

Caste and Race: Analogy or Juxtaposition? ***The relationship between Dalit and African American women*** **Course: Genders, Sexualities, and Race: An Intersectional Perspective**

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ABSTRACT

This project aims to demonstrate the similarities and differences between the lives of Dalit and African American women to understand the comparison and connection between the caste system in India and the system of racial segregation in the United States, and to explore the cross cultural applications of caste interaction.

Longstanding habits, prejudices, and assumptions largely impact individuals' identities. The era of upheaval we live in today calls for new ways of understanding how we interconnect and *caste* is the intrinsic framework for people's understanding of self and society. Based on my research on Black women and conversations with Dalit women, both groups in current times are subject to sexual and racial discrimination— oppression, hypersexualization, fetishization, and barriers in education/ workforce— on the assumptions of physical and biological characteristics they didn't apportion meaning to, but that get applied to in our society.

As an Indian woman in America with a strong need to protect human rights, and a witness to both systems of social hierarchies, I will explore the extent to which Dalit and African American women's lives are influenced by their respective political hierarchies, with a focus on access to education. I conclude that the caste model cannot be applied universally; instead, there are parts of it that remain the same and instances that vary with changes in the political context that the caste system is set in. These similarities and differences are a result of the connection and contentions in the experience of Dalit and Black women.

Keywords: social stratification, discrimination, untouchability, racial hierarchies

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I. INTRODUCTION

The term *caste* is loosely described as a social strata of a Hindu society. However, Berreman refers to it as a "hierarchy of endogamous divisions in which membership is hereditary and per-manent"(Berreman, 1960, p. 120) and it is universally applicable to "societies with systems of hierarchical, endogamous subdivisions whose membership is hereditary and perma-nent, wherever they occur (127)". Caste is an arbitrary ranking of human value, which is the basis, in a hierarchy, for a portioning of respect, benefit of the doubt, access to resources or the lack thereof, and assumptions of competence, intelligence, and beauty. While some scholars including Warner, Davis, Gardners, and Dollard agree that the Hindu caste system can be applied cross-culturally to the social stratification of political democracies— especially United States— as the term 'Black' is analogous to 'low caste' (Immerwahr, 2007, 275), Cox suggests that the comparison of the Indian caste system with the American system of racial segregation is invalid (Cox, 2014).

In sociological contexts, social stratification may be best understood through the political context in which it arises and is maintained (Brotz, 1959, 511). Colonial history, government policies, cultures, and traditions allow certain groups to dominate over the rest; thereby, fostering stratification. Inter-caste and inter-racial attitudes and behaviors "when viewed as rela-tions among people" (Berreman, 1960, 127) between India and the southern United States are "remarkably similar in view of the differences in cultural context"(Berreman, 1960, p. 127); but there are several innate structural differences in their respective hierarchies due to religion, colonialism, traditions, and culture, itself. Either way, this comparison allows one to better understand our respective social hierarchies within the larger context of the world.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Multi Caste hierarchical system in India vs. Biracial stratification of America

According to the caste rules presented in the Dharmaśāstra— "the sacred law texts that have, directly or indirectly, served as a guide for Hindu conduct for about two thousand years" (Orenstein, 1965, p. 1)-- the hindu caste system consists of four castes or *varnas*: *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya*, and *Shudra*. Then there are dalits,

also called 'untouchables.' On the other hand, the United States has been perceived by Benjamin Franklin as a tri-racial society based on skin color– "the lovely white," black, and "tawny" (Martinez, 1993, 28). However, racially, America is stratified into four groups– Native Americans, African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans– each of which shares different experiences of racism. However, the system still lacks a concrete recognition of contemporary groups as, unlike India where caste is economic, the US lacks real distinctions in race. Therefore, I address the bifold racial stratification of the United States consisting of only Blacks and Whites.

Ideal attitude in India vs. Actual behavior in America

When compared to Black-White interactions in America, caste in India is passively accepted and endorsed by everybody on the basis of religious and philosophical explanations that are generally subscribed to (Cox, 1987, 10). According to Cox, this comparison is invalid because it compares an idealized and unrealistic view of Indian caste with a relatively more pragmatic and realist view of race relations in the United States. "Indian caste is viewed as it is supposed to work rather than as it does work; American race relations are seen as they do work rather than as they are supposed, by the privileged, to work" (Berremen, 1960, 121). Thus, more than *real* interactions, *ideal* intercaste behaviors are similar between the two countries. He concludes by saying that in contrast to the US context, where he believes objection is directed to the caste system as a whole, "reform movements aimed at lower castes within India (including those inspired by anti-caste religions like Buddhism and Christianity)" (Thomas, 2014, 371) have been "unable, in practice, to remain casteless" (Berremen, 1960, 125)

Origin: Religious vs. Economic

Cox and Berremen's works complement each other in ways that they both believe that the Hindu caste system is a religious hierarchy while the American racial system is an economic hierarchy. In *Caste, Class, and Race*, Cox writes, "race prejudice originates in capitalist economic exploitation, not in ethnocentrism or intolerance" (Thomas, 2014, 368). According to him, racial hostility began with the commercialization of human labor in the Americas and the East Indies due to rivalry among traders for the capitalist exploitation of these regions' natural resources, the Catholic Church's waning power, and the rise of nationalism in Europe. Thus, "racial segregation in the US context could [can] only be maintained by violence or the threat of it [whereas] caste was [is] a religiously generated and accepted ideology in India" (Thomas, 2014, 367). The Hindu caste system is derived from religion and free from racial antagonism because "caste barriers in the caste system are never challenged; they are sacred to caste and caste alike" (Cox, 1942, 222). Thus, a major difference between the two forms of social stratification is that in the United States, "color is a conspicuous mark of caste, while in India there are complex religious features which do not appear in America" (Berremen, 1960, 122).

