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Introduction

How does one begin to write a history of prejudice, something that by definition resists historicization – and even acknowledgment? I attempt to do so in this book by examining the process of otherization (an inelegant word to describe an inelegant practice), of social and political distancing that is a central part of the history of African Americans and Dalits (ex-Untouchables, or Scheduled Castes as they are called in the Indian constitution of 1950), two long subordinated and stigmatized groups in the United States and India, respectively. It is my view that the juxtaposition of two very different locations and histories (the African American and the Dalit) and, within each of them, of very different kinds of public and private narratives of struggle allows for an uncommon analysis of the workings of prejudice in an intriguing complex of forms and places.

In order to deepen and extend the inquiry that follows, I make another move that is perhaps not entirely predictable. I start with a rough-and-ready distinction between what one might call "vernacular" and "universal" prejudices. The former is, in simple terms, local, localizable, relatively visible, and sometimes acknowledged: say, the prejudice against blacks, "Untouchables," gays, Muslims, Jews, conquered indigenous populations, recent immigrants, women, and other "minorities." It refers to calculated behavior that we sometimes condemn – when we notice it, or when it is forced on our attention: racism, casteism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, reductive monoculturalism, prejudice thus as bias, malice, or inherited structures of discrimination,

which the state believes it can measure or contain. I have called such prejudice "vernacular" in order to distinguish it from another kind, which is largely invisible because it is widespread ("universal") and hence seen as "natural." This "universal" is the language of law and state, and it passes for the common sense of modern society, rarely acknowledged as prejudice. At this level, the history of prejudice becomes even more intractable for it is, simultaneously, everywhere and nowhere.

Prejudice – the "already known" – of course always appears in the guise of common sense. It hardly requires explanation and is seldom archived. The difficulty of archiving its history is evident. The common sense of race, caste, class, or gender relations, even when made visible, as it sometimes is in sharply polarized societies and contexts, is articulated in historically unpretty, and therefore generally unacknowledged, actions and statements: derogatory names and forms of address, verbal and physical abuse, and sexual exploitation (justified by the alleged "immorality" of subordinated and marginalized castes and classes), to name a few of the most obvious. Moreover, given the fact of disproportionately skewed access to resources and power in historical societies of the past and the present, such abuse and dismissiveness has not always needed to be fully articulated. It has often been reserved for the spat-out, half-suppressed, word-of-mouth and, one might add, for the gesture of disdain, contempt and disgust, the pause and the recoil, the refusal to touch, what in India is called Untouchability.[1] How, out of what archive, are we to write a history of these gestures?

The question will surface repeatedly in the following pages since it lies at the heart of the specificities and challenges of writing a history of prejudice. At this point, however, and as part of the difficulty of pursuing such a history, I need to say one word more about the claims of the modern as the quintessentially normal, rational, "unprejudiced."

[1] On the question of "touch" and its significance for political/historical analysis, see Gopal Guru, "Power of Touch," *Frontline*, 23, no. 25 (December 16–29, 2006), http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl2325/stories/20061229002903000.htm; Gopal Guru, "Archaeology of Untouchability," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 44, no. 37 (September 12, 2009), 49–56. For discussion of this piece, see Sundar Sarukkai, "Phenomenology of Untouchability," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 44, no. 37 (September 12, 2009); and Balmurli Natrajan, "Place and Pathology in Caste," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 44, no. 51 (December 19, 2009). See also Yoginder Sikand's interview with Kancha Ilaiah, *Mukta Mona*, February 13, 2007.

The Prejudice of the Modern

Modern, Raymond Williams tells us, was through the nineteenth century and very markedly in the twentieth "virtually equivalent to IMPROVED or satisfactory or efficient . . . something unquestionably favourable or desirable." *Modernity*, in Peter Brooker's words, "names the processes of increasing rationalization in social and political life, along with the associated technological development and accumulation [concentration] of people in cities that combined to produce the . . . new society of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries." It also describes

> the processes of industrialization associated with capitalist development . . . [as well as] the "philosophy" of modernity: namely, a belief in scientific and social progress, human rights, justice and democracy, which inspired the American and French Revolutions as well as much later social, economic and political theory, including Marxism [and, we might add, many of the great anticolonial struggles of the eighteenth to the twenty-first centuries].[2]

Other characteristics might be noted. It is a ruling, if generally unstated, prejudice of the modern world that it has produced an ideal grammar (the *correct* form of speaking and writing), a rational order (the rule of reason), and an unmarked citizen (*man*, in the broader sense of humans as well as the narrower sense of the male of the species) entirely competent to implement this rule and this grammar.[3] This prejudice is closely linked to ideas of what it is to be modern, liberal, and democratic; in a word, to use a term that has been carried over from a "medieval" discourse into the modern, *civilized*.

