

Different Shades of Caste among the Indian Diaspora in the US

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Abstract: Social scientists, barring a few, deny the existence of caste in the Indian diaspora. It is a fact that caste does not exist among Indians in diaspora as part of a stratification system per se. However, the empirical reality suggests that caste is not totally absent among the Indians in diaspora. On the basis of field-work done by the researcher during January 2012 until May 2012 in different states of the US at least three different shades of caste can be observed among Indians in the US. These three shades are, one, caste can be observed in the form of relationships which gives birth to networks and endogamous grouping. In terms of endogamy the membership of a caste has to be ascriptive (i.e. membership by birth). Hence the caste system assumes potential to influence patterns of interaction of its members in diaspora. Different matrimonial websites and matrimonial columns in varying newspapers in the US are testimony to the existence of endogamy and thereby caste in Indian diaspora. The second shade of caste among Indians in diaspora is that it exists as an institution of discrimination and exclusion. That means discrimination and exclusion exists in the name of castes in the diaspora. In this paper, I will highlight how caste discrimination and exclusion on the basis of higher and lower status of castes exists among Indians even in the US. The third shade of caste among the Indian diaspora in the US can be observed when different castes transcend their regional, religious and linguistic boundaries to form new communities. In this context, the paper will analyze how different castes among the Dalits of India have formed a formidable group that cuts across their religion, region and linguistic delineation to unite under one Dalit identity. Their new identity is now used as a symbol of assertion and emancipation. To conclude, we can safely argue that these three shades of caste will grow stronger as time passes with the potentiality of creating caste conflict as it occurs in the UK.

Introduction

There is plethora of literature analyzing Indian diaspora on the basis of their regional (linguistic) and religious identity. Similarly, a number of studies have been done from the vantage point of countries in which members of the Indian diaspora live, like Indians in Great Britain, in the US, Canada, Malaysia, Fiji etc., to name just a few. However, with few exceptions, Schwartz (1967) and Kumar (2004, 2009), there is dearth of literature analyzing the dynamics of caste in the Indian diaspora. Social Scientists deny the existence of caste in the Indian diaspora. The first question they ask is how caste can migrate with the diaspora. The answer is not far to seek. When people migrate they do not migrate as solely biological entities, but with socio-cultural baggage as well. Caste being entrenched in their socio-cultural milieu gets transferred with migrant communities in the diaspora. The second question states, if caste exists in the diaspora in what form does it exist. It is a fact that caste among Indians in the diaspora does not exist as an institution of

ritual hierarchy and stratification system. However, caste is not totally absent. Three different shades of caste can be observed among Indians in the US. One, caste exists among Indians as an endogamous grouping. In terms of endogamy the membership of a caste has to be ascriptive (i.e. membership by birth). Hence, caste assumes the potential to influence patterns of interaction by its members purely based on birth which articulates itself as an extension of caste from their homeland. Furthermore, these interaction patterns based on endogamous relationships give birth to networks which cut across different countries. Second, caste also exists as an institution of discrimination. Here caste becomes an extension of a caste practice in the homeland which tries to monopolize life chances and resources. The third shade of caste among Indians in diaspora in the US can be seen as different castes cut across their caste and regional and religious boundaries and transcend to form a community for emancipation and assertion. The caste of Dalits in the US is the case in point.

To begin with, let us observe what the website of this organization evokes:

Brahman Samaj of North America (BSNA) is the largest Brahman organization with the sole objective of bringing Brahmans together and help them seek their own cultural and social identity. It endeavors to create an international community of Brahmans (<http://www.bsna.org/index.htm>)...BSNA provides a platform for our youth to meet and develop contacts with other members of the community all over the world... Matrimony has been an important consideration in every community in every part of the world. The BSNA provides potential contacts for those who want to marry in their own Brahman community.²

