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To cite this article: Suraj Yengde (2022) Global Castes, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 45:2, 340-360, DOI: [10.1080/01419870.2021.1924394](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2021.1924394)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2021.1924394>



Published online: 08 Jun 2021.



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# Global Castes

Suraj Yengde  <sup>a,b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Harvard Kennedy School, Cambridge, MA, USA; <sup>b</sup>Department of History, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

## ABSTRACT

Caste has been thought of as an institution intimately tied to the Indian past and present. However, caste as a, social system invested in purity, pollution, endogamy, hierarchy, and inflexibility locked in the rigidity of birth, is found in major societies across the world. Yet, caste has not received the desired attention outside India. Nor it has become a social, economic, and political concern of the world. Everyday caste oppression is indicative of the gross human rights violations wrought upon Dalit and other caste oppressed groups, not least in India, but globally. Drawing from caste studies in south Asia, Africa, Latin America, and North America, this paper inaugurates pioneering inquiry into caste discrimination as a global human rights concern. By complicating, to complicate and facilitate the conduits of hierarchical societies, it posits the importance of global caste theory as a way to synthesize the experiences of outcastes of each society.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 1 October 2020; Accepted 19 April 2021

**KEYWORDS** Global caste; African caste system; caste in America; descent-based discrimination; race-caste; dalit-black lives matter

Social inequality is not confined to Hindus only. It prevailed in other countries also and was responsible for dividing society into higher and lower, free and unfree, respectable and despised. (Ambedkar 1989, 75)

## Introduction

“The International Congress on Discrimination based on Work and Descent Tackling Antigypsyism, Casteism, Traditional and Contemporary Forms of Slavery and Other Analogous Forms of Discrimination” (hereafter, International Congress DWD) organised a three-day conference from 21 to 23 September 2019 in New York City. The conference hosted speakers from 24 countries (including Bangladesh, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Chad, Czech, Gambia,

**CONTACT** Suraj Yengde  [suraj.yengde@gmail.com](mailto:suraj.yengde@gmail.com)

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Germany, Hungary, India, Japan, Malaysia, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Nepal, Niger, Pakistan, Romania, Senegal, Serbia, Somalia, Sri Lanka, UK, and USA) with representatives of government and non-government bodies, parliamentarians, and academic experts. One notable aspect of this conference was a wide mixture of representation of groups that had hitherto not actively mobilized solidarity with each other. Diverse participants ranging from Brazil's Quilombo community to the European Roma, Senegalese *ñeeño*, Sri Lankan Tamils, Indian Dalits, Pakistani Muslims, Bangladeshi rights activists, Mauritanian Haratin (slaves), Chad anti-slavery activists, and Nepalese Dalit law-makers convened at this historic gathering.

Towards the end of the three-day conference, a *New York Resolution* was passed that called on the United Nations and its member states to adopt "Draft Principles and Guidelines for the Effective Elimination of Discrimination Based on Work and Descent". It called for the declaration of the "Decade of DWD (Discrimination based on Work & Descent) Communities" that will focus on combating discrimination and violence based on the notions of "Work and Descent, Casteism, Antigypsyism, Contemporary Forms of Slavery and other analogous forms of discrimination" with a Special United Nations Fund to adopt a declaration that recognizes the movement of people affected under the DWD. In addition, similar demands were directed with more country-specific resolutions to the state parties as well as international and domestic civil society to take on caste and DWDs on their agenda.<sup>1</sup>

The conference was in many ways a continuance of the unfinished agenda of anti-caste internationalism inaugurated by the Dalit groups in 2001 and 2009 at the United Nations WCAR (World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance) conference (cf. Hardtmann 2008; Natrajan and Greenough 2009). The UN WCAR hoped to broaden the tent of racism to include "all forms of racism" or related intolerance to capture other communities that do not neatly fit into the definition of race, but nonetheless suffer discrimination based on forms of racialization combined with class, gender, and other forms of exclusions and marginalisations. During the Durban conference, protests and counter protests erupted from both supporting and opposing parties. While Dalits and their international allies were vociferously calling for caste to be recognized at the UN, Indian government actors and its sympathizers in academia thwarted attempts to include caste as a form of discrimination and ultimately, arguments on behalf of Dalit activists at the UN WCAR fell short.

The anthropological reading of caste is comparatively new intervention, partly because of anthropology's understanding of societies mired in the Euro-centric racial estimation of biologism and anatomical illiteracy. Racial caste, on the other hand, was rooted in the sociological understanding of society wherein distribution of resources and control of labour and biopolitics

remained eccentric. Thus, a racial caste theory proffered a definition to the highly complex and irrational form of segmentation being developed in the colonial slavery habitus. That is why, anthropologically the race argument for caste was not yet a theoretically popular concept as much as a racial caste (cf. Montagu 1945).<sup>2</sup> However, in the first half of twentieth century American sociologists and anthropologists had, in fact, found racial-caste system operating in the post-slavery, Jim Crow American South. Prior to that nineteenth-century intervention by Reverend Joseph Roberts (1847) introduced caste analogy of the Hindu system with slavery. His theory found echoes in different quarters of America, especially the abolitionists. Charles Sumner, the lawyer and Senator of Massachusetts picked up this concept and launched new public enquiries on caste (1869).