Let me be clear. In highlighting the invisible, unacknowledged, yet global prejudice of the modern, I refer to preconceptions generalized not by a claim of being eternal but as a historically situated "universal," located in the era of the modern, itself overdetermined by the tenets of Western imperialism and worldwide nationalisms. More specifically, I allude to the common sense of mid-twentieth-century (post–World War II) political discourse, which is the focus of inquiry

[2] Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 208–9 (capitalization in original); and Peter Brooker, *Glossary of Cultural Theory* (London: Arnold, 2003), 166–7.

[3] For a fine articulation and elaboration of the proposition, see Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

in this book. The era of the establishment of the nation-state as the exclusively legitimate form for the political existence of peoples; of modernization and development, and the much vaunted equality of nations (and individuals) across the globe; of the universal declaration of human rights; and of the "universal" condemnation of continuing European imperialism, apartheid in South Africa, segregation in the United States, and Untouchability in India.

Through the media, and through wider political and intellectual commentary, contemporary common sense propagates a belief in the modern as enlightened, rational (or scientific), secular (or "modern," "enlightened" Christian, which is often equated with the "secular"), liberal (although that has become a derogatory term in contemporary American politics), and democratic. Masculinity is not commonly mentioned, but it is implicit, for the male of the species is taken as the standard – the assumed, deliberative, decisive, self-made, self-making, and self-same subject of the modern. Importantly, this narrative provides an overwhelmingly economic/institutional account of modernity: it omits any significant analysis of the philosophy of modernity and makes it appear natural and normal.

In spite of that economic/institutional bias, however, the discourse of the enlightened modern, with its emphasis on rationality, deliberation, order, and equal opportunity, conspicuously understates the calculus of capitalism in its account of modern society. It also shies away from naming violence as a significant factor in organizing and upholding existing social and political arrangements. Like violence, religion and religious belief become part of the great unsaid in the modern. What we hear about instead is the nonmodernity or premodernity of other (non-"European") religions, themselves brought into view with the modern claim to be secular.[4] Again, the variations are interesting, for if a Christian secular is what reigns in the West, a Hindu secular is clearly dominant in India. Through all of this, the discourse of the modern overlooks, undervalues, and cultivates a deep-seated anxiety about the rich variety and contradictoriness of human life and history.

[4] See Talal Asad's proposition about the simultaneous birth of the categories of religion and secularism in Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

A final trait to be noted in the modernist account of itself is that it deals with uncomfortable facets of modern existence – slavery, untouchability, drug-trafficking, genocide – by declaring them an aberration or exception, the work of deviants or criminals, or of people who are simply not modern enough: not *our* history, or at least not the most significant part of our history. It is here, in the tortuous construction of the nonmodern, the backward, and the deviant, that we move into the realm of what I have called vernacular, visible, prejudice.

Modernity brings with it a fable of freedom, prosperity, and peace, available to all. A rider is quickly added. Freedom can be extended only to those who are ready for it: not to children, for example, nor (for the longest time) women, or the colonized, the "backward," the illiterate, the propertyless, and so on. The pledge of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" regularly announced has also been regularly deferred. The point may be illustrated by reference to the experience of groups who have not been easily assimilated into the narrative of homogenous modernity and nationhood in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, among them African Americans and Dalits. Before moving on to the latter, however, I want to address one other issue, concerning the advantages and risks involved in juxtaposing the histories of these disparate "communities" from two different continents.

Juxtaposing African American and Dalit Histories

Much of my research and writing over the past three decades has focused on the conditions and histories of marginalized and disenfranchised groups in colonial and postcolonial South Asia. Why, then, the present shift to an investigation of the histories of Americans of African descent and Dalits (Indians of "Untouchable" descent) in tandem? The answer is by no means straightforward. It has much to do with the political struggles and debates of the last half century and more, the internationalization of those struggles in fascinating ways from the early and middle decades of the twentieth century, and the new perspectives on human society and history that have followed in the wake of these conflicts. However, some proximate "causes" are more easily identified.

The first is personal. After several years of living and teaching in the United States, from 1998 onward, I woke up to the realization

that I actually *lived* in this country and was not just a visitor as I had been for various lengths of time earlier. I recognized at the same time the importance, for me, of a robust and ongoing engagement with the politics and history of the society in which I lived. My current work on the history of African Americans and Dalits has grown out of that recognition.