Further in 2005 the Texas-based Vedic Foundation (VF) and the American Hindu Education Foundation (HEF) lodged a complaint with California's Curriculum Commission. They expressed that sixth grade history textbooks of Indian history and Hinduism contained biased material against Hinduism. They demanded that the books be revised according to what they called the views of Hinduism and Indian history shared by most Hindus and Indians. For doing the same they submitted some edits to the commission. Prominent among the edits was the insistence on the fact that caste and untouchability does not have any religious sanction since the inception of the Hindu social order. HEF traced the origin of the Hindu social order from Rigveda, Purushasukta tenth Mandal theory of *Varana*. Dr. Shiva Bajpai, Professor Emeritus of History, California State University Northridge, was appointed as a reviewer by the California's Board of Education to judge the genuineness of the edits. The Hindu American Foundation had not participated in the revision field a lawsuit against the State Board of Education because it did not accept the suggested edits by the two organizations. Last but not the least, The California Parents for Equalization of Educational Materials (CAPEEM), a group founded specifically for the California schoolbook case after SBE's decision, filed a separate lawsuit in Federal Court in Sacramento. The complaint was filed by Venkat Balasubramani, a Seattle attorney. Against this insistence of Hindu groups, mostly led by the so-called upper castes as is evident from the debates in different newspapers and in friendly chats with the other groups. Four Dalit groups, Dalit Freedom Network, Ambedkar Centre for Justice and peace, Indian Buddhist Association of America and Guru Ravidas Sabha Sacramento (Rio Linda) testified to negate the Hindu groups' claims. The Dalit groups were helped by Prof. Michael Wetzell – a Sanskrit Professor at Harvard University. The whole episode created a lot of tension in California that ultimately led to the court dismissal of the case in 2009.

In the same vein, the anthropologist Vishweswaran (2010) highlights the point how these organizations become narrow in terms of mobilization and thereby create a close network:

In July 2001, I and some colleagues at the University of Texas-Austin, received an invitation from a member of the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS) in Huston to meet the K.S. Sudarshan, the Indian leader of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) [...] The invitation was only sent to *Sanskritists*, scholars of Hindi, and those specializing in the study of Hinduism on the faculty [...] Since I am neither a *Sanskritist*, a Hindi teacher, nor a scholar of Hinduism, I surmised, I was included in the list primarily because of my South Indian Brahmin name [...] (p. 131).

Although a number of organizations in the US function in the name of religious and regional identities, their membership is strictly drawn from a particular caste. A respondent revealed how members of dominant castes of Andhra Pradesh – Reddis and Kammas, dominate different Telugu organizations in the US. Telengana Non Resident Indian (NRI) Association was formed in 2010 because some of the members felt the domination of particularly the Backward Castes (BC). Each caste tries to monopolize the organization leading to perpetual splits.

Caste Discrimination in the US

Caste cuts across religions in the Indian diaspora. In fact, caste-based discrimination has been reported among Indian Sikhs and Christians within the diaspora. Various Ravidasi Gurudwaras in the UK are testimony of the existing caste divide among the Sikh population (Juergensmeyer 1982, Judge 2010). I will analyze the presence of Dalit Sikhs and their *Gurudwaras* later in the paper to highlight a different shade of caste among Indians in the US diaspora. Let us first see the case of Dalit Christians in the US. McDermott (2009) while doing her study on Indian Dalit Christians in the diaspora in New York and New Jersey wrote,

Whether they want to admit it or not, however, the overwhelming impression I gained through nine months of research was that Dalit Christians continue to experience caste discrimination in the United States [...] the majority of advertised matrimonial demonstrate that Indian still practice caste preferences...Even in mixed congregations, people will not participate in social interactions if Dalits are known to be hosts. . . One of the younger Dalit Christian...was vocal, ironic, and critical of the ways in which university students express caste prejudice...‘Prejudice’? I experience it every day! They know their caste identity more than their Tamil (McDermott 2009: 235-236).