Following this a monumental work in the twentieth-century *Deep South* detailed the existence of the colour caste system in a deeply segregated society (Davis, Gardner, and Gardner 1941). "Color caste" was observed by the anthropologist Allison Davis as the "integration of the basic institution" like caste into the "largest system that of color caste" denoting the American South social order (Davis 1945, 7). Other studies of the era focused on the emergence of caste paradigms. American sociology was divided over bringing the relevance of caste to the American racial field. One of the chief opponents of this theory was a Trinidadian-born Chicago sociologist Oliver Cox, who preferred a racialized argument for American colour caste problem as opposed to the Hinduized caste (Cox 1945). Cox argued that a certain harmony existed in India's caste system because the caste system was spiritual to Indians, whereas in America, the white-Negro conflict demonstrated the inapplicability of caste (Cox 1948). This was a profoundly unmeasured reading of caste coming from the scholar who had not experienced caste, nor empirically examined his own claims. Startlingly, Brahminical sociology in the twenty-first century also continued the unfounded claim that castes in India are "harmonious". Such analyses were devoid of critical understandings of caste conflict and the epochal exploitative nature of caste. As opposed to Cox, scholars such as W. Lloyd Garner, Allison Davis (Davis and Dollard 1940), Dollard (1937), Berreman (1960), Myrdal (1944) emphasized colour caste dynamics to demonstrate the importance of underscoring social and economic hierarchies developed into what essentially amounted to a litany of state-sanctioned experiment of slavery.

Yet even beliefs rooted in the caste dynamics of colour line proved to be unhelpful for Dalit activists and academics. The latter simply could not make a case for the colour relevance of caste at the UN WCAR conference because it was out of fashion (fact had born out that colour-caste is not the most accurate marker of caste) and race had effectively replaced the caste discourse. Another reason was the lack of substantive data to demonstrate that caste

is an independent, standalone component that affects more than 300 million people on five (of the seven) continents. Due to lack of such a study the proposal was doomed to be defeated. However, in 2019 the same advocates, who participated in the WCAR Durban conference, re-gearred with new strategies. The speakers spoke with passion and fervour to denounce the existence of the localized native enslavements in their respective societies. Justice was at the core of their demands. They appeared resolute in getting it.

In this paper, I briefly look at the first “International Congress DWD” of caste-oppressed people in light of the anti-caste history at the UN. Building on this, I analyse both, the original twentieth-century version and early twenty-first-century resurgence of the race-/caste debate that impeded an anti-caste convention at the historic UN negotiations at WCAR, Durban. Finally, it concludes by looking at particular instances of castes in Africa, with a brief introduction to the Americas castas/caste study. This paper is a first attempt to theorize the broader idea of Global Caste that would encompass culturally specific factors responsible for structuring societies that do not have a squared-solid framework of race. It is in this light, the paper attempts to outline global castes and its conditioned hierarchies that possess endogamous characteristics preserved as a “tradition”. I argue that global castes are part of historical indigeneity that have guarded social and cultural practices. These can be observed through the lens of colour caste paradigms coalesced through religion and spatial bases that guide and structure the caste society.

Global Caste here posits a geographical and as well as ideological distinction. It sutures the highbrow description of the world with localized meanings of universalisms.<sup>3</sup> The Indological perspectives and Eurocentric imagination posit caste in competing dualisms of either being a category with a historical fecundity tied in the purisms of “traditional” phenomenon – the Vedic varna order unique to the Indian subcontinent; or a microcosm of macro-hierarchies. This paper defines Global Caste as layered mechanism of immovable social hierarchy and absolute control that aims to dehumanize certain forms of labour through both structural and economical positions, as well as through the cultural practices of endogamy and ritual. This paper further suggests that by understanding caste as a practice located in commune in the local context with its specific socio-cultural regulations, it can be easily reproduced throughout the world. But just as caste oppression is reproduced throughout the world, so too are anti-caste solidarities taking shape in creative form around the world. This paper seeks to make visible some of these emerging movements. Global Caste also has to additionally look at the sources of caste in the South Asian diaspora (Schwartz 1967; Yengde 2015, 2021; Ayyathurai 2021; Kumar 2009).

## Global Caste

If seen through caste theory, the case of slavery in modern times would easily correlate to the caste experiences of the outcastes of the world.

In some ways it is even worse than the black–white divide in America. We speak the same language, eat the same food. There is no facial or cultural difference—but this is happening.

Bishop Anthony Obinna describing the caste differences in Igboland of Nigeria (Nwaubani 2019).

Most societies around the world have followed a trajectory of modernizing through differentially valuing and devaluing the human body. It arranged the society into a totemic pole of hierarchies. At the extreme end, the body was relegated to the status of near outcastes. Their names were written off and they were sold whenever the need arose. These unnamed were categorized variously as working class in the anti-imperial terrain. This framework of analysis discarded the deep seated, a-class projections of humiliation that was endowed upon those people who were placed in the lowest strata of the vertical arrangement. The lowborn have been indispensable to the exigency of each civilization. These atrophied bodies and stories of the untold such were systematically organized in the vertical horizon of developments. It is important to emphasize that not all the experiences of the victims can be written off by just concentrating on the past two to four hundred years of European imperialisms, slaveries and indentures. The archives of pre-European histories of colonizations need to be excavated to realize the violence and denudation in the caste societies that doesn't put a premium on spatio-capitalist interpretations. The legalized brutalities of caste societies to maintain the hierarchy and normalize its unequal share of power. The global outcastes have been deprived of their narrative. They were asked to accommodate into the elite lexicons of anthropological essentializing in the conduits of west vs. rest. The humanity that was tied in oppression was not only wealth intensive, but also strictly located in the cultural inspired caste morality that produced global untouchables in a mortal order of global castes.