However, research suggests that American society is equally dependent on religion. Unlike Hinduism, Christianity doesn't really say there should be castes but there are Biblical justifications to native American oppression. "Puritan theology carries with it a racist ideology" (Holladay, 2012, 584). Slavery defenders often allude to the fifth proposition of the "principles of Christianity" in the Bible:

"That if one, or more decisions of the written word of God, sanction the rectitude of any human acquisitions, for instance, the acquisition of a servant by inheritance or purchase, whoever believes that the written word of God is verity itself, must consequently believe in the absolute rectitude of slave-holding" (Matthews, 1977, 212).

While there are debates over the Bible being pro-slavery, the Noah narrative in Genesis 9 and 10, where Noah curses the line of his son Ham with enslavement, is employed by both American and European Bible translators to explain racial identities and race-based slavery (Johnson, 2010, 14). "The prophecy of Noah was to be fulfilled, not in the individuals named, but nationality in their descendants"(Morrison, 1980,18). The Noah's curse is taken further to justify that since the African slaves were descendants of Ham, "their slavery is "divinely inspired" (18). It is "an accomplishment of Noah's prediction" (18). An article in the *Richmond Enquirer* stated that "'the present condition of the African is inevitable; all efforts to extinguish black slavery are idle" (18).

White Southern Protestants believed that slavery was *ordained of God*. The power of slave owners over slaves resembled the power of husbands over wives and of parents over children because biblical explanations had incorporated slavery into a system of tidy, domestic hierarchies. According to the justifications, slavery was legal since it was similar to marriage (Jemison, 2013, 255). Emancipation, on the other hand, would "ruin" the slaves and "endanger the very existence of the Nation"(Morrison, 1980, 28). In these ways, slavery– and colonialism itself– is justified as a way to not enslave the Americans' land but save their souls. Similarly, the Hindu caste system is not entirely religious. There are religious, biological, as well as racial theories behind the origin of the Hindu caste system.

According to the Rig Veda, an ancient Hindu text, the primordial man, Purush, destroyed himself in order to create a human civilization, and the various portions of his body produced the four distinct varnas. His head was populated by Brahmins, his hands by Kshatriyas, his thighs by Vaishyas, and his feet by Shudras. The falling

sequence of the many organs from which the Varnas were formed determines the Varna hierarchy (Deshpande, 2010, 17).

As per the biological theory, every living creature possesses a trait from one of three qualities or *gunas*: *Rajas*, *Tamas*, and *Sattva* (Deshpande, 2010, 18). Each *guna* represents a *varna*, a shade of texture or color symbolic of emotional state and mental temper: *Sattva* is white, *Rajas* are red, and *Tamas* is black (Deshpande, 2010, 18). One's Varna is determined by the nature of one's acts, the nature of one's ego, the color of one's knowledge, the texture of one's understanding, the temperament of one's fortitude, and the brilliance of one's bliss (Lahiri, 2010). These factors, when combined in different ratios, make up the group or class of temperamentally diverse people found around the world (Lahiri, 2010). According to this theory, the *Sattva* traits are typically passed down to the *Brahmins* (Lahiri, 2010). The *Dalits* inherit the *Tamas* traits, whereas the Kshatriyas and Vaishyas inherit the *Raja* attributes (Daniel, 2010).

Although the theory is considered biological, it is a non-existential racial primordial myth that internalizes the idea that the upper caste is born with good temperaments. Although this is like the myth that "White people are inherently smarter," there is little evidence that both these myths are true.

Historically, however, it is believed that the caste system was established in India with the advent of the Aryans in 1500 BC, when an individual's caste was mostly determined by their skin tone (Daniel, 2010). The word "varna" refers to color rather than caste or status (Ghurye, 1969, 163). The Aryans called the previous settlers "dark color [ed]," "people without noses," and applied them to the term *dasa*, which in Iranian means enemy," after encountering people who were particularly dark in color and had somewhat crooked noses (Ghurye, 1969, 165).

All in all, the US was an economic system that used religion to justify the economic relations of caste; however, there are no clear explanations for it in India except traditional ancient Indian beliefs. Thus, it is possible to assume that economics arose from the caste system in India whereas economics led to the racial system in America.