Under these circumstances the Christian Dalits in United States, recognized that the problem of caste discrimination in the US is an extension of Indian society and should be fought at the root. Therefore, they have created an organization in the US to fight the caste oppression back home. According to the president of the group,

Created in 2002 in the United States, the Dalit Freedom Network’s (DFN) mission is to empower Dalit in their quest for socio-spiritual freedom and human dignity by networking human, financial, and information resources...This international movement exists to give India’s Dalits a voice to be heard socially, politically and spiritually (D’Souza 2004: 259).

Matrimony and Caste in the US

Additionally, one can go to any Indian grocery store in the US and pick an Indian News Paper printed in the US and you will find entries in the matrimonial columns asking for caste specific

spouses. The websites of matrimonial columns also tell us the same thing, that caste is not totally absent in the US diaspora. The extreme form of this caste prejudice in marriage came to the fore when a person in Chicago burned his daughter, her husband and two children because she had married below her caste (Davey 2008).

Presence of Dalits and their Organizations in the US: A Proof of Caste in the US Indian Diaspora

Having discussed the presence of caste among different sections of Indians living in the US, I will now highlight the presence of caste in the US from a different vantage point in this article. I will analyze the presence of different Dalit castes in the United States. Dalits remain invisible within the Indian diaspora in the US. In my research no study has taken note of their patterns of organization and mobilization within the diaspora in contemporary times. Therefore, this article is a modest attempt to map out this phenomenon to further prove the fact that caste exists among the US Indian diaspora.

Chronologically the Indian diaspora can be divided into old and new. Similarly, the Dalit diaspora can also be divided into old and new (Kumar 2009). The Dalit population in the US forms the part of a new Dalit diaspora. Although the Dalit diaspora in the US crystallized only in the 1960s and 1970s, Dalits have a long history with the US. It began with few individuals who came to the US for specific jobs and then returned back. For instance Mangu Ram, a Dalit Sikh, came to the US in 1909 as a farm laborer in California to return to India in 1915. B. R. Ambedkar came to the US in 1913 for his graduate studies at the age of 23 and remained there until 1916. He came again in 1952 to receive his Ph.D. degree. At that time Dalit Sikhs immigrated specifically to California during the 1920s and 1930s from Fiji. Mention must be made of P.P. Laxman who arrived in 1952 from Kerala as a Fulbright Fellow and did his Masters in Cornell University. He had to undertake a one month ship journey to Naples before he came to the US. He went back to India in 1958 to return back to the US with his two daughters in 1962. In 1953 Shobha Singh came to pursue his Ph.D. at John Hopkins University with the John Hopkins President Scholarship. He went back to India in 1957 after submitting his Ph.D. thesis to return back to the US in 1964 with his wife. He was told that he had to sail for twenty-seven days from India to London via ship and then fly from London to the US. In 1967 Hardayal from UP was admitted to a Ph.D. program in Mississippi University but could not complete it and got a job. Subash Gadem, Neemgade, B. D. Dasairiya, Arya, Laxmi Bairwa and many others came as students for their higher professional degrees. V. K. Chaudhary, a design engineer and working in Military Engineering Service can be called the first Dalit to come to the US with a 'Green Card' from India in 1971. He was joined by his wife within a few months. She is noted as the first female Dalit engineer that migrated to the US.

Gradually a small pool of Dalit students, engineers, doctors and other professionals mustered up the courage to come to the US. Dalit migrants indicated that it was not easy to leave a permanent job while being the first or second generation educated member of the Dalit community with no network in their foreign destination. It was also difficult to convince their parents who had pinned their hopes on their educated sons. This was the general trend all from the 1960s to the 1980s. The new Dalit diaspora in the US developed during the 1990s after the information revolution and information technology industry got a boom. The second generation of Dalit literates from the urban centers who were qualified in software computer engineering (approximately five to eight years of work experience) started migrating to the US. No doubt their visas

were facilitated by their respective IT companies. The third wave of Dalit immigrants in the US happened from 2000 onward and consisted primarily of researchers and scientists. Most of them had their doctorates in biology-related sciences and were either working in research institutes or teaching in colleges back home. A fourth strand of Dalits in the US are dependents and relatives of the professionals who received their US citizenship. It happens more often than not that once professionals settle, they gradually start calling their blood and marital relatives. Apart from these four groups in the Dalit diaspora, there is a fifth group of Dalits which consists of students who came to do their higher studies but did not go back and gradually were absorbed into the job market.