Global Caste is a form of localized slavery that exists across the world. Here, I develop a theoretical approach that complicates simplified culturalist understandings of caste, and centre instead the phenomenological experiences of the unheard outcastes. I suggest that a supple global caste theory should be free from the rigidities of methodological conventions and unbound from dominant epistemologies. The caste has not become a problem of global concern due to the brutal suppression of this issue by the elites of local caste systems, who utilize academic canons and political

debates to undermine caste-sensitive interpretations of history. To study Global Caste, one has to innovatively deploy a semi-comparative, empirical study. There are some defining aspects of Global Caste: enduring stigma, humiliation, striving for recognition as human, fear of pollution from the outcastes, strict endogamy, minority status, spiritual assent, bloodline through inheritance, control of the body politic as an accessible labour to be disposed, judicial and police officials – also known as the “carceral state” – in favour of caste supremacy, and denying access to basic material and non-material resources through the state and laws. These features define global outcastes.

The endemicity of caste topics can be seen with its obvious operation in a society without a hurdle. The categories of identification can be summarized with below occurrences in the life of caste society.

- Granting of social rank from the mother’s womb.
- Discrimination premised on purity and pollution.
- Enforced endogamy.
- Occupational ranking in society.
- Contest to the hierarchal sanctity.
- Stigma and shame to discuss the issue of caste.
- Communal ostracization.
- Inferiority granted to certain social groups based on their birth.
- Ignorance from the government and the society.
- Justification for the existence of the system.
- Calling names to designate the status of the “lower” Other in the society.
- Used in reference to or instead of racial theory.
- Banned from positions of higher status in politics and society.

These systems of social operation function as codified normativity, thereby giving rise to rigid descent-based caste order.

The situations of caste societies might have ameliorated or changed owing to the political updates on the civic rights front; however, discrimination based on one’s descent still continues. It might not have the same characteristics or nomenclature, but their socio-economic status is still the lowest. To understand this, one needs to fully grapple with the condition of left-out underdogs of postcolonial nationalism – the outcastes of their societies. Some of these have not yet received the mainstream academic attention and more so by the nationalistic historiography. Under the auspices of post-colonialism European categories got summoned to interpret society and history. That is why irrespective of their existence, these communities remain largely unknown.

We can recall examples from around the world of “outcastes”, for instance Senegal’s ñeeño community (hereditary shoemakers, blacksmiths, goldsmiths) (Diop 1987, 2; Mbow 2000) of the Wolof society, or the

griots or Rwanda's Twa (also known as Batwa) "were at a very low level of pre-agricultural social organization" (Rodney 1982, 125) (1 per cent hunters and craftsmen) of the Tutsi (aristocratic and pastoralist 16 per cent) and Hutu (farmers and commoners 83 per cent) (Maquet 1961). The list goes on: in Kenya, the Watta groups (the unwanted low caste), in Somalia the Sab group, Midigan, Tumul and Yibir, while in Mali, Bellah (the slaves), Haratin of Mauritania, Osu and Ohu of Nigeria in France Cagots, in Japan Burakumin, and in Brazil Quilambulo. The Roma population spread across the world, particularly in Europe adds further to that categorization (Yengde 2019). In Latin America, the Mestizos, Castizos of Mexico, Gambia, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Benin, Ghana, Burkina Faso (Panos West Africa 2001) and Gemu Gofa Province, South-West Ethiopia prefix identity to mark the lower(-st) castes (Cerulli 1922 in Pankhurst 1999; Todd 1977).

Therefore, it is also not an easy exercise to correlate or replace caste with slavery. In his thesis "Slaves and Untouchables?", Ambedkar argued that slaves were a merchandise that had relative recognition. But, untouchables were subhuman in their personality and value. That is why untouchability was "hundred times" worse than slavery he maintained (Ambedkar 1989, 16). Ambedkar furthermore contended that in "an unfree social order such as slavery there is the advantage of apprenticeship in a business, craft or art" which was not accorded to the untouchables. And because slave was a property, owner had a material investment that forced him to take care of their valuable possession. This meant taking care of a slave in health, housing and giving access to high culture and art (Ambedkar 1989: 14–15, 17).<sup>4</sup> This was not necessarily available in the case of caste slavery of the Americas but was viewed in the Roman era where slave was not coded in racial-colour because race was not yet Europeanized in its strict sense of capitalist exploitation. Something similar is noted by Africanist Ugo Nwokeji "Slaves could transcend slavery and become slave masters themselves, but the Osu for generations unborn could never transcend their status".<sup>5</sup> However, many postcolonial scholars from Asia and Africa argued for a sanitized Eurocentric view by taking stock of past four hundred years of European colonization in their respective societies. During an interview with me, Nwokeji argued for a more nuanced reading of African slavery as opposed to the simplified narrative of European plunder in Africa.<sup>6</sup> Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani stated in alarm that "African scholars have not done enough and presented incomplete picture to the western world. They argued for Africa centric civilizations and the greatness of it. While such gory practices in the African traditional religions continued".<sup>7</sup> An outcome of this is the still prevalent caste slavery and untouchability operating as a neutralizing factor in popular culture, literature and media (Nwaubani 2020).