Economic Connections & Comparisons

Berremman believes that castes are interdependent economically in both locations as they have intricate barriers preventing free social interaction between them as well as significant economic disparities. Although there are significant disparities in power and privilege within and across caste (including class divisions within them) and complex restrictions on their ability to interact freely in society, "similarities in the two caste systems extend throughout the range of behavior and attitudes expressed in relations among groups" (Berremman, 1960, 123). In both India and the United States, the caste system has benefited the elite groups at the top of the hierarchical structure. They work to maintain the system because they want to keep their status for themselves and their descendants. High castes retain their dominance by enforcing severe punishments, and rationalizing their position by providing in-depth philosophical, theological, psychological, or genetic justifications. "Ideally the high-caste person is paternalistic and authoritarian, while the low caste person responds with deferential, submissive, subservient behavior (124)." The fundamental connection resides in the fact that the nations' laws of purpose in both situations is to preserve the caste system, which has institutionalized inequality as its fundamental component.

The Hindu caste system is a division of labor, where "each individual had a fixed economic and social status" (Deshpande, 2010, 17). Each of the four orders is given specific jobs and responsibilities: the Brahmins who came from his mouth were to teach, collect alms, and sacrifice for others; the Kshatriyas who came from his arms were to protect the people; the Vaisyas who came from his thighs were to trade, lend money, and cultivate land; and the Dalits who came from his feet were to serve the other three orders (Olcott, 1948, 651). "The Dalit or 'Untouchable' is a government servant. He is generally never a member of the higher judiciary, an eminent lawyer, industrialist or journalist" (Ghose, 2003, 83). They often performed menial jobs: tending horses and cattle, making and repairing saddles. As menial and manual work was stigmatized and despised in society, this contempt was also extended to those who performed it (Fuchs, 1951, 13). Placing the caste system in an economic context over Cox and Berremman's religious interpretations, offers a different conclusion as the absence of freedom of occupation, low earnings, and implicit restriction on needs destroyed the economy of lower castes. Ultimately, this enhanced the ruling class's status derived from the peasant, while the peasant grew more and more miserable.

This conclusion can be applied to the Puritans' racist worldview, in which Puritans established a democracy for themselves by overworking enslaved African Americans in their tobacco and then cotton fields (Kendi, 2019). Slavery forced enslaved Black men and women to toil in extreme environmental conditions for hours at stretch. This dichotomy of wanting a democracy while purposefully excluding some people from it provides an economic justification of slavery for Virginian Puritans (Kendi, 2019, 178). Just like the caste system, there was a division of labor on the tobacco and cotton plantation in pre-colonial America, which is explained by the differences in the economic condition of White workers and enslaved African Americans. White workers performed skilled artisan jobs and held esteemed positions as estate managers or overseers of the slaves (Galenson,

1981, 41). Due to their greater familiarity with English and possibly also due to their overall greater acculturation, the direct training costs for American-born slaves were reportedly lower than those for Africans. As unskilled agricultural laborers, Black slaves became indentured servants of their respective plantations (Galenson, 1981, 41), which was worse than bonded slavery.

Caste and race: Changeable or not?

According to Berreman and Werner, the Hindu caste system can be applied to the United States' racial hierarchy because in both countries, "caste status is determined, and therefore the systems are perpetuated, by birth and group membership cannot be changed" (Berreman, 1960, 122). "A caste system is not only a separated system, it is a stable system in which changes are socially impossible" (Johnson, 1941, p. 326). Regardless of their actions, those in low castes will always be projected as being innately inferior and are placed in a disadvantaged position. However, Cox argued that racial segregation in the south could not be compared to India as it was not permanent, but "would continue only as long as White people could maintain barriers to black assimilation and inclusion." (Cox, 1942) He gave an example of *mixed children*– "from too much preoccupation with the unchangeableness of physical inheritance, the conclusion is reached that the social status of Negroes and whites in the South may become identical, yet they will continue to constitute two castes" (Cox, 1942, 220). Although the social position of Blacks and Whites in the South may become identical, they will nonetheless continue to constitute two castes due to excessive obsession with the immutability of physical heredity. However, while caste or race may be permanent, the economic condition associated with it can be changed. While there isn't much research done to prove this, I will compare data of Dalit and Black women to show how economic conditions associated with race or caste, can change social perceptions regarding an individual's racial identity or position in the caste system.

Limitations due to Time

There are some limitations to the works of several scholars due to the context of the time periods their respective texts were written in. For example, Cox in "The Modern Caste School of Race Relations," writes that "Caste barriers in the caste system are never challenged; they are sacred to caste and caste alike" (Cox, 1942, 222). However, people are fighting the economic condition associated with the caste system today and fought it back in 1960 as well. According to data collected by Berreman, from the Srikanda village in Uttar Pradesh in 1960, in *Caste In India And The United States*, "among the low or untouchable castes in Srikanda, there was a great deal of readily expressed resentment regarding their caste position" (Berreman, 1960, 125). He observed that grievances were centered on the high castes' sexual, economic, and prestige practices. In the presence of members of the dominating high castes, resentment was hidden, but in places where there was little threat of detection or retaliation, it was readily expressed. Based on Berreman's observations of Black people of the village of Montgomery, Alabama, a similar caution was exercised in the presence of caste superiors in America as well. Low-caste individuals were required to display their allegiances in public, but when caste and village allegiances clashed, caste loyalties regularly and strongly predominated in their behavior. Similarly, even the group of Dalit women I interviewed in rural Rajasthan were not content with their economic position but did not express it in the presence of superiors.