Dalit Diaspora in the US: Their legal and professional status

Like any other Indian group there are different categories of Dalits living in the diaspora. There is diversity in terms of their legal and professional statuses. As for their legal status, I met NRIs, Green Card Holders, and Dalits as US citizens (it requires at least five years of continuous residence in the US to apply for citizenship). Now, more Dalits are applying for citizenship than ever before. They also want to obtain a PIO (Person of Indian Origin) card to save their time and energy to receive a visa to come to India.

Dalit professionals in the US are so diverse that it is difficult to find out how many professions they occupy. One can imagine this diversity as their professions range from working for NASA to being taxi drivers. I have interacted with Dalit lecturers at university teaching electrical, mechanical and software engineering. Many successful Dalit doctors are also living in the US. Scientists doing research in biotechnology in different universities and research institutes produce a number of research papers with multiple authors are part of the Dalit diaspora in the US. I met a researcher who has at least a hundred published research papers in reputed science journals. One scientist showed that a diagram of his research paper appeared as the cover page of a journal. I also found young minds working in the advertisement industry and as TV program producers. Clinical psychologists, businessmen, taxi drivers, mechanics, motel owners, gas station owners, car garage owners, DELI owners and what not. You can name any profession and they will be there; this shows their versatility and openness to be a part of the US American society.

Dalits and their Organizations in the US

What was the need of forming Dalit organizations in the US? Dalits in the US explained that during the early days there were very few Indians talking about Dalits. According to Owen Lynch, Professor emeritus of anthropology at New York University, before the 1960s, untouchables in the US were extremely rare. However, the Dalit community has grown steadily, “and they are showing the world that they can succeed when given equal opportunities” (Lynch in an interview in New York during April 2012). V. K. Chaudhary and others during an interaction in April 2012 stated that since it was difficult to meet each other, “we used to give advertisements to call people for any program of ours. There was no community life and we were two to three people meeting regularly. Therefore, to mobilize the people form a community of our own we formed our first organization”. VISION (Volunteers in Service of India’s Poor and Neglected) was formed in the mid-1970s in New Jersey where most Dalits lived. Most of the members of these organizations in 2012 were currently in their mid or late seventies and had many fond memories, specifically, how they have faced this world with their grit and determination. They remember protesting against a few cases of discrimination within the US. But most demonstrations were held against Dalit

killings and human right violations in India. The United Nation's office used to be their main centre of protest. In 1977, when the atrocities on the Dalits were on the rise, many protested in front of the UN office. In 1997 P. P. Laxman wrote a letter to the editor of EPW, highlighting the demonstration led by VISION. According to him,

Dalits from eleven different organizations staged demonstration on July 21st (1997) ... in front of the United Nations in New York. It was in protest against the desecration of the Ambedkar statue and police firing on Dalits in Mumbai on July 11th. The slogans raised at the demonstration were loud and clear: 'Stop Killing Dalits', 'Dalits rights are human rights', 'No more caste wars', 'Caste System, India's shame'... a memorandum...was submitted to Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of UN. The memorandum requests the UN to investigate the atrocities against untouchables through its Human Rights High Commissioner, Special Rapporteur on Racism and Racial Discrimination and Xenophobia, and Special Rapporteur on Child labor and Child Prostitution (Laxman 1997: 2078).

These protests did not go to waste because it is with these movements that Dalits approached the United Nations and participated in the Durban 'World Conference against Racism and Xenophobia' in 2001 that highlighted the Dalit human right violation at the international level. Gradually VISION receded into background with other organizations taking over.