## Race-caste debates

One of the major reasons that anti-caste efforts were dampened at the U.N. in early 2000 was because of an on-going debate that compared caste with race. This debate has since then received overwhelming attention from the media and academia. One portion of interest comes from orientalized sociology and the other from nationalist academe (Visweswaran 2010, 159). Both canons have attempted to own the debate by arguing caste is not race because of the biological differentials. And that caste is a cultural derivate that unites India. By adding customary aspects to the emergence of caste tensions firmly rooted in societal behaviours and religious practices, caste is understood as a culturally harmonious product of the great Hindu (inter alia Indian) civilization (Natrajan 2012a; 2012b).

Guru argues the unity of race and caste meets where the “natural essence and beauty” of these groups is divested by the hegemon (2009, 169). This means the ideological vision of race was constructed on colour as a necessary identifier. Colour did not have to be melanin-based but an ideological assumption. Thus, even a fair-skinned Dalit would be made to feel intimidated by a dark skin Brahmin but not vice versa. Thus, race assumes a class-cultural framework where white as an aspirational category becomes acceptable to non-whites. This determinant could easily apply to the caste context.

Theory of internationalization of caste had been initiated in the past century by Sridhar Ketkar who had observed the potential of caste becoming global due to Hindu migration. “If Hindus migrate to other regions on earth, caste would become a world problem” Ketkar argued (1909, 4). The *UK Equality Bill, 2010* was one such international intervention (first of its kind) that acknowledged caste as a mobile institution crossing South Asian shores, thereby meriting a global recognition. However, there have been frequent attempts to undermine the efforts in recognizing caste as a category of discrimination that could fit in the broader category of race and ethnic discrimination. David Mosse’s summary of the events building towards the Equality Bill legislation and the debates surrounding it foregrounds the views of the opponents who took a hurried position without fully underscoring the subtleties of caste as a form of discrimination that race might/might not help to cover (Mosse 2015; Waughray 2014; Dhanda 2015).

Sociologist of race and caste, Andre Beteille demonstrated “remarkable similarity” in the status and attitude towards the women of lower castes or races (Beteille 1990, 491). He observed, “inequalities of caste are illuminated in the same way as those of race by a consideration of gender”. Calling out the Indian Sociology as locked in the romanticism of Indic past, which was unhelpful in underscoring the sociology of caste, Beteille firmly stated “the present and not the past should be the point of departure in the sociology

of India". His primary points of attacks were Louis Dumont and McKim Marriott. However, a decade later during the Durban conference Beteille changed his position diametrically. He came across as an apologist of the caste empire. He thwarted sociological findings of caste atrocities by society, state and judiciary against Dalits. Beteille ridiculed caste atrocities by defending caste society's legibility. This argument concluded that caste existed but not to the level of meriting UN intervention. Similarly, Gupta in his appraisal of the UN Dalit activism expressed concerns that caste and race debate, which was long "dead and buried" was reincarnating (Gupta 2001).

Marshalling outdated and Brahminical theories of caste, Gupta and Beteille ensured that the Dalit position got derailed in their objective of seeking justice. Instead of enabling scholarship to make inroads in the progression of human freedom, their research became an active tool to axe important epochal changes (on the responsibility of anthropology and scholarship cf. Kunnath 2013). As Kalpana Kannibaran noted while the arguments are "sociologically fascinating, [but] are socially pointless" (Kannibaran 2010, 3). While the import of sociological theorization needs closer attention one also needs to look beyond-the-theory context to come to terms with the disservice of sociology towards Dalit liberation (Freire 1996).<sup>8</sup> Beteille and Gupta's theories exemplified the harmonious intersection of occidental and oriental sociology. Theories are fashioned as coattails on the terrain of constantly changing society. Thus, the experience of theory needs to guarantee an affirmation of the subject's position. It needs to take into account the intention of the subject. Many a times the opponents to Dalit activist's position worked on assumptions than drawing from high quality data. This was partly because the Dalit subject didn't merit academic and state attention due to the fear of exposing the evidence of entrenched caste system.

The position of Gupta and Beteille partly deserve appreciation as they refuted prevailing racialized identities being slapped on Indian geography. However, their intellectualism did not pave the path for Dalit self-emancipation. Instead, it becomes a barrier denuding to condemnation of Dalits declaring solidarity movements as "politically mischievous and scientifically nonsensical" (Kaur 2001). The origin of the myth of race and caste has different vantage points, but their ramifications and neologisms in terms of everyday pervasiveness are juxtaposed to each other. At the centre of race and caste superstructures sit dehumanization, inequality and condemnation.

Across the Atlantic in America a similar experiment was taking place during slavery. In her stirring analysis of the American racial caste system, Isabel Wilkerson brings back the age-old diagnosis of the American problem which was lost during the era of civil rights (Wilkerson 2020a, 2020b). The school of racial caste studies was active since the beginning of the twentieth century in America. As noted earlier, scholars, such as

Gunnar Myrdal, Gerald Berreman, Oliver Cox, Allison Davis, Mary R Gardner, John Dollard, put a caste lens on the sociological study of the American south, the hub of racial slavery.