Black people in America and other countries, as well as Dalits in India, have been the most oppressed and exploited groups (Kumar, 2010, 68). In addition, women from these classes are doubly marginalized (being both women and black/ Dalit) due to their gender and class, caste, or ethnicity, making them even worse victims. Although not much is known about Dalit women, cross-cultural studies of caste interaction between *Dalit* women and *Black* women can uncover the realities of structure and processes to yield valuable generalizations about social stratification and intergroup connections.

EXPERIENCES OF BLACK WOMEN

According to model of female inequality proposed by Michelle Rosaldo in *Women, Culture and Society: A Theoretical Overview*,

"(a) women are universally subordinate to men, (b) men are dominant due to their participation in public life and their relegation of women to the domestic sphere, and (c) the differential participation of men and women in public life gives rise not only to universal male authority over women but to a higher valuation of male over female roles" (Lewis, 1977, 341).

Black women are in structural conflict with a dominant racial and a dominant sexual group because they belong to two subordinate groups that are denied power and resources in society. They may have common interests with group members of each subordinate group, whether they are white women or black men. Ironically, both black men and white women identify as members of the dominant group. Therefore, the interests that unite black women

and drive them to stand in opposition to fellow members crosscut one another in a way that frequently obscures one set of interests over another. Their interests as women have historically been subordinated to their interests as black people. Because of racism, black women have historically held a structurally inferior position to white women in society. They have had less access to respect, authority, and power. Sanday notes that Western women may receive deference in their "often highly valued roles as helpmate, sex object, the 'driving force behind every successful guy,' etc.," highlighting the distinction between deference and power as a basis for women's position (Lewis, 1977, 343).

Master slave relations in domestic life

During the height of plantation slavery, caste relations were rooted in master-slave relationships that were "organized around the control of sex" (Warner, [1941] 2009, 6) and reproduced through regular social segregation patterns and displays of *Black* deference, particularly in rural areas. "[T]his combination of beliefs comprises an ideological system which is utilized to legitimize the social interactions between the superordinate Whites and the subordinate Negroes" (Thomas, 2014, 375) and describe caste as "a broadly shared body of beliefs about the status and capacities of Negroes" (Warner, [1941] 2009, 20). White men not only had romantic relationships but also relatively long-term relationships with black women and acknowledged their children. They contended that within the confines of the house, these families "ignore the caste rules" (33), and although white males would have been excluded from their caste group if they had acknowledged these connections, black women were not. In contrast, these women gained safety and defense that would "guard [them] in [their] connections with the white group" (36) without sacrificing their capacity to take part in the social lives and institutions of the black group. Although neither the white man nor the black woman would participate in each other's social activities while the man was at home, the ethnographers claim that the relationship itself "imposes little constraints" (36). In a similar vein, "there is nothing to indicate that they were separated from their own group or deemed queer" regarding the black men dating white women (30). On the other hand, white women were perceived as already being excluded "from their own group" and as refusing "to engage or [being] barred from participating in the customary manner" (30). To put it another way, black men and women who had relationships with white people on a sexual and/or family level were not perceived to be subject to the same kind of social exclusion as those white people.

Gender Oppression

According to data reported in the U.S. Bureau of the Census in 1977 in *The Social and Economic Status of the Black Population in the United States: An Historical View*, "As the section with the lowest income, lowest rate of completion of college education, highest proportion of adolescent pregnancy, and greatest likelihood of relying on Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC) payments for subsist" (Palmer, 1983, 153), black women have been at a "double disadvantage" (Dugger, 1988, 425) of racial and gender oppression.

The subordination of a black woman to a white woman has had enduring appeal, not only to the nineteenth-century Americans who were used to seeing black women as servants and slaves but also to a more modern audience who still sees black women as people who, by working in hospitals and laundromats, defy stereotypes of female incapacity (Palmer, 1983, 153). "Th[e]is the concept of "true woman" emphasize[s]d innocence, modesty, piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (Perkins, 1983, 17). However, this concept is not the reality of Black women's lives because their enslavement and objectification in pre-Civil War America manifests till date. They often represent strong, powerful womanhood while White women, whose caste constructs their identities around "good" femininity in response to the more rigid cultural dichotomy of ideas of womanhood, embrace their superiority to black women and their differences from them (Palmer, 1983, 158). However, the identity of white women is frequently admirable but also self-constricting as it involves a desire to better society, but it also requires upholding the boundaries separating white women from black women (Palmer, 1983, 158).

Workforce

In the past, Black women have been subjected to institutional racism on a physical, psychological, occupational, and financial level in order to uphold the status quo of the predominantly Anglo-Saxon society. Moreover, they have been sexually and economically exploited while working as their historical roles include being sexual objects for their White slave masters, their overseers, and other enslaved Africans as well as laborers and breeders of enslaved Africans (Spaights, 1995, 284). Black women took every means necessary to safeguard their family from the hazard of sale of family members—including exercising physical prowess, engaging in sexual relations with their slave owners, and serving as nannies to slave owners' children (284).

Traditionally, Black women have worked majorly in two occupations: household and service work. However, since white workers were favored by employers, black women were displaced from higher paying service jobs (285). With the advent of industries in the 1970s, Black women entered into other spheres of occupation, but they were often "last to be hired and the first to be fired" (284).