According to Rambabu Gautam, the founder of Ambedkar Literary Vision, ALV actually emerged from VISION. It began in 1991 which coincided with the century year of Ambedkar's birth. Although he is still active, the organization has become defunct due to the lack of second-generation leadership. During his active days he established two Buddha Viharas and seven libraries in India. The two Buddha Viharas are at district Sharanpur (Village Chhutmal Pur, Kalsia Road) and district Mainpuri UP, respectively. He had more than a hundred members who actively contributed. Culture and education were the focus of this organization. Rambabu Gautam said his organization has been providing financial aid to needy students for more than 12 years. Every year twenty to twenty-five students were selected from 200-250 applications from different states of India. After careful scrutiny he used to send \$50 to \$100 checks directly to his students. His organization has now become dormant since Rambabu has grown old and can no longer keep up with the increasing numbers of applicants.

The Ambedkar International Mission (AIM) is another organization working among the US Dalits. Started in the year 2003 in New York and New Jersey it is the most visible and organized organization of Dalits in the US today. It was started in 1994-1997 in Malaysia and has chapters in Brunei, Canada and Japan, to name a few. A serious effort was made by AIM since 2005 when they began celebrating anniversaries of Ambedkar's Birth and his conversion to Buddhism. Further, the Ambedkar Association of North America was founded by Dalits living in Detroit in 2008. The current president Vijay Kumar told me that Dalits formed this organization just to create a community of their own. "Whenever there is a get-together of Indians in this part of the United States, we used to feel out of place because it ultimately boiled to our identity, to Vijay. We were perpetually asked, 'Who we are?'. Directly or indirectly, they wanted to know our caste. So, it was better to have an independent and separate organization with our own identity."

Dalits and their Celebrations in the US

There are a number of celebrations in which Dalit people participate that cut across caste and regional boundaries. It is here that caste among Indian Dalits takes the shape of a community in

diaspora. The biggest and most elaborate of all celebrations in the US among Dalits is *Ravidas Jayanti* (Birth Anniversary of 14th century Saint & Poet). They have taken place in different *Ravidasi Gurudwaras* in different states of the US. Authors participated in three such functions in New York, Rio-Linda- Sacramento in California and Huston in Texas as they were celebrated on different dates. It is well known that the *Ravidasi* community tries to establish a separate religious place for themselves wherever they are in substantial number and economically well off. In this religious space called '*Ravidasi Gurudwaras*' or '*Ravidas Temple*' along with *Guru Granth Sahib*, *Guru Nanak*, *Guru Ravidas*, Dalit Sikhs have declared and revere him as a *Guru* because his couplets are enshrined in *Guru Granth Sahib*. There is chanting of the slogan '*Jo Bole So Nirbhay; Ravidas Maharaj Ki Jia*' (*trans.* He who says, Hail *Ravidas Maharaj* is fearless). On the specific day of *Jayanti*, Dalits throng in big numbers during the whole day. It is a great feast that begins with breakfast and ends with lunch, served free of cost. One such celebration in Rio Linda needs special mention here because of its unique nature. *Ravidasi Gurudwara* here has a big premise in which a fare is organized every year on this occasion. On the one side of the premise different types of articles are sold – from clothes to cosmetics to posters of social reformers. On the other side you have different types of food items served free of cost – *Choola Bhature*, Bread, *Ghobi*, *Pyaj* and other types of *Pakora*, *Puri-Subji*, *Mango Lassi*, *Bhutta* (*trans.* Roasted Corn). People are given an unlimited supply of food. The attraction of this celebration is '*JHANKI*' (*trans.* Road Show) which comprises pairs of men, women and children on the road. This parade can stretch to half a kilometer long. Members of the community use different vehicles and decorate them with pictures of primarily Dalit social reformers. Even horse carts driven by white men are used as a status symbol. All through the procession Punjabi and Hindi Music is played. '*Bhangra*' dance is also performed. Numbers of slogans are chanted during the two or three hour long march. All this produces a complete Indian ambiance. The celebration cannot be without political mobilization because every *Ravidasi Gurudwara* is run by an annually or bi-annually elected committee. After the prayer, the leaders discuss the future plans to expand the activity of *Gurudwara* in which donations are also sought.