Wilkerson's thesis is that the division of American society is primarily caste-based which acts as an "architecture of human hierarchy, the subconscious code of instructions for maintaining, in our case, a 400-year-old social order". She continues, "Looking at caste is like holding the country's X-ray up to the light" (Wilkerson 2020a, 17; Wilkerson 2020b). The underappreciated and mostly forgotten prognosis of caste is being brought back to look into the deep fissures created by racialized economic order. Hatred of black bodies with sustenance of racialism does not conform to the principles of fictitious biological differences. Having worked through this definition, Wilkerson contends that the "signal of rank" is what we call "race" is actually an "American caste system".

It is not simply rehashing of racial theory that would supplant the conversation on America's problems. Wilkerson argues by paying closer attention to the caste experiences one can truly hold race in the same light because "caste predates the notion of race". Caste manifests itself in the investment of maintaining the hierarchy. And therefore, it is more insidious. But, racism as an apparent marker is not the same because it is visible destruction. But the policies and invisible forces of society that are heavily invested in maintaining the structure intact is Caste. Because it is "not active and openly hateful of this or that group" and that is why long lasting. Thus, race becomes a "faithful servant" to caste. There have been several pushbacks by non-Dalit, mostly Brahmin Indian scholars and a few others drawing their criticism from the classic left position that discounts caste and instead promote race and class as a preface to discrimination. This, as Wilkerson proves are not adequate categories of explanation. The remarkable intervention by Wilkerson has at least given reason for America to seriously look into their history and its battles. Several theses have approached race through a fluid, often with an evolving definition (Negro-Black-African American), but a fixated and yet inflexible virtue of that paradigm was not seriously examined. Caste is an academic viewpoint that would displace the biologism of colour-casteism that locked the oppressed caste people of India into confined chambers.

### **Caste in comparative perspective**

Caste and race have achieved a near invincible status in public and private imageries. To look at them not as competing categories but complementary modes of interactions – castegories created in distinct temporalities advance the Global Caste project. The glossaries of Global Caste easily cross over racial dynamics of colonial construction. Global Caste offers an inclusive

and spatio-temporal vocality that otherwise privileges certain geographies and their experience as universal. Global Caste centres on local experience to magnify the intention of the oppressor's objectives that are often universal in violence. Although a case of Caste in East, North, Central and West Africa can be made owing to the seminal studies in the colonial times, I will briefly touch on the Ethiopian caste contest, and then focus on West Africa for the purpose of condensing the argument.<sup>9</sup>

Caste interpretation of African societies has met with criticisms. Pankhurst has argued for a different set of analysis apart from the caste to understand the condition of "marginalized minorities". Pankhurst suggests looking at "local conceptions of marginalizations" in a comparative perspective by taking stock of changing status "over time and space" (Pankhurst 1999, 485). He further argues that owing to "lack of uniform ideological cultural underpinning" wherein the social relations between the dominant and marginalized and among the marginalized is not caste-like; thus, it is better to keep it to the Indian context (Pankhurst 1999, 503). The misreading of caste as a religious, Hindu, Asian condition defeats the theory of caste as being hereditary, birth-based, rigid endogamous form of institution operating in any social groups. As is noted in his essay the ideas of purity and pollution exist in food practices, impurity attributed to the artisan caste without religious sanctions. Pankhurst argues the notions of purity-pollution is not a central organizing principle in south-western Ethiopia (Pankhurst 1999, 490–1). This position does not disqualify the caste rationale of purity. However, early in the essay, drawing from the twentieth-century works on caste in Africa, Pankhurst argues that apart from Hinduism the rest of caste specifications apply to caste in Africa (Pankhurst 1999, 486–7). However, by time he arrives at the conclusion, he disagrees with this proposition. Ambedkar examined the similarities of untouchabilities existing in non-Hindu societies. He cites examples of Judaism and Zoroastrian religious practices where menstruating women, or someone who comes into contact with a corpse is held as untouchable. However, Ambedkar argues "even though the idea of untouchability exists in various countries and religions, heredity based untouchable class only exists in India" (Ambedkar [1927] 2009, 47). This doesn't undermine the existence of castes in non-Indian societies.

### ***Castes of West Africa***

The case of caste in West Africa, especially Senegal can be viewed through the existence of hereditary rules effective in politics, economy, occupation, attitudes of people (intellectuals and common people alike) towards the lower castes, in matrimonies and strict familial pride with one's status (Mbow 2000). Among these, the conditions of inter-caste marriage still remain a taboo in the caste societies where families become accomplice in

prohibiting such marriages. Often this leads to suicide or infanticide of the intercaste couple (Mbow 2000, 87 fn. 18). The children born out of the intercaste (mixed) wedlock are “*geer benn tank* (having only one foot)” (Mbow 2000, 90).

Penda Mbow, a professor at Senegal’s premier university in Dakar, was in relationship with a man but couldn’t marry him. Senegalese caste norms prohibited them from inter-marrying since her partner belonged to a different caste. An ex-minister and adviser to the President of Senegal, Mbow had to wait for 40 years to legally marry. She recently married her long-time companion owing to the strict rules on inter-caste marriage. This news was received with much celebration in the Senegalese media (Seneweb 2017). Similar circumstances of caste endogamy can be seen in Nigeria, Mali, Mauritania, and other caste-sensitive societies of Africa.