However, there is caste within caste. Even among black women, socioeconomic status differs between middle income and low-income families. Those from low income families fall below the poverty line, working domestic jobs in private households (287). On the other hand, black women from middle income families— with college education— compete in the primary job market by virtue of their education (288). Today, all Black women experience an excessive amount of stress as professionals in a White supremacist society. Many Blacks have unconsciously internalized myths that the Black race is genetically inferior—myths that are promoted by a church, the media, IQ tests, and separate but unequal educational facilities. Because of this, when Black professional women compete with members of White middle-class groups for jobs, promotions, and higher incomes, some of them experience sentiments of incompetence and self-devaluation despite their credentials.

Education

Education served and continues to serve a different economic purpose for both Black women and Women (Perkins, 1983). For white women, education serves for “true womanhood” (Palmer, 1983, 153) as a means of honing domestic skills, reiterating the importance of becoming a wife and mother, and creating a setting that enables them to meet future husbands. However, for African American women, education is a means of “race elevation”/ racial development (Perkins, 1983, 17). Thus, “unlike women of the white society, black women were [are] encouraged to become educated to aid in the improvement of their race” (17). With time, Black women have become more educated than white women and also more educated than black men. In fact, data from the census bureau of 1997 affirms that as of 1997, there were 320,000 more black women enrolled in higher education than there were black men” (377). Higher education has not only shown black women better ways to work but also a better world. “Higher education produced strong female soldiers for their race” (Glenda, 1996).

However, Spaight argues that “education has a mixed impact on the life of middle-class Black women” (Spaight, 1995, 284). Although the credentials provided by education are essential in enabling women to find jobs that are suited to their abilities, talents, and areas of expertise, the current state of schooling can have a significant negative impact on Black women. Whether attending inner-city schools with too many inexperienced and insensitive teachers, or taking a bus to the suburbs, students frequently fall prey to the labeling process that places them in learning categories like mentally disabled, learning disabled, or emotionally disturbed, during elementary and secondary school experiences (284). Ultimately, Black children are denied rewards for their academic achievements and intellectual abilities in both scenarios. Many Black female students are forced to enroll in less esteemed schools and universities than their White counterparts due to poor high school performance and a lack of family resources. For a Black female student attending a facility where racism and sexism are still pervasive, the development of career “networks” may likewise be negatively impacted (284).

Racial Fetishization & Sexual Oppression

Black women are susceptible to the historical repercussions of the intersectionality of race, class, and gender that all connect into their continuous sexual debasement. The modern-day sexual exploitation and assault of the black community is a direct result of American notions of the hypersexualized black woman (Holmes, 2016, 6). According to Linda Williams, the black victim is perceived by both rapists and society as a valid victim due to the long-standing perception of black female sexuality and the historical lack of legal protection of the black female (Williams, 1986). Black women in the United States have greater incidence of sexual assault and rape as a result of the notion that they are “genuine victims” (Williams, 1986). As a result, a legal pattern reflecting the lower social value given to black women and their sexual agency has been developed. The complete protection of the law is denied to the black woman who becomes the “legitimate victim” due to preconceptions that have their roots in slavery (Williams, 1986). This mentality, which has roots in the time of the slaves, supports the sexual exploitation and degradation of black women in society today. “With slavery and the rape of enslaved black women as originally or foundational in the production of African Americans, the skin of the black women in the context of the slave masters, sexual violation showed no signs of modesty” (McClaurin, 2001). Racial fetishization is a method of managing reproduction and sexuality that predates the time of slavery and has also persisted throughout all of American history in the form of societal conventions and policies (Holmes, 2016, 6).

Inter-racial marriages

Many authors have identified social and psychological factors that favor intermarriage. For instance, Barron (1946) argued that some communities experience significant rates of intermarriage due to an uneven sex ratio and numerically small representation. Golden carried out a similar but perhaps more in-depth investigation into causative elements in 1959. He dealt with the variable of proximity. According to premarital studies, proximity of residence, economic proximity, and spatial and occupational similarity, as well as close associations and shared experiences in education level, type, and location, as well as social contacts, are all factors that influence young people from different groups to form marriages (Barron, 1946).

Since many jurisdictions forbade interracial unions until the 1967 Loving v. Virginia verdict, the rate of interracial marriage has varied by state in the United States (Aldridge, 1978, 356). All laws prohibiting interracial unions were found unconstitutional by the Loving v. Virginia verdict. Data from California showed that after the 1954 court ruling, the rate of interracial marriage climbed marginally (Barnett, 1963). The United States may be seeing an increase in racially mixed marriages, according to other scattered figures (Powledge, 1963; Heer, 1966, 273; Mayer and Smock, 1960). Even though data have shown growth, several assessments of the Blacks' opinions conducted before the 1970s revealed a lack of enthusiasm for intermarrying (Pittsburgh Courier, 1958). Similar attitudes can be attributed to the emphasis on black pride and racial solidarity in the latter 1960s and early 1970s (Staples, 1973, 123).

III. METHODS

I used the *snowballing sample* methodology to interview 22 Dalit women in the rural village of Hanumangarh, India. I collected observational data—regarding the living conditions, economic situation, political perspectives, religious beliefs, personal aspirations, and social relations of Dalit women in rural India—in order to get firsthand insights from seeing and hearing about Dalit women's lives. Ultimately, these observations will help me compare the experiences of Dalit and Black women to describe similarities and differences in the characteristics of the caste system and racial system. This comparison is important because Dalit women and Black women are the only group oppressed due to both their race and gender.

