." *American Anthropologist*, vol. 68, no. 4, 1966, pp. 867–882. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/670404. Accessed 14 May 2021.

¹⁵ Franz Boas. 'Changes in Bodily Form of Descendants of Immigrants', in *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 14 (1912), p. 530.

by the caste constructs of the Indian society, as we have discussed that culture is the key element in the formation of communities.

The rejection of race as a determinant of social structure has also played a crucial role in the work of Goldenweiser. Similar to Boas, Goldenweiser too observed that human behaviour was primarily determined by cultural differences learnt through social interaction.¹⁶ In his work 'Race and Culture', Goldenweiser has observed that: '*It so happens that race is not merely a physical fact, is not merely a psychological fact—and in both these capacities we might as well disregard it on this occasion—but race today has once more, as so often before, become a state of mind. Race is a state of mind. It is an attitude. We are replete with it.*'¹⁷

VI. AMBEDKAR ON UNTOUCHABILITY

Dr. Ambedkar challenged the theories that attributed a lower caste status to an inferior racial background, since he needed to demonstrate that untouchables were not inherently inferior to the rest of the Indian society. For Ambedkar, the practice of untouchability was learnt through social interaction rather than being dictated by race or a divine source. Further, he tried to demonstrate that caste and untouchability were dynamic and prone to change. And therefore, the problems posed by caste would not exist in Western society since the element of social interaction with people belonging to the same casteist mindset would be absent in a foreign society. In fact, caste barriers can be broken by geographical mobilisation as interaction with other communities would give rise to the obliteration of caste and the issues accompanying it.

Ambedkar's opinions on untouchability were in contrast with popular explanations of the origin of untouchability in India. Former low-caste leaders like Jyotirao Phule and M.C. Rajah had argued that untouchables were the original inhabitants of the subcontinent. According to this version, untouchables were part of a different race that needed to be protected after centuries of oppression at the hands of Aryan-Hindu conquerors. Phule's work is evidence of the fact that racial theories about untouchability were alive and well even before Ambedkar's time. However, Dr. Ambedkar rejected that idea, as this would justify the position of untouchables at the bottom of the Indian society. In 1916, he presented the paper 'Castes in India: Their mechanism, genesis and development' as part of Goldenweiser's course in Columbia. In this piece, he attempted to explain the origin of caste and not surprisingly, reflected some of the main elements of the Boasian school of thought. 'Castes in India' in fact comes across as a vehement rejection of racial theories to explain the caste system. From the beginning, Dr. Ambedkar has downplayed the importance of race in India. He observed that the people of the subcontinent were 'a mixture of Aryans, Dravidians, Mongolians and Scythians.' This made racial differences almost irrelevant as 'ethnically all people are heterogeneous.'¹⁸

Ambedkar also very carefully emphasized on the point that racial explanations of the caste system were flawed and based on foreign speculations of the Indian society. Ambedkar argues that '*European students of caste have unduly emphasised the role of colour in the caste system. Themselves impregnated by colour prejudices, they very readily imagined it to be the chief factor in the caste problem. But nothing can be farther from the truth.*'¹⁹ He continued to denounce the ideas of Herbert Rislley, one of the biggest proponents of racial theories of caste, as someone who 'makes no new point deserving of special attention'.²⁰ Furthermore, Ambedkar considered evolutionists and eugenic theories so absurd that, like Boas and Goldenweiser, he didn't even bother to discuss them in great detail:

"Without stopping to criticize those theories that explain the caste system as a natural phenomenon occurring in obedience to the law of disintegration, as explained by Herbert Spencer in his formula of evolution, or as natural as 'the structural differentiation within an organism'—to employ the phraseology of orthodox apologist—, or as an early attempt to test the laws of eugenics— as all belonging to the same class of fallacy which regards the caste system as inevitable, or as being consciously imposed in anticipation of these laws on a humble population, I will now lay before you my own view on the subject."

¹⁶ On Boas and race see Thomas Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); For Goldenweiser see his 'Race and Culture in the Modern World', in *Journal of Social Forces*, Vol. 3 (1924), pp.127-136.

¹⁷ Goldenweiser, 'Race and Culture', p. 127.

¹⁸ B.R. Ambedkar, 'Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development' in Vasant Moon, ed., *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches* (21 vol., Bombay: Education Department, Gov. of Maharashtra, 1979-2006 [1916]), 1, p. 6.