One can see what is happening in the New York *Ravidasi Gurudwara*. It is unique because it has *Ravidasi's* portrait in the centre. It also has a portrait of Ambedkar on one side of the wall. On the first floor there is a small library which has portraits of Phuley, Shauji Maharaj, Ambedkar, and Kanshi Ram, among others. Numbers of books related to the Dalit movement are lying in the library. Secondly, a pile of Ambedkar's famous essay '*Caste in India: Genesis, Mechanism and Spread*' can be widely distributed free of cost to any groups of people. Above all, this New York *Gurudwara* also celebrates the birth anniversary of Kanshi Ram.

Ambedkar Birth Anniversary in the US

My respondents noted that Ambedkar's birth anniversary has been celebrated in the Consulate General of India Office in New York since 1978-79 by VISION; lasting for approximately ten to twelve years. They were helped by the officers of the Consulate who belonged to the Indian Foreign Service (IFS). The respondents were self-assured of their identity because their titles resembled some of the Dalit castes of North India. Then why did VISION stop celebrating Ambedkar's birth Anniversary in the Consulate? V.K. Chaudhary, now in his late seventies, explained to me that, "...because we wanted to give it more visibility and hence decided to celebrate in a more open place so that more people could attend." Hence they moved the celebration to Columbia University in 1991 which was Ambedkar's birth centenary. From the 1990s until 1998, another group of *Ravidasis* (Punjabi Dalits) led by Sita Ram and others started celebrating Ambedkar's

birth anniversary outside the *Ravidasi Gurudwara*. The event became so popular that more than two hundred people used to participate in the event. After 1991 Ambedkar's bust was installed in Lehman Library at Columbia University which later became the centre point for celebrating the anniversary. Since 2003 AIM, a group of young Dalit professionals, started organizing an anniversary program in New Jersey and New York. Additionally, they added the anniversary of Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism. Since 2011 AIM has led the anniversary of his birth at the Consulate General of India Office. A Dalit IFS officer once again helped AIM organize this program. In 2012, it was to the surprise of participants that the Ambassador of India to the US also participated in the program and made a small speech during the event, even though she was not officially supposed to take part in the program. Dalits felt that this provided greater legitimacy to their program.

Ambedkar at Columbia

Ambedkar's bust was installed at Columbia University for the one hundred year anniversary commemorating his birth in 1991. It currently stands on the ground floor of the Lehman Library. For long Dalits, especially Ambedkar's International Mission have been trying to start a regular lecture series in the name of Ambedkar at the University. They succeeded in 2009 when Nicholas Dirk, the Vice President of Columbia University, gave the first lecture. A two day conference entitled 'Caste and Contemporary India' took place on October 16-17th 2009, which was organized by the South Asian Institute with the help of nine other organizations including the US Department of Education, the Centre of Human Rights Documentation and Research, and the Centre for the Study of Ethnicity and Race. A great number of Indian, European and American academicians working on caste participated along with a number of Dalit activists from India. In 2010 the government of India did set up the Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Chair in the 'Indian Constitutional Law' with a four million dollar endowment fund. Along with the chair is a Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Memorial Lecture that continues to lie vacant as I write this article. In March 2012 Columbia Law School instituted and organized the first Ambedkar Memorial lecture. The lecture was delivered by Ram Chandra Guha who spoke on 'Reconciling Gandhi with Ambedkar' which attracted a lot of criticism from the audience. Some Dalit members in the audience went on to argue that this lecture was disrespectful to Ambedkar because the speaker did not give an adequate amount of time delineating Ambedkar's thought on caste but kept on elaborating and discussing Gandhi. Some of the faculty members at Columbia during an informal chat aired their dissatisfaction about the chair being located in the Law school instead of the social sciences department.