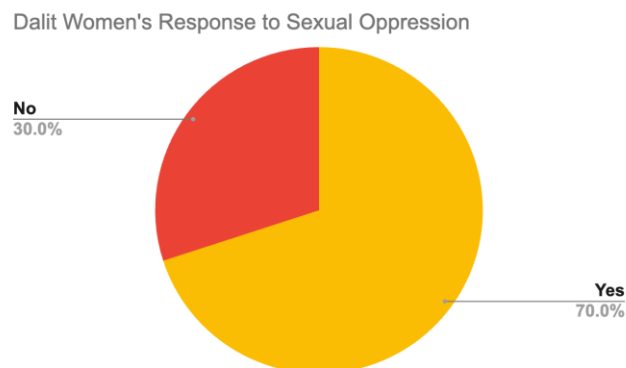
My interviews were unstructured and conversational. Since I'm an upper caste woman, a lot of the upper caste women were initially hesitant but opened up eventually. All the interviews were done in Hindi as the respondents spoke little to no English. So, I translate some of their direct quotations into English for this paper. First, I talked to five women who work as domestic helpers in my neighborhood. Then, I talked to 17 women residing in an area called 'Mandi,' Hanumangarh's primarily Dalit slum. I made a few demographic conclusions: the respondents were between the ages 16-55. Of the 22 women, 18 were married and 14 were employed. All 18 married women married within their caste and were against inter-caste marriages for their children. Exactly half of the respondents, 11 women, reported being victims of domestic violence.

While this may not be an exactly representative sample, these conversations helped me make observations relevant to my research. I looked for themes regarding Dalit women's personal experiences and how they are similar or different when compared to the lives of Black women. Common themes included Dalit women's recognition of intercaste relationships in contrast to Black women's interracial relationships, the impact of early marriages on women's current lives as a way of maintaining caste identity, role of education, and the importance of maintaining caste identity.

IV. RESULTS

History of Sexual Oppression

Like the Black women, Dalit women have historically been sexualized, especially by Upper caste men. Based on the interviews, 15 out of 22 women reported being raped, especially before marriage.



A 40 year old matriarch reported, "When I hit puberty, I was supposed to visit a high caste landlord's field each week. I was terribly afraid— Will he show up? Will he mistreat me?" The experienced, older women described this ritualized oppression of rape to a 'tradition.' One of them added, "This is the miserable condition we lived in. I'm just happy my daughter isn't a victim of it." Although sexualization of dalit women is reduced compared to early postcolonial times, it is possible to assume that the Dalit populations regularly experienced rape and sexual exploitation, which the upper castes utilized as tools to undermine Dalit manhood and incite violence in order to control the communities. Not just because they are *women*, but particularly because they are *Dalit women*.

Both Dalit and African American women's master slave relations with upper caste and White men demonstrate them being sexually "touchable," despite being socially outcasts; upper castes used this power to appropriate Dalit women's bodies while also emasculating Dalit men under the pretext they weren't masculine enough to protect their women.

Defining Self Esteem through Inter Caste Relationships with Upper Caste Women

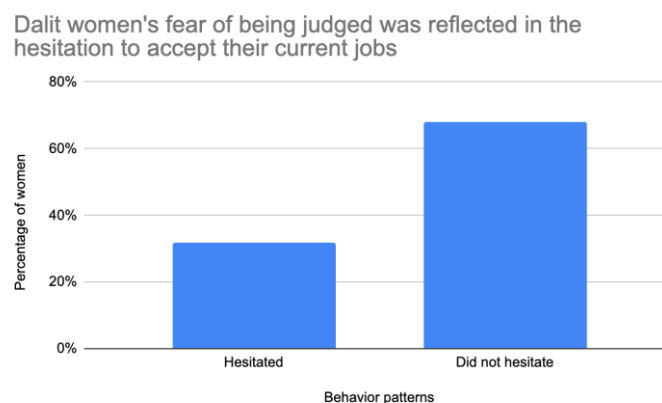
One of the respondents in the interview noted, "When I go to work, my mistress scolds me. At home, my husband beats me. Where should I go?" There is little respect for a lot of these women, whether inside their homes or outside in society. Yet, Dalit women live with the reality of the caste system and its recognized implications by accepting social and economic differences over defying them. For example, one woman who serves as a domestic helper said,

"I have as much as I need: three meals a day and six pairs of clothes. In some households, my mistresses respect me while in others, they don't. God willing, I have a *job*, supportive *neighbors*, and my *family* doesn't sleep hungry."

It is inferred that Dalit women's primary sources of self- esteem are *family*, *religion*, and *other Dalit women*. In the neighborhood I interviewed, Dalit women validate the experience, perspective, and feelings of other Dalit women that mainstream society attempts to invalidate. One woman said, "Basically, all Dalit women in my community are the backbones of one another's lives." Similarly, social support networks have been historically crucial for African American women amidst brutal conditions of slavery, in which slave women relied on one another to live (White, 1985). Although family and social support is still important to black women in today's day and age, a lot of them also derive their self- esteem from their participation in the workforce and "gains in education [which] have resulted in their near socioeconomic parity with Black men" (Patterson, 2004, 311).