The Dalit and the African American struggles (if we may as shorthand reduce them for the moment to two) have shared common ground in several respects, and the connections and parallels between them have often been noted. The nonviolent campaigns of civil disobedience against British colonial rule in India led by M. K. Gandhi were an important inspiration for Martin Luther King, Jr., and many of his followers. And Gandhi himself developed many of his ideas about nonviolence and civil disobedience from reading authors like Henry David Thoreau. Similarly, though this is less commonly remarked, Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, Horace Greeley, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and other black and white abolitionists used the idiom of caste extensively in mounting their critique of race relations in the USA. W. E. B. Du Bois, perhaps the leading intellectual spokesperson of the African American struggle in the first half of the twentieth century, deeply invested in the internationalist and anti-imperialist dimensions of the movement, declared "color-caste" to be the ideology of imperialism, and noted that the "caste of color" was so pervasive in his own country "as to correspond with the caste of work and enslave not only slaves but black men who were not slaves."[5]

On the other side, the foremost Dalit intellectuals repeatedly invoked the black experience in their articulation of the Dalit struggle. Jyotirao Phule in the late nineteenth century and B. R. Ambedkar in the twentieth, to take two of the most prominent examples, translated key terms from the Anglo-American abolitionists' idiom. Phule described the Dalits' condition as one of "*Ghulamgiri*" ("slavery"), affiliating the historical degradation of "Untouchables" with trans-Atlantic slavery. Ambedkar transcoded racial segregation in the United States as the Dalits' "*bahishkrut samaj*" ("outcaste community"). And in the 1970s a militant group of ex-Untouchable writers and activists in

[5] Kamala Visweswaran, *Un/common Cultures: Racism and the Rearticulation of Cultural Difference* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 112, 114, and passim.

western India invoked the Black Panthers in naming themselves "Dalit Panthers," thus serving to popularize the name "Dalit" for groups earlier described as Untouchables, Depressed Castes, Scheduled Castes, or (in Gandhi's favored term) Harijans.[6] It is almost as if exigent history writing in these instances cannot be done in narrowly regionalist or nationalist terms but requires a wider, universal frame.

Dalit – meaning (literally) "crushed," "ground down"; (metaphorically) the wretched of the earth; (historically) those who labor so that society and "civilization" may advance; and (politically today) low-caste and low-class groups who demand fair compensation for their labor and equal opportunities for their talents – is not an inappropriate term to describe the condition of subordination and marginalization of the more impoverished and disadvantaged of these groups. *Dalit* as the laboring body – the body on whose back, on whose labor, the whole edifice of the economy and society, the privilege of culture and civilization, and leisure and power has been built, and as the female body that appears center stage in the later chapters of this book, as inordinately ground down and subjected to a sometimes literally unbearable combination of sexual and social labor – doubly subalternized: *dalit* twice over. Intimations of this wider history may be readily seen in the experience of people of African descent in the USA as well as in that of ex-Untouchable castes and subcastes in India.

In a sense, my own reflection on Dalit and African American histories simply acknowledges and pays tribute to the universalist impulse, and the search for new kinds of politics and new locations for them, found in the histories of so many subaltern constituencies. It may thus be seen as a contribution to the ongoing reexamination and rewriting of history that has gone on actively from the middle of the twentieth century. This reassessment includes the fundamental feminist challenge to the male universal that has until now ruled in the realms of philosophy, history, and democratic politics, and the widespread interrogation of the past and the present by anticolonial and postcolonial scholarship. It includes as well the wide-ranging African American analysis of the

[6] Harijans means "children of god," and Dalits have understandably expressed displeasure at the patronizing quality of the name. Ironically, Gandhi, who is a hero for many African Americans, has been seen as the "enemy" by activist Dalits. The reasons for this will become clearer below.

race and caste underpinnings of European imperialism and the Dalit reinterpretation of the strategies through which abolitionists seized on liberal discourses to make political claims for black freedom and equality.

In spite of this long history of transnational and transcontinental inquiries, I am aware of the dangers of juxtaposing the examples of subaltern struggles in the very different societies and historical contexts of India and the United States – or what one might call the pitfalls of comparative history. I share the skepticism and misgivings of many scholars about the value of a dominant tendency in comparative history or sociology, which relies, as one leading historian puts it, "on the most slender trace of an analogy here, a touch of resemblance there, and a suggestion of parallelism in yet another respect." "Comparison is not a neutral analytic method but a highly pointed claims-making device," observes another.[7]

Like them, I am uncomfortable about practices of comparison that assume the givenness of the units to be compared and deal in universals, against which particular societies, communities, or histories are either found wanting or declared commendable. For any comparative history that consciously or unconsciously proposes a supposedly "neutral" standard – commonly that of the Western European and North American experience as understood by the ruling elites – whereby one may assess success or failure in modern world conditions, and proceed to make judgments and hand out prizes on that basis ("mature democracy," "increasingly enlightened community," "incipient secular consciousness"), is liable to be reductionist, if not deceptive or indeed disingenuous.