Cheikh Anta Diop stated that unlike other hierarchical caste societies the Senegalese *gér* – the superior caste “*could not* materially exploit the lower castes without losing face in the eyes of others” (emphasis mine) (Diop 1987, 2). The uniqueness of this caste system was premised on exchange. Be it slave caste ministers or the manual labourer castes who *could* add wealth given by the lord instead of being deprived. Such social system accorded advantages and disadvantages which is why “African society remained stable” Diop argued (Diop 1987). The religious attachment to the maintenance of caste assured monopoly of inherited caste community skills. This was made to “eliminate professional competition” (Diop 1987, 8). And to promote this work ethic religiosity validated the system. Thus, even if a person acquires the craft and skills, still the person is barred from freely practising that trade because of ancestral inheritance to the novelty of the trade. The purity of the outcome of specific caste profession gets valued, while the same work done by other caste person loses its originality.

In Nigeria, in particular, extraordinary literature is produced on the caste system compared to other African societies. Many European anthropologists of the colonial times produced scholarship on the intra-caste conflicts in Igbo society. However, it was refuted by Africanist scholars who found it innocuous to compare the caste system of Igbo with other caste societies (Obinna 2012). However, Nigerian author Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani in her *New Yorker* magazine piece demonstrated the significance of the caste system in Igbo society (Nwaubani 2019). The commitment to traditions, such as traditional titles “Ogbuagu” given to accomplished men, cannot be taken by the lower (slave) castes irrespective of their achievements. The values of the caste system are upheld as legacies of the great pre-colonial African past.<sup>10</sup> Tradition, as a marker of civility as opposed to the European colonial modernity, was a framework developed by post-colonial studies that belaboured to prove the white society about its greatness. In doing this, a cultural hallmark of traditional societies was masked as a great gift to the world. In effect, such

traditions were locked in the pre-modern, medieval conceptions of human subjugation. The caste systems of African society bring to bear the many debates about who gets noticed and what gets discussed in the African grief.

It is not very often that one derives resources or knowledge from the subordinate castes of African society. It is usually the dominant castes that are privileged to fit into the rank of ruling class, aristocrats or powerbrokers, who due to their access to modernity and grasp on colonizer's language, convey to the world about their privileged memories of oppression as Nwaubani does in her searing self-critical indictment of her great-grandfather who traded in slavery. She identified him as a "slave-trader" (Nwaubani 2018).

African intellectuals tend to blame the West for the slave trade, but I knew that white traders couldn't have loaded their ships without help from Africans like my great-grandfather. I read arguments for paying reparations to the descendants of American slaves and wondered whether someone might soon expect my family to contribute. (Nwaubani 2018)

The slaves were of Osu and Ohu origin, who were also transported across the Atlantic. The dominant castes in the societies "competed with one another in the number of slaves" (Nwaubani 2019). This structure of internal African experience of enslavement predates the "modern era" as Ogechukwu Maduagwu, the founder of Initiative For Eradication of Tradition and Cultural Stigmatization in Our Society (IFETACSIOS), a caste abolitionist organization observed.<sup>11</sup> According to Maduagwu the historic experience of untouchability attached to the bodies of defeated tribes was one of the ways for their enslavement. The ones who were enslaved and brought into the Igbo land, were tied to the shrine working as low-born supervised by freeborn higher caste priests. This explanation of society through a caste angle helps to detangle the complications developed over the racialized other through class conflicts. Many outcaste Osus have subverted the denigration of untouchability into a marker of accelerating class by sharing resources due to the solidarity of marginalization.<sup>12</sup> Caste theory manages to take into account many hoops that were missed in the overwhelming anti-imperial, anti-capitalist logic of postcolonial reconstruction of independent nations. Often caste dynamics get submerged under the philippic of whiteness contra non-white "races" by privileging historically short-sighted Euro-American viewpoint.

There are no physical differences between the casted people unlike the "race" phenomenology. This fundamental difference has been unique to the caste-race question. In the Igbo society Nwaubani also cautions from pitting caste into a race problem by analogizing it with the African American experience. She finds these differences are mostly based on lineage and spirituality, which is drawn from the cultural belief. If compared with the Hindu caste society, these two prominent markers become engines to the caste

society. Ambedkar noticed caste with providing a “cultural unity” that maintains homogeneity in a diverse society (Ambedkar [1916] 1979). Lineage as a way to retain purity of bloodline through strict endogamy, and spirituality that encourages such practices becomes authenticated excuse to impose caste rules. From early age children are indoctrinated with this belief system who then impose these distinctions of lower and lowest designations on the outcastes. Igbo caste system is a social practice.

Looking at the Igbo caste system one can draw apparent parallels to the India’s caste system. The spiritual sanction in the Igbo traditional religion acts like Hindu-Brahminic religion for Dalits. Calling names to the lower caste *Ohu* or *Osu* in public spaces and getting into constant confrontation with those of the higher castes who refuse to honour the dignity of the people on the oppressed spectrum is similar to the Indian Dalit experience. An entire community is outcasted and ostracized from participating in any village festivities and the leadership of the lower castes is not acceptable to the higher caste groups in Southeastern Nigeria (Nwaubani 2019). The *Osu* caste is hereditary and it has limited relation and association with the non-*Osu* society. The stigma of *Osu* emanates from their lowest position worthy of pollution and fear. The brutality received in the name of religion and Igbo cosmic practices dismember the *Osu* people at the hands of Igbo caste priests. For example, this ritual chant demonstrates the inescapability of the capital punishment wrought by the Igbo caste society: “Anything that kills a freeborn should go and kill the outcast instead”. *Osu* in modern times continue to be debarred from the Igbo society where their skills and achievements are “undervalued” let alone acknowledged (Obinna 2012, 113).