Dalit women also attributed that behavioral differences in caste were not due to the Dalit women's personal character but an inherent lack of essential morals in the upper castes– which are otherwise instilled through education. For example, the Dalit women report being treated differently by educated and uneducated mistresses. One woman who serves as a domestic sweeper mentioned that her mistress would not let her use any bathroom in the house. She said, "My home is 8 miles away. Where do I use the bathroom? I have no choice but to wait 6 hours a day. Maybe she's not educated enough to understand that." On the other hand, a woman who serves as a helper at a local hospital said, "Not many people in the hospital respect me but my mistress does. She's a well- educated doctor. Her respect is all that matters to me." Thus, Dalit women justify upper caste women's disrespectful or respectful behaviors as their inherent lack or presence of good moral values and education. Likewise, Black women don't negatively internalize the sexist and racist ideology but are instead empowered to work towards the alleviation of their race.

It seems as though the perceived effect of caste matters more to Dalit women than its ultimate effect. In the presence of high caste people, Dalit women find it difficult to talk about their economic conditions due to the fear of being negatively judged. Of the 22 women, 7 hesitated to speak about their jobs and all of these were jobs pertaining to menial work.



On being asked what she did for a living, a woman said, "I don't work. I'm a housewife." It wasn't until the end that she admitted, "I'm actually a laborer in the nearby textile industry. Now I can tell you only what I do whether you like it or not." Ultimately, these women attribute the recognized caste differences to the economic positions upon which the caste is built and not its social position. "I'm a proud Dalit woman but I don't take pride

in cleaning sewages for the municipality,” added one of the women. Another said, “My only complaint with the caste system is that my career as a garbage cleaner is a necessity, not my choice.” Likewise, Black women hold their ‘Blackness’ and womanhood in high esteem, but not the glass ceiling and limited economic opportunities that are a byproduct of their race and gender.

Impact of Early Marriage on their Current Lives

Among the 22 Dalit women, all 18 married women reported being married between the ages of 12 and 18. Many Dalit women as a group regretted their early marriage. For example, one Dalit woman said, “Today, I’m fortunate to have two daughters; but I vividly remember the day I had to abort my first child– I was 15 and my uterus wasn’t strong enough to support pregnancy. I wish my parents hadn’t married me off so early on in life.”

These women attributed their early marriage to poverty and their parents’ lack of education. In the words of a respondent, “I grew up in a poor, uneducated household, where I felt like a financial burden to my parents.” Another shared, “Growing up, my father looked for jobs for my brother and marriage proposals for me. I wish my father was more educated than that.”

Early marriage, they believed, was also a common cause of other difficulties and challenges in their lives. A woman recounted a personal story, “At the time, I didn’t know it was called ‘child marriage’ but looking back, motherhood at 16 ended my dreams of becoming a teacher.”

Interestingly, these women blame lack of education to early marriage, not being Dalit. It is their way of maintaining caste identity– not associating bad things in life with caste. Dalit women aren’t ashamed of their caste identity fundamentally. While child marriages aren’t common among Dalit women, they are also proud of their Black heritage and identity.

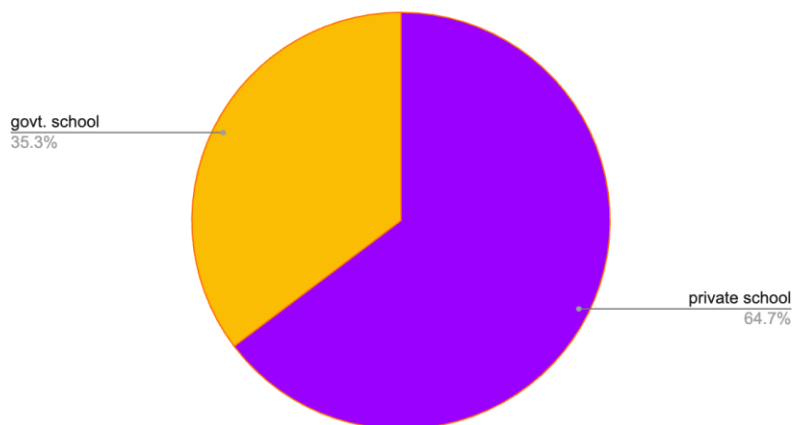
Role of Education

21 out of 22 women regretted their lack of education and attributed their lack of education to their early marriage. As a Dalit woman shared, “More than my early marriage itself, I regret the opportunities I missed because of marriage.” The same lady added, “A college degree would have transformed my current life and finances.”

Now, each one of them sends her children to school and saves money for their educational expenses. One Dalit woman said, “I don’t want to make the same mistake my parents did. Now, I work two jobs to send my sons to school.” Another said, “I don’t want my daughter to live like me, limited by the little money my husband provides. I want her to study and become financially independent.”

However, getting education isn’t only linked to their children but also stems from the belief that education would enable them to take the route that the rich take to get ahead in life. As mentioned by a woman preparing for competitive exams to get a job, “I’m currently preparing for a government job to find stability in life; for the government provides reservations of seats to people of my caste. We also get a higher salary among other benefits. But ultimately, I want to see myself working in private jobs because the rich people work those types of jobs.” Among 17 married women who have children, 11 send their kids to private schools for the same reason. In the words of a Dalit woman, “Reservation in government schools is helpful but private education is better and more expensive. It’s where the rich go.”