¹⁹ Ambedkar, 'Castes in India', p. 21.

²⁰ Ambedkar, 'Castes in India', p. 8 This point was also noted by Ishita Banerjee-Dube in 'Caste, Race and Difference: The Limits of Knowledge and Resistance', *Current Sociology*, Vol. 62(2014), pp.512-530.

Instead, Dr. Ambedkar highlighted the crucial role played by culture and psychology in the genesis and development of caste. He demonstrated that caste was not immutable and that it could change with time. Ambedkar's thesis was based on four main points. First, he showed that India has a deep cultural unity despite the diverse nature of the Hindu population. Second, he observed that caste was a parcelling of a larger cultural unit into bits. This was possible to achieve by making endogamy sacred to Hindu society. Endogamy was important in order to prevent 'surplus women' and 'surplus men' from abandoning their homes and joining another group that could pollute their original community. Third, Ambedkar defended the idea that there was only one caste, i.e., Brahmins, by explaining that before the caste system even spread, the population of the subcontinent was divided into classes.²¹ Fourth, Ambedkar argued that the dissemination of caste in India could not be explained religiously by the creation of the Laws of Manu. This is because the Laws of Manu reflected practices already in existence in Indian society rather than imposing new stipulations to be followed. Building on the ideas of the French sociologist Gabriel Tarde and Walter Bahegot,²² Dr. Ambedkar argued that endogamy became a fashion in India first practiced by Brahmins and the practice was then replicated by other 'sub-divisions' of Indian society and eventually transformed into castes.²³

In his words:

*"Endogamy or the closed-door system, was a fashion in the Hindu society, and as it had originated from the Brahmin caste it was whole-heartedly imitated by all the non-Brahmin sub-divisions or classes, who in their turn, became endogamous castes. It is 'the infection of imitation' that caught all these sub-divisions on their onward march of differentiation and has turned them into castes. The propensity to imitate is a deep-seated one in the human mind and need not be deemed an inadequate explanation for the formation of the various castes in India."*²⁴

Therefore, caste was neither racial, pre-social nor fixed in time. According to Ambedkar, caste was derivative of the practice of endogamy and involved environmental, psychological and cultural elements. It was specific to the Indian culture and society, and was disseminated through imitation. This would mean that caste could be unlearned as well as transformed.

VII. PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATIONS OF DR. AMBEDKAR'S IDEOLOGIES

Dr. Ambedkar's implementation of anthropological ideas went beyond academia. He continued to apply the ideas inspired by Boas and Goldenweiser to reject the practice of untouchability in India, and to separate himself from other politicians who claimed to represent untouchables. His rejection of racial theories on untouchability was constant throughout his academic and professional career, both in politics and in his written work. For example, in 1928 Ambedkar was invited to make a submission to the Indian Statutory Commission (Simon Commission) which was appointed to investigate the constitutional future of India. He gave evidence on the issue of the 'Depressed Classes'. On 29 May 1928, he demanded joint electorates, adult franchise, and reservation of seats for untouchables in India. Even though his demands were not acknowledged by the commission at that time, Dr. Ambedkar made sure that it was clear that he did not share the racial explanation of untouchability that M.C. Rajah had defended a few days ago. Following this, he rose to the centre stage of Indian politics and was made a part of different committees that were created to assess the problem of untouchability in India.

In 'Annihilation of Caste' (1936), which was one of his seminal works, Dr. Ambedkar again rejected the notion of singularity of a racial origin of untouchables. He was on the same page as Franz Boas on the idea that, to treat caste differences as racial differences was 'a gross perversion of facts'. In his words:

"What racial affinity is there between the Brahmin of the Punjab and the Brahmin of Madras? What racial affinity is there between the untouchable of Bengal and the untouchables of Madras? What racial difference is

²¹ Ambedkar's vision of classes in India reflects the varna system. However, Ambedkar argues that such division were flexible and people were able change their 'classes according to their qualifications.

²² Ambedkar used mainly Tarde's book *Laws of imitation* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1903).

²³ B.R. Ambedkar, 'Castes in India'

²⁴ The phrase 'the infection of imitation' comes from the work of Walter Bahegot, an English journalist, economist and political theorist. See his *Physics and Politics: Or Thoughts on the Application of the Principles of Natural Selection and Inheritance to Political Society* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench Trubner and Co. LTD, 1891), p. 95.