Their position is unchanged irrespective of the religion and their life is devoted to someone else’s pleasure and protection. Meaning they do not have a dignity and life full of unworthiness (Obinna 2012).<sup>13</sup> However, Christianity, through the efforts of missionaries, offered them education and positions that helped to elevate their status out of the local religious status.<sup>14</sup> Still their status as inferior is unbreakable. The belief in local religious gods sifted to believe that caste enslavement was meant to be kept untouched because it was “the plan of the god and interfering with it would upset gods”.<sup>15</sup>

The active efforts in the Nigerian society by non-*Osu* to hide their status or avoid any hint to demonstrate *Osu* connections are revealing the fears and social pressures to act to impress the comfort of ruling class’ viewpoint. In an interview with me, Nwaubani stated that anti-caste activists are mostly non-*Osu* like Oge because many *Osus* do not want to identify with their caste in the open due to the apparentness of stigma and fear. However, some *Osus* have successfully advocated for jobs and preferential treatment in the government positions.<sup>16</sup> There are also efforts underway to organize *Osu* community to share information and resources.<sup>17</sup> Historically, the *Osu* status was not confined to one particular group.

Getting into the Shrine and claiming the Osu status meant to escape death or death-like conditions. Once a person becomes Osu, then they are made untouchables – which meant they were under the custody of gods and no one could touch to inflict punishment or pain. There were many reasons for one to become Osu and the motivation varied. One could claim Osu status to escape sanctions, or death as a form of human sacrifice that was going to be offered, or to evade the unpayable debt to the powerful creditor. These were last choices prior to death.<sup>18</sup> Once an Osu the curse of becoming lowest outcaste – an impure body remained on the succeeding generation producing a descent-based untouchability.

In 2017 at a public event in Harvard, I asked the Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka to address the question of caste in Nigerian society. Soyinka immediately gestured to the existence of caste among the Igbo people, thereby distancing himself from the caste question. This conversation was picked up a Nigerian novelist Onyeka Nwelue also in the audience who spent the rest of the evening explaining to me the reason Soyinka distanced himself from the caste society of Nigeria. Nwelue gestured to Chinua Achebe who is from the Igboland and has invested in exposing the caste system. The apparent reference is to the classic *Things Fall Apart* wherein Achebe talks to the four castes in Igboland: Diala (freeborn), Ohu (domestic slaves), Osu (slaves owned by traditional deities) and Ume (slaves dedicated to most vicious deities) all placed according to the hierarchies.

Soyinka's reaction demonstrates the persistent problems of Nigerians merely acknowledging the caste problem while failing to actively engage in addressing it by Otherising caste rather than acknowledging it. This happens due to the absence of anthropological and sociological comparative framework amongst the DWD groups; the activists have fallen short of making concrete developments into the rigid organizations like UN and other international non-government civil society groups. The celebrated work of D M Todd (1977) and Tal Tamari (1995, 1997), whose doctoral dissertation remains key textual approach to the issue of caste in Africa (Tamari 1991), never became base of dialogue at the UN conventions that could strengthen the case of caste victims alongside the DWD groups.

### ***Castas of the Americas***

Although the concept of caste matured during the South American colonization, it was in the Spanish colonial conquest that caste hardened in the colonized society. It was in the Portuguese colony, Brazil in particular where caste colourism took definitive shape under the hereditary castes – the *castas*. The complex “mixed-race” case of Brazil has taken shape into multi-coloured form. That is how we get “one hundred and thirty-six colors of race in



Brazil" (Prabhala 2014). In addition to these racialized forms, caste assimilation grids class and colour lines into the Brazilian society.

However, for the sake of this paper, I briefly dwell on the Mexican caste system that epitomizes economic and social constructs in the Americas. Here caste identifiers draw on the percentage of blood. Three-part Spanish and one-part Indian make one *Castizos*. Three-part Indian and one-part Spanish makes one *Cholos*, while the Spanish and Negro blood make *Mulattos* (Levitin 2011). The *Mestizos* (Spanish and Indian ancestry) were castas whose designation was decided on descent as opposed to the Spaniards of *peninsulares* (born in Europe) or *criollos* (born in South America) (Menchaca 1993, 585). Such strict segmentation of caste operates like the caste system of India wherein percentage of caste blood defines the caste status of the progeny. Ben Vinson III in his landmark study on the Mexican caste system described how before the *mestizaje* (the colour-racial identity) there was caste. The Mexican independence of the early 1820s had dual purpose – political freedom and abolition of the caste system (Vinson III: 183). In that way the efforts bore fruits, however, the caste mindset remained. Caste structure and operation evolved with peculiar understanding of caste ethnicity instead of race. One elderly informant, Torres (age 95) informed Vinson that “we don’t have race here” (Menchaca 1993, 204). What then did they have? It was castes that ran like a stream underneath the colour-coded society. In current times it operates with the same language and philosophy as during the colonial regime. Its modality, however, has changed (Menchaca 1993, 207).

Similar template was used in the north of Mexico, in the American South that laid a foundation for America’s slavery to develop into racial caste system. Caste system ensured a viable functioning of enslaved population that put the lowest caste – The outcaste slaves on the margins of social, political, and economic progress. the upper castes – who became default, dominant castes – took every advantage of their caste status aided with racialized science and religiosity to claim a spiritual superiority over the lower castes.