Dalit women's preferred types of education



Today, Black women are ahead of Dalit women in terms of the economic opportunities offered to them but the idea behind the pursuit of education fundamentally remains the same: higher job opportunities for economic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal development of both their race/ caste and themselves.

Importance of Maintaining Caste Identity

Interracial marriages are increasing in the United States since they account for higher social and economic opportunities for people of color. However, all 22 Dalit respondents were against the idea of inter-caste marriage and the 18 married women also reported having married within their caste: Endogamy supports caste sentiments. Many of them said, “I did not marry outside of my caste. I don’t want my children to marry outside of our caste.” While there’s stigmatization to their caste, Dalit women’s caste is their identity. A woman noted, “Family habits change with change in caste, and I don’t want to change who I am intrinsically.” This matrimonial custom reveals a strong feeling of caste identity that is fostered by attitude towards familiarity and pride in Dalit culture, traditions, and history. However, even the Dalit culture is evolving with time. Based on the interviews, there lie dramatic differences in how a 20 year old respondent sees herself now vs how a 55 year old Dalit woman saw herself 35 years ago because the rigid rules of untouchability and social exclusion associated with Dalit women’s caste are becoming less rigid with time. Yet, Dalit women do not see marriage with upper caste households as a way of getting out of the caste system because their culture, traditions, values, and identity are important to them.

V. CONCLUSION

All in all, there are both analogies and juxtapositions between race and caste. The systems of caste and race create an impulse to amass power and resources, and the impulse to regulate another group. But, caste focuses on the infrastructure of our divisions and rankings, whereas race is the metric used to determine one’s place in it (Wilkerson, 2020). Ultimately, the caste model cannot be applied universally; instead, there are parts of it that remain the same and instances that vary with changes in the political context it is set in. The contentions and connections between the caste system in India and racial segregation in America can be explained by the experiences of Dalit and African American women, who are classic representatives of their systems of social stratification due to their history of double exploitation by Dalits and non-Dalits, and Blacks and Whites along with other caste members—on the basis of their race and gender—making them one of the most vulnerable minority groups within their respective systems of social stratification.

Each of their oppression— dating back to their colonial and early post-colonial history of slavery in America, early marriage in India, and sexual oppression in both— is consistent with the belief that women are considered subordinate to men in public and domestic spheres, as proposed by Michelle Rosaldo’s model of female inequality in *Women, Culture and Society: A Theoretical Overview*. Dalit and African American women have been historically oppressed, objectified, and hypersexualized, yet despite their vulnerability, both groups are bound together in their racial solidarity and pride of their identities. High self-esteem and a desire to maintain caste identity manifests in their lives; for they are empowered to alleviate the suffering of their caste rather than change or obscure it. Both groups also perceive higher education and consequent job opportunities as a means of alleviating their individual and communal economic conditions. Caste influences their lives economically more than it does socially since Black and Dalit women are not as much concerned with being 'Black' or 'Dalit,' as they are with the economic conditions associated with it. Contrary to Michele Rosaldo’s model, a lot of these women are more hardworking, educated, and financially independent than the men of their race or caste.

Despite these fundamental similarities, Black women are professionally ahead of Dalit women in the twenty-first century due to America’s comparatively early colonial independence in the political context. Moreover, early marriage and an orthodox lifestyle has played a central role in the lives of Dalit women; thereby preventing them from pursuing a higher education or job. Moreover, while interracial marriages in the US are increasing, Dalit women do not see inter-caste marriages with the high caste as a way of alleviating their position in society.

Owing to the similarities and differences in colonial history, culture, religion, and economy, such relations between African American and Dalit women explain the points of contentions and connections between caste and race. Thus, the effective applicability of the caste system will always depend on its broader political context: there lie dehumanizing impulses in the form of hierarchies throughout the world, but they manifest themselves with a kind of lethal intensity predicated upon the culture. However, these differences allow us to learn from the positives of a culture and we must try to imbibe these in our own community. From the purity of dominant groups to the subsequent boundaries from the feeling of the impulse to protect the dominant groups from intrusion or contamination by the subordinate groups, the realities of structure and process as revealed by cross-cultural studies of caste interaction is more likely to produce useful generalizations about this type of social stratification and intergroup relations as a way to learn about ourselves by seeing the points of intersection with other societies.

Limitations

America is racially stratified into four groups— Native Americans, African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans but this paper only addresses the bifold racial stratification of the United States consisting of only Blacks and Whites because the system still lacks a concrete recognition of contemporary groups. Further, Dalit

women from the same part of rural India were interviewed, which is not adequately representative of the experiences of all women, especially those from urban areas, given that India is a rapidly industrializing economy.

Suggestions

To deeply understand the complexity of the two political hierarchies, further research could include a study of the experiences of upper caste and White women; Dalit women in urban areas and Black women; and what that might mean for identity issues. Furthermore, the caste system could also be compared with the other socio-political hierarchies, such as the Great Chain of Being in pre-Renaissance Europe.

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