Independent Participation in the Indian Independence Day Parade

Members of various Dalit organizations in the US told me that participation in the Indian Independence Day Parade with their own float began in 2007 and since then they have been participating regularly in the parade which always happens on the first Sunday after the 15th of August. Upon asking why the Dalit population started taking out their own independent float in the parade they informed me that they wanted representation of their own icons and symbols. There is complete blackout of Dalit icons and symbols that erases their presence in India. "Our (saint) poets, social reformers and cultural traits need an audience as well. So, we have started taking out our float separately and give meaning to our participation in the Independence Day parade otherwise we

used to feel alienated as there was no space for us,” revealed one of the members of the Dalit diaspora.

Buddhism via Virtual Buddha *Vihara*

The author came across a group of Dalits in the US diaspora who have started what has been termed the ‘Virtual Buddha Vihara’ (VBV). This is a unique experiment made by Dalits to unite a community through the cyber world. Let us see for ourselves what is this Virtual Buddha *Vihara*? There is a central link which has been created so that other members can ‘log’ on to it and remain connected through their computers. There have been at least twenty to thirty members that congregate each week through the Virtual Buddha *Vihara*. A *Bhikkhu* (*trans.* a Buddhist monk) joins the congregation on the web and initiates the participants into the Buddhist prayers (*tri saran* and *panchseela*) and gives a sermon in English. After the sermon is finished participants are allowed to ask questions to the *Bhikkhu* about religious tenets. The religious congregation is transformed into a social interaction of community where members air their views about pressing issues or discuss some upcoming event. Some newcomers to the US, temporary or permanent, from India may also be introduced in such virtual gatherings and participants curiously ask about the current situation in their home country if the participants are from India, especially about the situation of Dalits in India. During these gatherings, there is intense interaction within the community that was/is not otherwise possible in the US. In sum the VBV has given a unique virtual space which creates solidarity among Dalits who have never gotten the chance to meet people with similar experiences. The VBV has become a platform of collective education and information for both Dalits in the US and in India.

Dalit Family, Women and Education in the Diaspora

Most Dalit immigrants, both old and young, live in nuclear families i.e. mother, father and unmarried children. The population which migrated in the 1960s-1970s is now left only with families comprising aged husbands and wives. Their sons and daughters are now married and have started their own nuclear families. However, both children and parents maintain a strong tie and visit each other regularly. When the author of the article asked how the senior citizens feel about their achievements, they revealed very painfully that, “In spite of all their achievement and success, old age is really lonely.” Members of Dalit families who migrated after the 1990s are now in their early to late forties and adhere to the two- or one-child-norm. Most of their children are attending elementary or high school. On the other hand, the semi-literate and blue-collar workers mostly live together as joint families. This is precisely because that way, they have to spend less on their accommodation and second it is cost effective to run and own a joint business. Marriage within the Dalit diaspora in the US is very mixed. The children of the 1960s-1970s generation have mostly married in the US. They have married Indians cutting across caste, regional and linguistic boundaries. Many Dalits are in interracial marriages. However, the semiliterate and economically disadvantaged Dalits try to marry within their region and caste back in India.

Dalit Women in the US Diaspora

Dalit women in the diaspora present an altogether different image in comparison to Dalit women in India. Most of them are literate and employed in different professions. They are electrical

engineers, software engineers, doctors, university professors and school teachers, and sales associates, to name just a few. Dalit girls who do not have much education mostly end up working as sales associates in different stores. In some joint families women work in the day time when the husbands and kids have gone to work and school respectively. Women often help their husbands with their businesses and complete domestic work at home. Most of them can drive and participate dropping off and picking up their husbands from the bus stop in families where the husband prefers to commute by bus for their job. They often go to pick up their kids from school. Many Dalit women in the US diaspora have adopted a dual policy dress code. They are comfortable with western clothes like pants, shirts, coats and middies etc. and Indian clothes like *Salwar* suits and *Sarees*. For community functions they will often prefer to wear their traditional dress, and western dresses for day-to-day activities. However, their experience with so-called high caste Hindu women is also worrisome. The separation is immediate as the social and religious rituals performed (like worship of deity, going to temple on festivals or keeping fast on certain auspicious occasions) by them and Hindu caste women are totally different. Once they come to know each other the relationship is very minimal or totally cut-off.