By looking at America through a caste lens, it starts to make sense how the lower caste groups are meant “to be treated, where they are expected to live, what kinds of positions they are expected to hold” (Wilkerson 2020a, 18). Thus, a call is made to analyse America’s troubled past through the lens of caste and its co-existence with other systems of hierarchies. Instead of pitting it as caste or race, American scholars of the past century had argued for a racial-caste or color-caste system. The invisibilization of caste features make it more pungent and powerful as opposed to the visibilities accorded to race attributes. The basis of each society is foregrounded in the architectural foundations of a social construct that maintain the hierarchy. One cannot move from within the structure of the fixed ranking given at the time of the birth. This belief then matures to grant unanimous privileges to the dominant oppressor castes while prohibiting the same to oppressed ones.

The purview of looking beyond the boundaries of caste cartographies offers us unique insight into looking at caste disorder operating in many societies, comfortably sustaining in the modern nation states. There are caste oppressions that are not often rooted in the Euro-centric racial conception. We are also seeing a new form of caste oppression that is not a separate colour concept.

## Conclusion

Belief in purity of soul and blood affirms the *raison d'être* of the caste system. This purity is then validated through the distribution of work. One is assigned a caste role and they have to commit to it entirely. Violation of this invites punishment. Similar forms of systems exist in societies that have vertical hierarchies brought by the descent-based order. Caste as a hereditary system is not unique to India, it is global. The inflexible forms of hierarchies do exist elsewhere. But they have not received the same intellectual response as is seen with Indian caste system. Reasons may vary but logic of superiority bears resemblance. Perhaps the post-colonial native elites themselves were amassing cultural capital and wealth to distract their own superior, higher caste status by becoming uber victims of the colonial process. In this the historically double oppressed (by colonial machine and by the native elite) never had an equal seating.

The social status permanently fixated based on one's descent is a hallmark of caste rapture. World over the societies that have undergone colonial reconstruction of their selves have found facing with the European models of ethnicity, tribe, and nation. Caste somehow missed the differentiating metaphor. Thus, an anti-oppression fight has been confined to the European models that have retained a certain characteristic intact – this is the obscure, but omnipresent, Global Caste.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank 6 reviewers for their criticisms, comments, and suggestions. I am grateful to the informants from Nigeria, Senegal, Japan, Nepal, India, USA, U.K., Mali, Mauritania, Romania for giving me interviews and, or, helping me think through the ideas of caste. The credits for individual interviewees are cited in the paper. I would like to thank the organizing committee of International Congress DWD team for inviting me to deliver Special Address at the inaugural session of the Congress on 21 Sept. 2019. Part of the remarks appear in this paper in a condensed form. I would like to also thank Malini Ranganathan, Jesus Chairez-Garza, Mabel Denzin Gregan, and Pavithra Vasudevan for inviting me to deliver the Keynote at the "Rethinking Difference in India: Racialization in Transnational Perspective" conference held on April 1–2, 2019 at American University, Washington D.C. The present paper is different from the original keynote.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## ORCID

Suraj Yengde  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8909-6421>

## Notes

1. Copy of the resolution with the author.
2. The original theories of the racial caste system were developed in the post-slavery American South. Development of racial-caste interface helped to explain the inadequacy of the “most dangerous myth” of race.
3. Schwartz’s (1967) edited collection was the first scientific study that collated studies on caste and diaspora. Following this there have been critical developments in finding caste outside South Asia. Vivek Kumar’s work around caste and diaspora establishes the existence of Dalit community in the western diaspora (2009). However, Ayyathurai’s (2021) research in the Caribbean in 2019 found castelessness among the Indo-Guyanese community.
4. Ambedkar looked at the Roman era slavery and noticed slaves becoming grammarians, artists, philosophers, doctors, p. 14–15. Waghmare (1974), the first Shudra (Gardner caste) to conduct extensive research on African American literature in the 1960s commented that even if the slaves could buy the freedom, it was extremely difficult for one to purchase due to the costs and generational toil day and night just to get by.
5. Nwaubani (2020).
6. Ugo, interview with the author, 30 September 2020.
7. Nwaubani interview with the author, 13 September 2020.
8. Freirean methodology has intentionally invested in action as a collective project to free the oppressed.
9. Works in the Horn of Africa, and West Africa have aptly recognized caste distinctions in the African societies (Shack 1964).
10. For a nuanced exposition of this see Diop (1987).
11. Interview with the author, 4 September 2020.
12. Two sisters who belong to the Osu community Urenna Onuegbu nee Onyenucheya, Uzumma Onyenucheya shared the story of their middle class status that is an envy for the non-Osu, known as Dialas. Their version of Osu sacrifice stems from the fact that Osu were the “most beautiful and intelligent people that is why they were chosen for sacrifices” (Interview with the author, 14 November 2020). Similar narratives can be heard in case of Dalits in India who were once the valorous royals but after the defeat subjected to condemnation (Ambedkar 2003).
13. Ibid.
14. Nwaubani interview with the author, 13 September 2020.
15. Nwaubani interview with the author, 13 September 2020.
16. Nwaubani interview with the author, 13 September 2020.
17. Urenna Uzumma, Onyenucheya, Interview with the author, 14 November 2020.
18. Ugo interview with the author, 30 September 2020.

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