*there between the Brahmin of the Punjab and the Chamar of the Punjab? What racial difference is there between the Brahmin of Madras and the Pariah of Madras? The Brahmin of the Punjab is racially of the same stock as the Chamar of the Punjab and the Brahmin of Madras is of the same race as the Pariah of Madras. Caste system does not demarcate racial division.”*²⁵

Dr. Ambedkar also took up the question of the Aryan race in ‘Who were the Shudras?’, written in 1946. He followed the work of W.Z. Ripley²⁶, and observed that race would signify ‘*a body of people possessing certain typical traits which are hereditary.*’²⁷

Further, he continued on the footsteps of Dewey, and to a lesser extent Goldenweiser, in his belief that psychology was closely linked to experience, and that these were vital in the formation of individuals and communities. Dr. Ambedkar was convinced that through meaningful experiences, individuals would have the ability to question their conditions and modify them. Since his ‘Annihilation of Caste’, he argued that caste and untouchability transcended the limits of being merely social practices. He discovered that the caste system also had a psychological effect on people by altering the way individuals behave among others and how individuals or groups think of themselves. Similar to the way that Goldenweiser did years before him, Dr. Ambedkar explained that caste was not a ‘*physical object like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire which prevents the Hindus from co-mingling and which has, therefore, to be pulled down. Caste is a notion, it is a state of the mind.*’²⁸

Such a state of mind would be relevant to the society in which it thrives. When it is taken out of the social setting that caste thrives on in the first place, then the state of mind also would cease to exist, and would further be shaped by the society it is being put in.

As noted above, Ambedkar did not follow blindly the work of Boas. Rather, he improved upon it to suit his political and ideological battles against untouchability in the Indian context. In doing so, Ambedkar made arguments similar to prominent Western academicians such as Ruth Benedict and Alexander Lesser. It is important to note that Dr. Ambedkar’s relationship with anthropology does not end there. To mention a few examples, in his seminal work, ‘The Interpretation of Cultures’, Clifford Geertz draws several times from Ambedkar’s concept of nationalism as a ‘feeling of a corporate sentiment of oneness’.²⁹ In the same manner, Louis Dumont in his ‘Homo Hierarchicus’, without acknowledging Ambedkar, defines caste as a state of mind.³⁰

Thus evidently, Dr. Ambedkar was not only as an informed scholar of fashionable theories of the West, but also as a well refined analyst, innovator and practitioner of the things that he so firmly believed in.³¹

VIII. CONCLUSION

In the light of Dr. Ambedkar’s ideas of the caste system and rejection of racial concepts in India, it is safe to say that the concepts of caste and race are radically distinct, based on their geographical and social conditions. It would automatically flow that the issues pertaining to caste would not exist in any foreign society in the same way as it does in the Indian society, as taken away from the societal environmental context, caste would cease to have the stronghold that it has within the Indian framework, and vice versa in the case of race in the Indian societal structure.

Thus, it can be positively concluded that caste cannot in any way, be equated with race. Even though the concepts can be confusingly similar, an in-depth understanding of the social structures and the origins of the two concepts make it very clear that they are inherently different at their very core and that is what Dr. B. R. Ambedkar had tried to emphasize upon all along.

²⁵ B.R. Ambedkar, ‘Annihilation of Caste’ in Vasant Moon (ed), Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches (21 vol., Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1979-2006 [1936]), 1, p. 48. Here Ambedkar quotes from the Indian archeologist D.R. Bhandarkar who claimed that ‘There is hardly a class, or Caste in India which has not a foreign strain in it. There is an admixture of alien blood not only among the warrior classes—the Rajputs and the Marathas—but also among the Brahmins who are under the happy delusion that they are free from all foreign elements.’

²⁶ William Z. Ripley, *The Races of Europe: A Sociological Study* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Turner & Co, 1900).

²⁷ Ambedkar, ‘Who were the Shudras?’, p. 66.

²⁸ Ambedkar, ‘Annihilation of Caste’, p. 68.

²⁹ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973), pp. 256-292.

³⁰ Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 34.

³¹ B.R. Ambedkar, *Franz Boas and the rejection of racial theories of untouchability.* / Chairez-Garza, Jesus.

“Once you clear the minds of the people of this misconception and enable them to realise that what they are told is religion is not religion, but that it is really law, you will be in a position to urge its amendment or abolition.”
— B.R. Ambedkar, Annihilation of Caste

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