Houses and cars will tell you the economic differentiations among the Dalit in the US. Those who are job precarious are very particular to buy their own houses and move as early as they can. This is because of two reasons. One, it is easy to get a loan if you have a good credit score. Second, one ends up paying the same amount of money in an installment if you buy a house or in rent if you rent a house. I have met Dalits who owned different types of houses. The range was really diverse with one bed-room apartment to houses with swimming pool. A car is not a luxury item but a necessity in some cities in the US. Many use public transport because it is much cheaper, accessible, and faster. However, when living in a sub-urban area, which most Dalits do, then a car is necessary for everything - even to reach public transportation.

Dalit Newspapers in the US

Dalits feel discriminated against because the mainstream Indian newspapers do not address news that affect their lives. Neither events taking place in India nor in the US are reported in the newspapers published and circulated within the US. To counter this discrimination, Dalits in the US started publishing their own newspaper in different Indian languages. For instance, Ambedkar Times is the newspaper in Punjabi, Hindi and English that is published from Rio-Linda, California (see <http://www.ambedkartimes.com/SHRI%20GURU%20RAVIDASS%20SABHA%20SARAME%20NTO.htm>). *Ambedkar Laher* (*trans.* Ambedkar Wave) was another weekly newspaper published in English and Punjabi from New York for three years from 2008-11 but its publication was stopped because the publisher migrated from New York to Connecticut. The second reason they wanted to publish the newspaper was to create awareness among Dalits in the US to show that 'we' exist in this country as well. The third reason is that they wanted to share news from India with a larger Dalit population in the US.

Innovating Financial Assistance

The poor Dalits who arrive in the US without any capital have brought their traditional system of financial banking called 'Committee'. They know very well that official financial or bank loans are out of bounds for them due to the strict nature of US banks distribution. To obtain a loan, a credit rating is required, which no immigrant Dalit has. Under these circumstances the traditional financing system has worked efficiently for Dalits, especially Dalit Sikhs. It works this way: A

small group of ten to fifteen Dalits came together and started pooling their agreed upon monthly sum of money. Each month the collected amount was borrowed by the highest bidder in the group. In this way the Dalit immigrants made capital available to them. The group functioned until each member received his or her money. Many Dalits made a successful venture out of these transactions which solved their domestic problem. However, Ashok Kumar (name changed for anonymity) is the most successful man who benefitted from this 'Committee' of micro-financing. Not even a B.A. graduate, working as a gas station attendant, he later passed a driving exam and became a taxi driver. Soon after he started participating in the 'Committee' and borrowed two hundred thousand dollars and purchased two gas stations. Now he has repaid the loan and has bought a motel in which seventy-four members are employed. There are many other success stories like the story of Ashok Kumar, but we cannot discuss all of them here. However, this success story proves the point that this process of micro-financing has been beneficial for the Dalits in an alien land where they did not have any cushion of financial help.

Conclusions

In conclusion we can argue that caste exists in the Indian diaspora albeit with its different shades. Caste is both present among so-called upper castes and Dalits. Caste also spills over in religion. The presence of Brahmins and Dalits with their caste, religious symbols and icons in the US diaspora amply proves the point that caste has travelled from India to the Indian diaspora in the US. To be precise, the presence of BANA, Hindu Swyam Sevak Sangh, Ravidasi Gurudwaras, Valmiki Temples and Ambedkar International Centre (<http://www.ambedkarinternationalcenter.org/contact.html>) further substantiate this point. In the same vein, the existence of different social and religious organizations in the name of Dalit icons also proves the point that Dalits suffer latent forms of caste exclusion in the US as otherwise there was no need for them to develop independent symbols associations/organizations and religious places exclusively for themselves.

Acknowledgments

Thanks are due to USIEF for awarding the Nehru-Fulbright Teachers Fellowship (Jan to May 2012) and to the Department of Sociology, Columbia University, New York for hosting a course during the fellowship.

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Notes

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²<http://www.bsna.org/archives.htm#global>, dated 06-05-2012, 6 PM

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