My hope is that my investigation of African American and Dalit histories side by side will not detract from the specificity, complexity, and integrity – that is, the very *history* and *politics* – of the building of these diverse struggles. The unlikely juxtaposition of bodies of scholarship and debate taken from two different continents – scholarship and debate that is intensely local and impressively transnational at the

[7] Ranajit Guha, "Subaltern Studies: Projects for Our Time and Their Convergence," in Ileana Rodriguez, ed., *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 37; and Micol Seigel, *Uneven Encounters: Making Race and Nation in Brazil and the United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 225.

same time – should extend our awareness not only of shared histories and shared struggles in the making of the modern world but of the particularities and features of different histories and societal conditions that experts have assumed to be well understood and hence taken for granted. By that means, I hope it may also make for a new kind of comparative history, one in which we deal not in universals already understood but in the assumptions that underlie our individual histories and our particular universals – thereby challenging the very claim to a single overriding and ahistorical universalism (or prejudice!).

To begin with, the juxtaposition of processes of minoritization responsible for the production of multiple "minorities" at the very time that nations and "majorities" come into being should underscore the coexistence of very different kinds of thinking on matters like race and caste, racism and casteism – an understanding of these in terms of parallel but incongruent histories of class and power on the one hand, as against those that stress a more primordial sense of identity and inheritance on the other. I have written elsewhere of how the concept of "communalism" in India – the notion of religious communities perennially ranged against each other – was derived from "communal conflict" and the "communal riot" (the marking of violence as the true, if not the only, relation between people belonging to different religious denominations) and not from "community" or collective modes of being and thinking self and history.[8] So, too, I submit, notions of race and caste derive from the attempted perpetuation, or recuperation, of particular structures of power and privilege through a politics of racism and caste discrimination, not the other way around.

In spite of such beginnings, race and caste (like the politicized religious community in India) are represented as the ground or foundation of a series of repetitive actions that regularly breach the walls of social organization (i.e., as a societal phenomenon outside the domain of political practice, including the political practice of the state). My juxtaposition of different histories of racism and casteism should show once more how incoherent and messy the parameters and logic of caste, race, and other categories of social and political exclusion have been

[8] Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990; Perennial edition, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012).

and at the same time invalidate any attempt to root these constructions purely in a sociological domain, excluding their political charge.

Racism and the African American question have been central to the political debate in the United States for a very long time; hence Du Bois's declaration in 1903 that the problem of the twentieth century was the problem of the color line and the Nobel Prize–winning Swedish social scientist Gunnar Myrdal's Carnegie-sponsored (and state-supported) 1944 analysis of the "Negro problem" as the "American Dilemma."[9] There has been less open engagement with the stigma and humiliation attending caste practices, and the underlying question of Untouchability, in India. In part, this was because the "Muslim problem," as it was called, and the struggle for and ultimate establishment of a separate Muslim nation called Pakistan, had long been seen as *the* national question in India. In part, it followed from a widespread belief that class struggle, the emergence of new economic and social forces (and, with them, of modern reason) – what the country's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, called the forces of world history – would carry all before them and relegate caste and religion, and other such "relics" of the past, to the periphery of public life. The history of India (and the world) has not quite lived up to that expectation. Yet, questions of caste and Untouchability, and the liberation of the lowest (and often poorest) castes, have not attracted urgent attention outside Dalit circles, at least until quite recently. A small piece of anecdotal evidence will serve to illustrate the point.

Over several years at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and at Emory University in Atlanta, I offered four semester-long courses, two on "A Black Bourgeosie? The Making of the African-American and (South Asian) Dalit Middle Classes" and two on "Autobiographies/Histories: the African American and Dalit Struggles." Both universities have numerous undergraduates of South Asian background, described as "heritage" students, as well as a number who come directly from South Asia. A good number of African American students, a few students of Caribbean background, a few who have come from Africa more recently, and some Caucasian Americans opted to

[9] See W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1901; reprint New York: Signet Classic, 1969), 54; and Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, Volume 1: *The Negro in a White Nation*, 2 vols. (1944; reprint New York, McGraw-Hill, 1964).